

Pierre Viret: A Pastor and Ethicist for the Twenty-First Century

TIMOTHY BLOEDOW

Abstract

Pierre Viret was a Swiss Reformation leader who worked alongside John Calvin, William Farel, and Theodore Beza, but he is less well known in the English-speaking world. Viret brought his distinctive contributions to the Protestant Reformation as a pastor and an ethicist. These contributions in life and doctrine need to be rediscovered for a more robust reformational church today. This article considers Viret's credentials as a Reformer. It then explores various areas in which Viret applied his distinctively biblical ethic, particularly respecting the role of the magistrate and the relation between church and state. His biblical worldview is comprehensive in breadth and depth. His example is very accessible to Christians wanting to follow in his footsteps.

Pierre Viret (1511–1571)¹ is a lesser-known leader of the Protestant Reformation in Switzerland and France in the English-speaking world. He does not make a single appearance in some histories, including the popular *2000 Years of Christ's Power*.² In other histories, Viret receives much less coverage than other Reformation

¹ There is at present some scholarly debate as to the exact year of Viret's birth. One of the leading experts on Viret's writings, Dominique Troilo, opts for the date of 1509.

² N. R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, Part Three (Welwyn Garden City, England: EP Books, 2003).

leaders. He shows up three times in the index of Philip Schaff's *History of the Christian Church*.³ Others, such as William Farel, John Calvin, and Theodore Beza, receive noticeably more exposure.

The modern church's lack of familiarity with Viret, who was Calvin's best friend, is a sad deficiency that needs to be remedied.⁴ Viret made his distinctive contributions to the Protestant Reformation in Switzerland and France, a legacy from which we could benefit in the twenty-first century.

In his day, Viret was a popular pastor and preacher and an energetic evangelist. He was a prolific writer and a courageous apologist who would challenge opponents to public debate.⁵ Viret was one of the founders of the Reformation church in French-speaking Switzerland.⁶ In 1537, he became one of the first two professors, and the most zealous ambassador, of the Bernese-founded Lausanne Academy.⁷ The Lausanne Academy did crucial work to advance the Reformation prior to the founding of the Geneva Academy.⁸ Much of the value in Viret's work is his thinking on applied ethics, especially in the area of civil governance. Added to this is the courage he expressed personally confronting, rebuking, and resisting civil magistrates in the cause of the gospel and justice. The twenty-first century church would benefit greatly from greater time spent studying and applying Viret's teaching.

Viret was born in 1509 in Orbe, eighteen miles north of Lausanne, Switzerland, and converted from Roman Catholicism at the age of eighteen while studying in Paris at the College de Montaigu. Viret's knowledge of Greek and Hebrew is seen as instrumental in his conversion and subsequent ministry: "Forsaking the traditions of the religious leaders of his day and returning to the original languages of God's Word would before long

³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 8, 3rd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910).

⁴ Jean-Marc Berthoud, *Pierre Viret: Forgotten Giant of the Reformation* (Tallahassee: Zurich Publishing, 2010), provides a short popular introduction. Thanks to the support of L'Association Pierre Viret, a critical edition of his *Christian Instruction* is being republished; the first two volumes are now available: Pierre Viret, *Instruction Chrétienne*, Tome premier, ed. Arthur-Louis Hofer (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 2004), and *Instruction Chrétienne*, Tome deuxième, ed. Arthur-Louis Hofer (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 2009).

⁵ Rebekah A. Sheats, *Pierre Viret: The Angel of the Reformation* (Tallahassee: Zurich Publishing, 2012), 51–52.

⁶ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* 8:252.

⁷ Sheats, *Pierre Viret*, 87.

⁸ "These printing restrictions [in Bern] go a long way toward explaining why the Lausanne Academy has been so neglected by modern scholars. Beza, Hotman, Cordier, and especially Viret were actively writing while in the city, but they had to have their works printed in Geneva." Michael W. Bruening, *Calvinism's First Battleground: Conflict and Reform in the Pays de Vaud, 1528–1559* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 175.



PIERRE VIRET
1509-1571

become imperative for the soon-to-be Reformer.”⁹ Viret quickly began preaching at the age of twenty in Vaud, Switzerland, at the urging of William Farel. Farel, when he was in Orbe preaching in the face of strong Roman Catholic opposition, noticed Viret’s faithful attendance at his sermons. “Ever in search of men to join him in his work, Farel approached the silent Viret and asked him to commence preaching at Orbe.”¹⁰ With Farel and Antoine Froment, he laid the groundwork in the early 1530s for the planting of the Reformation in Geneva. Viret died at the age of 60 (May 4, 1571) in southern France in the service of Jeanne d’Albret (the mother of the future French king Henry IV).

