# Developments in Church Government in the Post-Reformation French Churches[1]

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## Abstract

The history of the Protestant Reformed churches in France in the century following the Wars of Religion, their trials and sufferings, is well documented. It is a tragic page in modern European history and retains the attention of commentators because rarely has a people group been persecuted so intensely for so long, to the point of virtual extinction. Less known, perhaps because of the linguistic barriers, is the development of church life and the theological struggles in the Protestant churches during that period. Recent publications contribute to rectify this lack. The present article is an introduction to some of the issues of the time which have perennial interest.

The period of the seventeenth century in France begins with the accession of Henry of Navarre to the throne upon his conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1589. This event heralded the end of two decades of bloody wars of religion in France and the promulgation of an edict of tolerance for the French Huguenots in

[1] A lecture given at Kosin University, Busan, Korea, in October 2015.

1598, the Edict of Nantes, which was repealed by Louis XIV almost a century later in 1685.[2] During that period, Protestants enjoyed restricted but diminishing liberties, followed by growing civil oppression. The relative tolerance provided the necessary conditions for the establishment of regular church government and growth in the Reformed churches.[3] They were submissive to royal authority in such a way that the French monarch initially avoided active opposition against them, which occasioned the Catholic dictum *soumis comme un Huguenot*, meaning "submissive like a Huguenot."

## I. *A Tragic Fate*

The Huguenots were most faithful supporters of the Bourbon monarchy. At the end of this period, at the time of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, the renowned preacher Jean Claude, who was a great defender of the persecuted Huguenots, penned *The Grievances of Protestants Cruelly Oppressed in the Kingdom of France* (1686).[4] His biblical defense against persecution was somewhat blunted because he was drawn into the waters of moderation and tolerance by his collaboration with Richard Simon and Pierre Bayle, who were among the early luminaries of free thinking.[5]

This period was a critical time for French Calvinists, one from which they never really recovered.[6] In spite of the limited toleration granted by the Edict of Nantes, from that point on, it was a case of progressive strangulation of Reformed church life in France.[7] It is estimated that by the time of the Revocation in 1685, not only tens of thousands of Huguenots had left France by emigration, but also some six hundred pastors. Between 1685 and

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[2] Élisabeth Labrousse, *La révocation de l'Édit de Nantes* (Paris: Payot, 1990). The Revocation banned Protestant church activity from public life; church buildings (*temples*) were demolished, meetings forbidden, pastors obliged to recant or go into exile, and children to be baptized Catholic.

[3] On the Edict of Nantes, Joseph Lecler, *Histoire de la tolérance au siècle de la Réforme* (1955; repr., Paris: Albin Michel, 1994), 514–18, translation, *Tolerance and the Reformation*, trans. T. Westow (London: Longmans, Green, 1960).

[4] Jean Claude, *Les plaintes des Protestans, cruellement opprimez dans le Royaume de France* (Cologne: Pierre Marteau, 1686). Jean Claude was pastor at Nîmes, Montauban, and Charenton (in modern Paris) and died in exile at The Hague in 1687.

[5] Richard Simon, author of one of the first critical approaches to the Old Testament (1685), was named a father of modern exegesis in the text presented by the Pontifical Biblical Commission to Pope John Paul II on April 23, 1993, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church." Pierre Bayle, a contemporary of John Locke, like the English philosopher, published a pioneering work on tolerance, *De la tolérance* in 1685.

[6] Paul Wells, "Calvin and France: A Paradoxical Legacy," in *Restoration through Redemption: John Calvin Revisited*, ed. Henk van den Belt (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 271–82.

[7] Janine Garrison, *L'Édit de Nantes et sa révocation* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), 119–83.

1715, two hundred thousand more took the road to exile.[8] Others recanted publicly, either really or superficially. In the following century, the free thinking of the Enlightenment did its work on the remnant.[9] The result was that just before the Revolution in 1789 there were only 472 Protestant churches left (by comparison with over 1,200 churches estimated to have been planted by 1570), with diminished congregations in restricted enclaves and a mere 180 pastors, a good number of whom had by then followed the philosophers and espoused deism. France was lost to Calvinism; it has never been restored in an ecclesiastical sense and even today is restricted to the witness of isolated individuals or groups.