Viret pastored in Payerne, Neuchâtel, and Geneva, and for the longest period—over twenty years (1536–1559)—in Lausanne. On being exiled from Lausanne by the Council of Bern in 1559, Viret returned to Geneva for a few years. It was after this that he took up residence in southern France due to ill health. During that time, he also “labored for a while as an evangelist, with great success, at Nîmes, Montpellier, and Lyons,”¹¹ and spent his final years serving at Jeanne d’Albret’s academy at Orthez and as the Superintendent of the Reformed churches in the Kingdom of Navarre. He spent his latter years becoming arguably the most influential leader of the French Reformation in his day.

[He was] champion of the Reformation in the Swiss canton of the Vaud and the most important native religious Reformer of French-speaking Switzerland. ... As pastor at Neuchâtel (1533), he won the favour of the Bernese, who, following their annexation of the Vaud (1536), supported his reforming efforts in the Vaudois capital of Lausanne. Viret led the disputation of Lausanne (October 1536) and subsequently organized the Reformed Church throughout Vaud.¹²

I. Viret’s Popularity in His Day

Viret, then, was one of the early leaders of the Protestant Reformation in France and Switzerland alongside Calvin, Farel, and Beza. Because of his popularity, Viret was often pulled in more than one direction at a time. The church in Geneva called him in 1536 while he was serving in Neuchâtel, and “the Council of Neuchâtel replied to that city with a letter detailing the reasons why they could not part with Viret.”¹³ Viret, however, ended up

⁹ Sheats, *Pierre Viret*, 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* 8:252.

¹² “Pierre Viret,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pierre-Viret>.

¹³ Sheats, *Pierre Viret*, 48.

leaving Neuchâtel for Geneva, but, while on his way to Geneva, he encountered soldiers from Lausanne, and “the officers from Lausanne begged Viret to return with them to their city to proclaim the Gospel—Geneva had preachers already, they declared; Lausanne had none. Faced with such an entreaty, Viret could not refuse the men’s plea.”¹⁴

Viret did visit Geneva, and later, when expelled from Lausanne in 1559, he pastored in the city for a couple of years. Michiel van den Berg writes,

[Geneva] showed its preference [for Viret over Calvin] by providing Viret with a better parsonage and living conditions than they gave Calvin. At the later date, when he once again became a permanent preacher in the city, no effort was too great to look after his needs. Even when his health issues forced him to go south for a significant period, the city council paid all his expenses.¹⁵

Viret became a very close friend of Calvin, who “often calls him ‘my very best friend’ in his extensive correspondence with him, of which some four hundred letters survive.”¹⁶

In a biography of Calvin, reports historian Scott Manetsch, Beza commended different strengths of the preaching styles of Viret, Farel, and Calvin—Viret’s eloquence, Farel’s sublimity of mind, and Calvin’s weighty insights—concluding “that a preacher who was a composite of these three men would have been absolutely perfect.”¹⁷ Schaff observes, “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.”¹⁸

Viret was known as the Angel of the Reformation for his reputation as a peacemaker, even toward Roman Catholic adversaries. He was called upon by Calvin, those who opposed him, and many others to serve as a mediator and negotiator to resolve intractable disputes.¹⁹ He was fearless before magistrates and much loved among the poor and working class. Viret could be stinging in his rebukes of injustice, especially by the civil magistrates and the wealthy, but Beza billed him as possessing “the sweetness of honey.”²⁰

Viret was also a prolific writer, and his “written legacy ... in quantity, content, and influence is second only to Calvin’s among the Francophone

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Michiel A. van den Berg, *Friends of Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 97.

¹⁶ Ibid., 90.

¹⁷ Scott M. Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 156.

¹⁸ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* 8:252–53.

¹⁹ Sheats, *Pierre Viret*, 143–50.

²⁰ Van den Berg, *Friends of Calvin*, 93.

Reformed.”²¹ The effectiveness of Viret’s Reformation-era ministry can be seen in that Roman Catholic assassins attempted to kill him on two separate occasions. There is much in Viret’s reputation as a leader in the Protestant Reformation to commend him to subsequent generations. In the English-speaking world in particular, however, the man is rarely mentioned and is often unknown. “[Viret] is usually relegated to a role of minor importance as one who labored in the shadow of the really great men of the Calvinist Reformation.”²²

II. *Viret’s Obscurity Today*

This begs the question, Why does Viret not have the recognized stature of other Reformation leaders? If not of a Calvin, why not at least the name recognition of Farel or Beza? Some have suggested that part of the reason for the English-speaking world’s lack of familiarity with Viret could be because most of his writing was in a difficult archaic form of the French language, so little effort has been made to translate his works.²³

Perhaps later Reformers prioritized the gifts that others, such as Calvin, possessed. Robert Linder acknowledges that Viret was not the theologian that Calvin was. Jean-Marc Berthoud proffers the idea that “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 16th century.”²⁴ In subsequent decades and generations, as the Reformation consolidated and developed, the Reformed world seems to have come to prize theology and preaching over other fields such as ethics and apologetics? R. Scott Clark has observed,

We know relatively less about these other figures because, in the 20th century, for reasons that had more to do with systematic theology rather than history or historical theology, Calvin became virtually [the] sole face of Reformed theology, as if the entire Reformed faith teetered on one man’s head.²⁵

²¹ Ibid., 93.

²² Robert Dean Linder, *The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret* (Geneva: Droz, 1964), 12.

²³ Lee Duigon, “Pierre Viret: A Forgotten Giant of the Reformation by Jean-Marc Berthoud,” *Chalcedon*, February 28, 2011, <https://chalcedon.edu/magazine/pierre-viret-a-forgotten-giant-of-the-reformation-by-jean-marc-berthoud>.

²⁴ Jean-Marc Berthoud, “Pierre Viret: The Apologetics and Ethics of the Reformation,” *Adorning the Doctrine: Papers Read at the 1995 Westminster Conference* ([London]: Westminster Conference, 1995), 32.

²⁵ R. Scott Clark, “More Than the Institutes and More Than Calvin,” *The Heidelberg*, January 5, 2009, <https://heidelberg.net/2009/01more-than-the-institutes-and-more-than-calvin-pt-2/>.

Perhaps Viret became sidelined due to some distinctive views he held that did not endure among the dominant streams of Reformation thinking. On baptism, in his *Simple Exposition of the Principal Points of the Christian Faith*, Viret, in the catechetical form in which he wrote the book, has his questioner ask,

And if faithful men present the children of unfaithful parents and bind themselves for them, taking it upon themselves to instruct them in the Christian religion as if they were their own parents, would it be lawful to baptize such infants?

The respondent answers:

I would not have any difficulty with this provided the parents do not oppose it, but are in agreement, and principally for two reasons ... seeing there is a faithful surety.... For such surety takes the place of parents, provided they do not oppose it and indeed have given him the authority to do what he does.²⁶

Viret may also have been out of step with his views on governance. He seemed to have a flatter, more “democratic,” view of both civil and ecclesiastical government than did other Reformation leaders: “Viret stressed the autonomy and democracy of the local churches. He was convinced that a sort of congregationalism was ordained by God.”²⁷ Most Reformation leadership stood against absolute subservience to the civil magistrate, though their views on how citizens and subjects were to resist corrupt civil government differed. Maybe Viret was on one extreme with a position that fell out of vogue.

Perhaps Viret simply did not fit the mold of the other Reformers. He was raised in humble conditions as the son of a tailor. He did not come from the world of merchants or gentry, as did many other Reformers. Linder suggests that Viret was influenced in his political ethics by his heritage, and this may have led him to be even more cynical and suspicious of the civil magistracy than were other Reformation leaders. Linder says Viret was especially harsh toward the wealthy and civil magistrates. He observed much injustice in the treatment of the poor and the working class at the hands of these privileged members of society. He spoke out strongly and regularly against usury, unfair taxation, and bribery. Linder writes,

²⁶ Pierre Viret, *Simple Exposition of the Principal Points of the Christian Faith*, trans. Rebekah A. Sheats (Tallahassee: Zurich Publishing, 2017), 214.

²⁷ Paul T. Fuhrmann, review of *The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret*, by Robert D. Linder, *Journal of Presbyterian History* 45.1 (March 1967): 62.