The Reformed synods during the time of limited tolerance were marked by the reception of the Synod of Dort, the conflict over the teaching of Moïse Amyraut at the school of Saumur in the Loire Valley, and the increasing hardship of church life under the rigor implemented by Louis XIV. Between the assassination of Henry IV by a Catholic extremist in 1610 and the Revolution in 1789, a mere four Bourbon kings reigned, and their power became ever greater until it began slipping away prior to 1789. Theirs was a durable continuity of sapping and repressive policies that undermined the Huguenots. This fact is often not sufficiently appreciated, with regard to both the way the Protestants suffered the politics of exclusion and the ways in which they reacted to them. What was happening at the time in England and Holland did not help either, and Louis XIV must have trembled at the thought of the fate of Charles I and the federalism developing in Holland.

## II. *Synodical and Church Controversies*

Following the Edict of Nantes in 1598, synods met every three years until 1628. In the seventeenth century there could be no synod without royal authorization and the presence of a royal commissioner. After that and before the Revolution there were only four national synods—Charenton (Paris) in 1631 and 1644, Alençon in 1637, and finally the synod at Loudon in 1659—because the churches were increasingly persecuted and their activity restricted.

The main Protestant figures of the period were the Scot John Cameron and the Frenchmen Moïse Amyraut, Pierre Du Moulin, Jean Daillé, André

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[8] Marianne Carbonnier-Burkard, *Comprendre la révolte des Camisards* (Rennes: Ouest-France, 2008), 20.

[9] On the collapse of the Reformed churches in France before the Revolution, Daniel Robert, *Les Églises réformées en France, 1800–1830* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961), 16–20.

Rivet, Charles Drelincourt, Claude Pajon, Jean Claude, and Pierre Jurieu. In addition, the Genevan school influenced Bénédict Turretini (1588–1631) and his better-known nephew François of elenctic theology fame (1623–1687); Jean Diodati (1576–1649), who translated the Bible into Italian; and Bénédict Pictet, who wrote a three volume dogmatics (1696) and an influential two volume work on Christian ethics (1692).

The main theological issue at the time in the life of the synods was obviously the condemnation of Arminianism and the fear on the part of Du Moulin, Rivet, and their ilk that Amyraldianism, developed from the "universalism" of Cameron, who had enormous influence on his students, was a half-way house to synergism.[10] Du Moulin wrote pointedly about the Arminians ("apes of the Pelagians"), and his *Anatomy of Arminianism* (1619) reveals his gifts as a theologian and polemicist.[11] The opponents of Amyraut feared that his two-stage view of the divine decree of salvation, with Christ dying hypothetically for all and subsequently being received through faith by those who believed the gospel, would inevitably collapse into Arminian prescience and the limitation of divine sovereignty in salvation.[12] They considered that this was ploughing a different furrow from that of Dort, particularly its third canon, which had been accepted by the Synod of Alès, with Pierre Du Moulin as moderator, in 1620. However, the theology taught at Saumur by Amyraut, La Place, and Louis Cappel, in the line of Cameron, retained its attraction throughout this period and was never formally condemned by a synod of the church as heresy. Unfortunately, Amyraut, no mean theologian, is generally only remembered in this context.[13]

Another synodical controversy, later than that surrounding the Saumur theology but not unrelated to it, concerned the work of the Holy Spirit in conversion and centered round the ideas of Claude Pajon. Pajon published little, but his ideas circulated widely and were much discussed, generating two rounds of controversy in 1665–1667 and 1676–1685. These issues did not reach synodical level, as no synods were authorized by the king during

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[10] Albert Gootjes, "John Cameron and the French Universalist Tradition," in Martin I. Klauber, ed., *The Theology of the French Reformed Churches. From Henri IV to the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Heritage Books, 2014), 169–96. My review of this book is in *Unio cum Christo* 1.1–2 (2015): 313–18.

[11] Martin I. Klauber, "Defender of the Faith or Reformed Rabelais? Pierre Du Moulin (1568–1658) and the Arminians," in Klauber, *The Theology of the French Reformed Churches*, 217–36.

[12] On Amyraut and Amyraldianism see Richard Stauffer, *Moïse Amyraut: un précurseur français de l'oecuménisme* (Paris: Librairie Protestante, 1962); Alan C. Clifford, *Calvinus: Authentic Calvinism, a Clarification* (Norwich: Charenton Reformed Publishing, 1996).