There is little doubt that in a country dominated by the government of Berne, Viret had acted like a political subversive. In the eyes of the civil authorities he was a rebel and a fomenter of sedition, and therefore should be treated accordingly. Even many of Viret's fellow Protestant ministers criticized his immoderate actions, counseled submission, and refused to back his policy of resistance to the secular authorities of Berne.²⁸

Viret's biblically based ethics, along with his outspokenness on civil government may also have set him apart. Berthoud, a Viret expert, suggests that Viret had a stronger commitment than Calvin did to the relevance and authority of Scripture (over against natural law) for the realm of civil government.²⁹ Linder observes that "there is a brevity of [Calvin's] treatment of the subject of government in his *Institutes* which makes it seem almost to be an afterthought."³⁰ On the other hand, a historian who reviews Linder's book, *The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret*, cautions that "there is occasional evidence of too great a concern to make [Viret] appear independent of and different from Calvin and other reformers."³¹ The reviewer, nevertheless, observes,

The analysis of Viret's political views is painstaking and well reasoned. ... Linder makes it clear that Viret, more than other reformers, emphasized the point that the ruler is under the law and should strive for justice and equality before the law. A good case also is made for giving Viret credit for developing ideas concerning a congregational form of church government, separation of church and state, the right of political resistance, and religious toleration.³²

In discussing the political theory of Viret and his sixteenth-century colleagues, Linder cautions that they were speaking into a different political world.³³ Nevertheless, the universal biblical principles from which Viret drew his applications are relevant for all times and peoples. When it comes to governance, there may be many localized particulars, but there are relatively few categories, and there is nothing new under the sun (Eccl 1:9), so

²⁸ Linder, *Political Ideas*, 38.

²⁹ Jean-Marc Berthoud, "Pierre Viret and the Sovereignty of the Word of God over Every Aspect of Reality," *A Comprehensive Faith*, ed. Andrew Sandlin (San Jose, CA: Friends of Chalcedon, 1996), 102.

³⁰ Robert D. Linder, "John Calvin, Pierre Viret and the State," *Calvin and the State: Papers and Responses Presented at the Seventh and Eighth Colloquia on Calvin and Calvin Studies*, ed. Peter De Klerk (Grand Rapids: Calvin Studies Society, 1993), 173.

³¹ Harold J. Grimm, review of *The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret*, by Robert D. Linder, *Church History* 35.1 (March 1966): 112.

³² *Ibid.*, 112–13.

³³ Linder, "John Calvin, Pierre Viret and the State," 171.

there still is much benefit to studying Viret's thought when it comes to the theology and ethics of civil government as we find it today.

III. *What Viret Taught about Civil Government*

The Protestant Reformation's break with Roman Catholicism had substantial implications for Christian views of civil government, including the relationship of the church to the state. At that time, European society was coterminous with the church, with intersecting jurisdictions between church, state, and family. Church membership and, therefore, church discipline, including excommunication, had direct implications for social standing and citizenship. The success of "Protestant" movements gave civil magistrates a choice of which church with which to align themselves, a new reality that complicated international relations and contributed to military conflict. Reformed Christians did not have the luxury of ignoring these areas of life and conflict. They had to attempt to speak into these complex realities with biblical truth and justice.

Viret did not fear wading into these theological conflicts or confronting civil magistrates in person when he believed that they were advancing injustice or encroaching on the biblically-defined jurisdiction of the church. His thinking on political matters was reflected in numerous writings, but most comprehensively in his *Instruction chrétienne en la doctrine de la Loy et de l'Evangile et en la vraie philosophie et théologie, tant naturelle que supernaturelle des chrétiens* [*Christian Instruction in the Doctrine of the Law and the Gospel and in True Christian Philosophy and Theology, both Natural and Supernatural*], which includes his commentary on the Ten Commandments.³⁴

The state "was a direct creation of God."³⁵ It was a gift from God for keeping peace and order in society, and a key reason for this role was to facilitate the work of the church in its redemptive mission on earth.³⁶ The work of the civil magistrate is "holy and just."³⁷ Viret believed that civil magistrates should exercise all their rightful authority, including execution of those warranting such punishment. On the need for true criminal justice, Viret wrote,

³⁴ Berthoud, Berthoud, "Pierre Viret and the Sovereignty of the Word of God," 97.

³⁵ Berthoud, "Pierre Viret: The Apologetics and Ethics of the Reformation," 36.

³⁶ Linder, *Political Ideas*, 83–84.

³⁷ Pierre Viret and John Calvin, *Thou Shalt Not Kill: A Plea for Life*, trans. Rebekah A. Sheats (Monticello, FL: Psalm 78 Ministries, 2016), 73.

The law truly shows us what danger men place themselves in—particularly rulers, judges, and their officers—when they leave known murderers and manslayers unpunished; or when they do not use such diligence as they ought in searching out and discovering them as they should; or when they flippantly show them mercy without a good or just reason to do so.³⁸

Despite recognizing civil government as a divine creation, Viret was very critical of the men who held positions as civil magistrates in his day.