[13] Richard A. Muller, "Beyond Hypothetical Universalism: Moïse Amyraut on Faith, Reason, and Ethics," in Klauber, *The Theology of the French Reformed Churches*, 198.

this time. Pajon went further than Amyraut, who proposed that if the Spirit works immediately on the intellect in conversion, he operates only mediately on the will, since his work passes through the intellect. Pajon seems to have denied an immediate operation of the Spirit on both the intellect and the will. His opponents, who included such influential figures as Jean Claude and Pierre Jurieu, deemed that Pajon's teaching implied difficulties not only with relation to man's fallen depravity but also with regard to providential *concursus* in conversion. Pajon was never condemned of heresy and avoided charges by making himself useful, directing his energies toward replying to the able Jansenist Pierre Nicole's work *Legitimate Arguments against the Calvinists* (1671).[14]

The various synodical polemics rumbling on as they did throughout the period weakened the Protestant churches' witness and took them away from the concrete political problems facing them in France, which were of dual nature: the continued opposition from renascent Romanism and its eloquent defenders, including the Jansenists, on the one hand, and the authoritarianism of the king on the other. Why did the French churches develop no form of resistance other than a passive respect for the monarchy before the disastrous Camisard uprisings in the Cévennes in the early eighteenth century?[15] Why was no contrarian theory developed in France by the Calvinists, as was the case of Samuel Rutherford in Scotland in his *Lex Rex* (1644), or Louis Althusius of Holland in his *Politica* (1603), advocating that a tyrant can be dethroned and even put to death? This was not new, and there were also Gallic precedents. The "Monarchomachs" had contested the absolute power of monarchy, referring to the final section of Calvin's *Institutes* and Beza's *Right of Magistrates* for their ideas about a just and active opposition to tyranny.[16] Were the synods of the French Reformed church too much in the slipstream of the Protestant nobility, and were its theologians too tied to what seemed acceptable and desirable to their leaders and protectors?

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[14] Albert Gootjes, "Politics, Rhetoric, and Exegesis: Claude Pajon (1626–1685) on Romans 8:7," in Klauber, *The Theology of the French Reformed Churches*, 296–306.

[15] Maurice Longeiret, *Quand Dieu dirige l'histoire et la conduit à bonne fin* (Cléon d'Andran: Excelsis, 2013), 81–126, on the time known in French Protestantism as *le désert*.

[16] Monarchomach meaning those who fight against the king. Théodore de Bèze, *Du droit des magistrats sur leurs subjets*, ed. Robert M. Kingdon (Geneva: Droz, 1971). As well as Beza they included François Hotman (1524–1590), Simon Goulart (1543–1628), Nicolas Barnaud (1538–1604), Philippe du Plessis-Mornay (1549–1623), and George Buchanan (1506–1582).

## III. *The Origins of the Synodical System*

It has been said that French church polity is vital for the later development of Presbyterianism, since it was adopted and adapted by other national Reformed churches in Western Europe and beyond.[17] Three factors contributed to the development of church polity in France in the seventeenth century: firstly, Calvin's view of government; secondly, his view of church order; and thirdly the Ecclesiastical Discipline [*La discipline ecclésiastique*] adopted by the French churches along with the La Rochelle Confession [*Confessio Gallicana*] in 1559. This discipline was added to the thirty-eight original articles of the Confession and had expanded to 252 articles by the synod of Loudon in 1659.[18]

In contrast with Martin Luther, whose views of church organization were more circumstantial, Calvin held that the organization of the church has a double character. It is immediately placed under the Lordship of Christ, not under any human hierarchy, and there is a definite pattern of church government prescribed by Scripture. In this Calvin applied Luther's two-kingdom theology, the rule of Christ in society and in the church, with greater consistency than did the German Reformer. On the level of civil government, Calvin argued for public representatives to resist a king's tyranny, when necessary, as the final chapter of his *Institutes* state:

> For when popular magistrates have been appointed to curb the tyranny of kings … So far am I from forbidding these officially to check the undue license of kings, that if they connive at kings when they tyrannise and insult over the humbler of the people, I affirm that their dissimulation is not free from nefarious perfidy, because they fraudulently betray the liberty of the people, while knowing that, by the ordinance of God, they are its appointed guardians.[19]

For Calvin, there is no direct human ruler in the church as in the civil government, because Christ reigns directly as king of his people. However,

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[17] Cf. Theodore G. van Raalte, "The French Reformed Synods of the Seventeenth Century," in Klauber, *The Theology of the French Reformed Churches*, 57–97.

[18] The text of this discipline is now lost, but parts have been reconstructed. See Patrick Cabanel, *Histoire des Protestants en France: XVIe-XXIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2012), chap. 5. For an early English (and sometimes rather loose) translation of the discipline, see "The Discipline of the Reformed Churches of France," in John Quick, *Synodicon in Gallia Reformata: Or, the Acts, Decisions, Decrees, and Canons of Those Famous National Councils of the Reformed Churches in France* (London: Parkhurst & Robinson, 1692), xvi–lviii; online: https://books.google.com/books?id=xhw-AAAAcAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false.