Viret wrote that even though God had ordained the magistrate’s office, nevertheless the magistrate was not beyond criticism for corrupt and unjust actions. 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 and princes had no right to steal from peasants, and if they did, they should be treated as a peasant who is caught robbing a king. ... 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.³⁹

Viret denied, according to Linder, that any political model was inherently superior to the others. All these models gave one or more people the right, on their own terms, to rule over others. Instead, Viret argued that the law was king. One of the staples of his political theory was equality before the law between the governors and the governed: “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.”⁴⁰ His view was not a new concept, but, as Linder noted, “the idea was neglected during the late Middle Ages.”⁴¹ Its rediscovery was short lived. If those who hold the levers of power do not have the heart or conscience to submit willingly to the law they administer to others, there is no sure mechanism for holding them accountable. Decentralizing authority and maximizing the number of checks and balances help, but enduring Christian conviction is truly what is necessary.

One reason why Viret may not have wanted to declare for one form of government over another, suggests Linder, is that he was much more sympathetic to a democratic model than would have been helpful to affirm in the world of the Magisterial Reformation, especially since he seemed to

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁹ Robert Linder, “Pierre Viret on War and Peace,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 48.1 (April 2013): 128, referring to Pierre Viret, *Instruction chrétienne* (1564), 1:572–73, 583–87; *Traitez divers*, part 5:156–57; and *Le monde à l’empire et le monde demoniaque fait par dialogues*, 228–32.

⁴⁰ Berthoud, “Pierre Viret and the Sovereignty of the Word of God,” 101, citing Viret from *Le monde à l’empire*, 91–92.

⁴¹ Linder, *Political Ideas*, 60.

affirm a similar model for both church and state. Linder writes, “Probably the most important feature of his thought on [civil government] was his personal preference for some sort of democratic republic.”⁴²

IV. What Viret Taught about Law and Civil Government

When Viret argued for law to govern in the civil realm, what law did he have in mind? In the preface to his *Instruction chrétienne*, Viret wrote, “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.”⁴³ Viret’s comments about the role of God’s law in civil government speak into the ongoing debate regarding the differences between moral law and judicial law, and how we are to understand the relevance of old covenant judicial case law in Israel. This conversation is also tied in with the question of whether God’s law is necessary, or if some form of natural law is adequate for the realm of civil law and government. Some believe one can decide this question adequately in favor of God’s law with the help of better-known Reformers such as Calvin, but others believe that Viret makes a stronger case for the comprehensive authority of Scripture over every area of life, including the civil realm.

Berthoud has cited Viret as writing,

God has included in this Law every aspect of that moral doctrine by which men may live well. ... 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.⁴⁴

More specifically, in terms of law, including punishment, Viret wrote,

God ... commands us to punish the transgressors of these commandments, be it by death or some other penalty according to what they deserve, whether they have transgressed the commandments of the first or the second table, as it appears by these laws: “He that sacrificeth unto any god, save unto the LORD only, he shall be utterly destroyed” (Ex. 22:20). ... The same is also commanded of blasphemers: “And he that blasphemeth the name of the LORD, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him ...” (Lev. 24:16). ... The Lord has done the same for the second table. For we have the laws which were given against

⁴² Ibid., 115.

⁴³ Berthoud, “Pierre Viret: The Apologetics and Ethics of the Reformation,” 33.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 33–34.

children who rebel against their parents, and against adulterers, those who commit incest, Sodomites, those who give false testimony, and murderers and manslayers, who by these laws are all judged and condemned to death (Lev. 20:9–16; 18:6–23; 24:19–22; Deut. 22:22–24).⁴⁵

Comparing Viret with Calvin, Berthoud writes,

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.⁴⁶

Viret was recognized for his particular expertise on civil governance and public ethics. At a formal public disputation between Protestants and Roman Catholics in the Pays de Vaud in 1536, ordered by the Council of Bern, where Calvin, Farel, and Viret all spoke, “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.”⁴⁷

Viret’s commitment to the comprehensive implications of the Law-Word of God and, through it, to the perpetual reign of Jesus Christ over mankind, does not put him neatly into any modern Reformed camps. He supported state funding of education.⁴⁸ His concerns over the economic exploitation of the poor by the wealthy do not carry a libertarian flavor. He supported civil adjudication of some offences found in the First Table of the Law such as idolatry. Some say he leaned in a congregationalist direction rather than Presbyterian.

Viret’s ethical analysis and judgment covered a lot of ground: economics, the military, politics, the arts, and more.⁴⁹ On war, his comments brought into the present could fill a void left by the silence of today’s Christian

⁴⁵ Viret and Calvin, *Thou Shalt Not Kill*, 71–72.

⁴⁶ Berthoud, “Pierre Viret and the Sovereignty of the Word of God,” 102.

⁴⁷ Linder, *Political Ideas*, 25–26.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 103–4.

⁴⁹ Berthoud, “Pierre Viret: The Apologetics and Ethics of the Reformation,” 34–35.

leadership. Viret did hold to a theory of just war, but he “considered ambition, avarice, covetousness, and corruption to be the fundamental causes of most wars. ... He was not willing to support any kind of politically inspired offensive war against another nation.”⁵⁰ Viret’s “conclusion was that peace was always to be desired over war and that every effort should be given to maintaining peace if possible.”⁵¹

Viret frequently spoke on money and wealth, condemning economic injustice. “Viret likened all parasitical rulers to bees who with their stingers tormented the poor people until they were bloody and raw.”⁵² In *Le monde à l'empire et le monde demoniacle fait par dialogues* (p. 156), he 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.⁵³

According to Linder,

Viret singled out usurers as a special target for his attack on the corruption of riches. [He] censured those who loaned money solely for profit when there was no physical necessity and those who charged excessive rates of interest on legitimate loans ... and described the men who did this as those “who live off human flesh.”⁵⁴

Viret reportedly “demonstrated a lively interest in the welfare of the poor, the peasantry and the working class. ... However, he did not conceive of the state as a welfare agency but placed the responsibility for the care of the poor squarely upon the local church.”⁵⁵

A rarity today is clergy who speak to civil magistrates about taxation, but they are quick to urge Christians to do their duty of paying their taxes. Not so with Viret. He told Christians to pay their taxes, but he also

devoted much more space in his writings to warning secular authorities against excessive and illegal taxation. ... He was particularly sensitive about the *gabelle* and considered it immoral to tax an object so necessary to the diet of the average man as salt.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Linder, “Pierre Viret on War and Peace,” 125.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵² Linder, *Political Ideas*, 96.

⁵³ Berthoud, “Pierre Viret and the Sovereignty of the Word of God,” 104.

⁵⁴ Linder, *Political Ideas*, 100–101.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

A look at Viret’s exposition of the sixth and ninth commandments⁵⁷ shows how detailed his analysis is and how comprehensive his application tends to be. He covers the implications of God’s law for individuals, family relationships, the church, and the civil magistrate.

When it comes to murder, Viret does not simply tell individuals not to murder. He also warns civil magistrates about the dangers of dealing inadequately with such a crime.

The judge who does not punish those whom he is charged to punish by the commandment of God his sovereign Ruler and Lord, renders himself guilty not only of the crime which the criminal has committed, but also of all those that he afterward commits, and also of the crimes of others who impudently engage in evil-doing because they see that wicked men escape without receiving a punishment worthy of their crimes.⁵⁸

Viret also addresses killing in self-defense and does so far more carefully than most others who support this right. He warns that it is very easy to abuse the privilege of self-defense: “It is indeed difficult for a man to kill another out of self-defense—no matter how good a cause he might have—without mixing with it anger and wrath unworthy of a Christian man.”⁵⁹

When Viret came to the ninth commandment, he considered not just lying, but also flattery, gossip, slander, and the extraction of testimony through torture. He explored motivations and considered effects.

Viret considers the spiritual realities surrounding deception. He begins his exposition of the commandment by considering truth and the nature of God.⁶⁰ He also says that there is “no vice by which man renders himself more like the devil than by lying.”⁶¹

Viret also makes the point that the language of the commandment—bearing false witness—requires one to see a court of justice—a sphere of government—as the primary context for interpreting the full range of meaning. And false testimony given in a court is typically given under oath; such false testimony is thus also a violation of the third commandment.⁶²

⁵⁷ Pierre Viret, *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* (Geneva, 1564). This book was published in three volumes; the third was never printed, but a section of it was published separately with the title *De la providence divine* (Lyon, 1565).

⁵⁸ Viret and Calvin, *Thou Shalt Not Kill*, 60.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁶⁰ Pierre Viret and John Calvin, *Defend the Truth: A Conversation on the Ninth Commandment*, trans. R. A. Sheats (Monticello, FL: Psalm 78 Ministries, 2017), 9–13.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 19.

When it comes to the heart of the matter, Viret's consideration of false witnessing is very detailed. "There are four types of people who can greatly sin in such a matter. The first is the accuser; second, the defendant; third, the witnesses which are produced; and fourth, the judges."⁶³ He appeals to Scriptures such as Proverbs 19:5; 21:28; 6:16–19; and 25:18 as well as Deuteronomy 19:16–21, which says of a false witness, that "you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother ... life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot."⁶⁴

Viret holds the civil magistrate to a high standard for combatting false witnessing, not even allowing him to quickly absolve himself with a claim of ignorance about the false witness. An appeal to ignorance is only acceptable, Viret says, "if no negligence, carelessness, or indifference exists on the judge's part, and if he has not sinned because he failed to properly investigate the matter as he ought to have done."⁶⁵

Viret's insightful view of Scripture enables him to see the moral law with its abiding obligations where others see merely temporal judicial application. After all, false witnessing receives very little time among today's Christians compared with the amount of commentary given to what one might call "issue-based" moral erosion. Do Christians today realize that they can bring at least as much biblical authority to bear against false witnessing and the judicial process that produces the issue-based decisions that they find so distressing?

Viret also understands the principle behind God's requirement with stoning that the witnesses cast the first stone. The principle is abiding, yet America has rejected this fundamental principle of justice with no outcry from Christians. Viret explains,

It is not without good reason that the Lord commanded in His Law that the witnesses who would be produced against a criminal must be the first to raise a hand against him in the execution of the sentence of the judge given according to their testimony (Deut. 17:7). For the Lord teaches us by this commandment that the witnesses must have as much fear of testifying falsely against the life of their neighbor as of wickedly murdering him themselves by their own hand; and that they must testify with such conscience as they themselves would desire to be judged and executed, seeing that they kill the person who is put to death because of their testimony.⁶⁶

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

These brief examples of Viret's ethics demonstrate his pastoral vision and ethical depth. He was a gospel minister with evangelistic zeal and a passion for justice that endeared him to his people.

V. What Viret Taught about Limits to Civil Government

Viret's life was also marked by his battle for the independence of the church from interference by the state. This was the same battle Calvin fought in Geneva and Farel in Neuchâtel. Viret's conflict was with the Council of Bern, which governed Lausanne. His refusal to back down to the demands of the Bernese officials led to their decision to banish him after twenty-two years pastoring the city of Lausanne.

Along with the other Reformers, Viret believed that the church should be sovereign in its sphere. During his long pastorate in Lausanne, he was constantly battling the Bernese magistrates over their insistence at having the final authority over several areas of church life, specifically the selection of church officers, access to the Lord's Supper, and the right of excommunication. Viret had a running battle with the Council of Bern for years, and eventually, they sent him into exile. The last straw was his refusal to administer the Lord's Supper in the days leading up to the Christmas of 1558 without being permitted to exercise the right first to examine those who wanted to participate in the meal. He wanted to exercise his rightful spiritual oversight of the souls of his parish. "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.' ... [The] Word and the sacraments cannot be properly administered without it."⁶⁷

Furthermore, Viret's strong ethical orientation produced explicit and specific moral application in his sermons that got under the skin of those who came under conviction, including civil magistrates.

The sermon was his chief weapon in bringing spiritual and moral reform to Lausanne. ... His constant insistence upon a program of moral legislation and socially centered preaching appeared to grate on the nerves of the Bernese for on several occasions they censured him for an unduly severe moral emphasis in his preaching.⁶⁸

The Reformers tended to take a firm position on the maintenance of law and order as a key role of civil government. The Reformation period "was a world in political, religious and social upheaval. In periods of widespread

⁶⁷ Sheats, *Pierre Viret*, 167–68.

⁶⁸ Linder, *Political Ideas*, 34.

upheaval and unrest, the most valued political principle is usually that of order. Therefore, it is not surprising that Calvin, ... in Geneva, greatly valued and supported political order.”⁶⁹ Viret, too, “taught that the state operated to keep peace and order—two functions which he highly prized.”⁷⁰

In subsequent eras, therefore, analysts have wrestled over what, if any, room Reformed orthodoxy provides for defiance of civil government. Reformed Christians affirm that we must obey God rather than men, but they typically argue that those who do so should meekly accept the consequences. There is little evidence of a coherent theology of active resistance. Even in terms of the American War of Independence, it is easier to find Reformed Christians in the United States than abroad who accept that as a biblically defensible conflict. Linder notes the importance of this aspect of political theory by pointing out that resistance theory is “the key to understanding any theorist’s political bottom line.”⁷¹ He affirms that

Calvin did, in fact, allow for resistance in certain limited circumstances [when] lawfully-established inferior magistrates are available to lead the resistance against such despotism.⁷²

Viret also required the leadership of lesser magistrates for political resistance, but, according to Linder, he was “more bluntly qualified in his acceptance of the authority of the state than was Calvin.”⁷³ We have already seen that Viret had no fear of going head-to-head with civil magistrates over matters of justice for the oppressed and defense of the spiritual authority of the church. He called civil magistrates, “public criminals,” “ministers of the devil,” and “the head chiefs and captains of other criminals” when they engaged in unjust warfare and when, as judges, they released the guilty and punished the innocent.⁷⁴ Viret also asserted that “the only legitimate kingdoms with valid laws were those which had a legal code based upon the Ten Commandments of God.”⁷⁵

Linder notes that “Viret saw political order as an absolute necessity if true religion were to exist among humans,”⁷⁶ but that the Reformer also

⁶⁹ Linder, “John Calvin, Pierre Viret and the State,” 175–76.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Linder, “John Calvin, Pierre Viret and the State,” 177.

⁷⁴ Viret and Calvin, *Thou Shalt Not Kill*, 76, 80.

⁷⁵ Linder, *Political Ideas*, 63.

⁷⁶ Linder, “John Calvin, Pierre Viret and the State,” 177.

believed that the powers of the state were neither absolute nor transcendent. Indeed, his own life of ministry involved much conflict with civil magistrates. Viret's own views on resistance against tyrannical civil magistrates were formed in the fires of front-line conflict in Lausanne. It is true that he wrote that magistrates were like 'lieutenants of God' and that to avoid anarchy all governmental superiors should be given the obedience that is their due "by divine right."⁷⁷

Yet, he "denounced those people who took 'their princes for their law in matters of religion and conscience.'"⁷⁸ In fact,

it was in terms of his formulation of a Calvinist resistance theory that Viret made his greatest contribution to the limitation of state power. ... Viret, like Calvin and Theodore Beza, authorized the taking up of arms in defense of the Gospel only under certain conditions.⁷⁹

One of these conditions, as noted above, was that "resistance to secular government could be led only by duly constituted inferior magistrates who already possessed a measure of legitimate political authority."⁸⁰ The Lesser Magistrate Project is trying to raise awareness among today's American Christians about the biblical basis of this doctrine of interposition.⁸¹ They embrace Viret as a Reformer of similar vision. The organization seems to have little traction in Reformed circles today, where the doctrine of interposition is little known and carries marginal appeal. The outspoken leader of the movement and the founder of the Lesser Magistrate Project is a Lutheran pastor, Matthew Trehwella. Despite the fears many have over the very idea of resistance, respected Reformed leaders have continued to affirm it. Charles Hodge, a Presbyterian theologian and the principal of Princeton Theological Seminary in the mid-nineteenth century, affirmed that "the right of revolution is a sacred right of freedom. It is a right which, if Englishmen and Americans had not claimed and exercised, despotism had now been universal and inexorable."⁸² Linder goes so far as to say that

many of [Viret's] political ideas seem to be of greater importance and more significant for the development of modern democratic thought than do those of either Calvin or Beza. Even if his other contributions to the Reformation are ignored, his

⁷⁷ Ibid., citing Viret, *Instruction chrétienne*, 1:22.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 178.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ <https://lessermagistrate.com/>.

⁸² Charles Hodge, "President Lincoln," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 37.3 (July 1865): 452.

political theory recommends him as one of the most important of the early leaders of historic Calvinism.⁸³

Presenting Viret's pedigree on the doctrine of political resistance, Linder writes that "Viret expressed these ideas as early as 1547, seven years before the appearance of Beza's better known tract *De Haereticis a Civili Magistratu Puniendis*, fifteen years before the outbreak of the first war of religion in France."⁸⁴ Further time spent in the works of Viret may, indeed, lead to a different spirit among modern Reformed Christians.

Conclusion

Viret had a robust and much-needed biblical ethic for his day, and for ours, one confidently rooted in the law of God. Clarity on the scope of the true spiritual jurisdiction of the church and of the limited jurisdiction of the state, as well as a biblical understanding of resistance against civil magistrates, are long overdue developments for the modern church. This should especially be appreciated in our day, in which we see growing persecution of the church and continued confusion over the implications of the lordship of Christ over public life. These areas of doctrine stir much controversy in some branches of even the Reformed church, yet Viret, with his views, was broadly known—and used—as a peacemaker. In his practice as a leader and his doctrine, Viret could be of great help to the twenty-first century church on these much-neglected areas of thought and practice in today's Western church.

⁸³ Linder, *Political Ideas*, 92.

⁸⁴ Linder, "John Calvin, Pierre Viret and the State," 179.