[19] Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 675 (4.20.31).

under Christ, as under a human king in the national forum, there are those who exercise authority—the church is neither communistic nor anarchistic, but its order is assured by appointed officers. Calvin believed that this view of church order was indicated by Scripture and existed in the primitive church before being overlaid by the abuses of the Papacy.[20] Calvin recognized three offices: that of pastor (bishop, *episcopoi* were *presbyteroi*) or elder, of teacher, and of deacon.[21] In regard to the matter of whether one person or instance should appoint a minister for a particular church, Calvin stated that to take away from the church or from the college of pastors the right of judging would profane the power or the church, the *jus divinum* (divine law). An elder or deacon is recognized by the qualifications of Scripture, approved by the church. This view is elaborated in article 29 of the La Rochelle Confession, which states,

> We believe that the true Church should be governed according to the order established by our Lord Jesus Christ. That is, there should be pastors, elders (*surveillants*), and deacons, so that true doctrine may be upheld therein, errors corrected and suppressed, the poor and afflicted helped in their needs, the services (*assemblées*) held in the name of God, and that adults and also children be edified.[22]

The question of special offices implies that of hierarchy in organization, particularly against the backdrop of the Romanistic pyramid structure of authority and its fundamental division of society into clergy and laity. It has sometimes been stated that an elaborate system of hierarchies existed in the French Reformed system.[23] However, if some form of hierarchical order exists, the fundamental principle of the La Rochelle Confession, and the Discipline following it, is antihierarchical, as expressed in article 30: "We believe that all true pastors, wherever they may be, have the same authority and equal power under one head, one sovereign, and one universal bishop: Jesus Christ. Consequently, we believe that no church shall claim any authority or dominion at all over any other." Article 31 continues by stating, "No person may aspire to office in the church of their own authority, but this is to be done by election in so far as possible and God permits."[24]

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[20] *Institutes* 4.2.3–4; 4.1.

[21] Calvin's attempt to harmonize the functions did not go very far, as pointed out by Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1990), 171.

[22] *Confession de La Rochelle* (Aix-en-Provence: Kerygma, 1988), 54, translation mine.

[23] Cf. van Raalte, "The French Reformed Synods," 57–61.

[24] Ibid., 83–87. This election is not a congregational vote, but the designation of future pastors by the provincial synods; local churches then call their pastors following the rule of the *Discipline* of 1559, chapter 1, articles 1 and 3.

Three affirmations are made in these articles: no minister occupies a position that is superior to another; no church or church institution has authority or power over another; and those serving the church must be elected, because their calling is recognized as coming from the Lord of the church. Each of these affirmations raises the antihierarchical principle to the level of *status confessionis*. Bernard Roussel states that article 1 of the 1559 Discipline rejects all organizational hierarchy: there are no officers or assemblies over each other and no higher and lower levels of authority other than that of the consistory over the congregation, which is a biblical order.[25]

In French this organizational structure is called *le régime presbytéro-synodal* (the presbyterian-synodical system). This expression seeks to accent the fact that there is a complementarity between the principle of local diversity in the presbytery and collective unity in the synod. A delicate balance of power exists under the authority of Christ between the local congregation and the broader church, between the consistory (or presbytery) and the synod (or classis). Power exists first of all in the local congregation. Pierre Courthial comments:

> According to the New Testament each local church is the fullness of the body of Christ in that place. There can therefore be no inequality, since each church is really the body of Christ in that place and the church in that place. If there were supremacy of one church over another, it would be like saying that one church was more the body of Christ than the other. So I believe it is correct to say that all churches are equal.[26]

To express the unity of the church as one body, singular and plural, the Reformed church of France was originally not named by a substantive in the singular, but by the plural: the Reformed Churches in (not of) France, *les Églises réformées en France*, a designation that was only abandoned in the nineteenth century. The elaboration of the synodical system at the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth was special in France, as Geneva itself had no synod. If the Genevan model was followed to a certain point, the French adapted it to the needs of a fast-growing church spread throughout a hostile nation.[27]

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[25] Van Raalte, "The French Reformed Synods," 59, quoting Bernard Roussel, "La 'Discipline' des Eglises réformées de France en 1559," in *De l'Humanisme aux Lumières, Bayle et le protestantisme: Mélanges en l'honneur d'Elisabeth Labrousse*, ed. Michelle Madeleine et al. (Paris: Universitas, 1966), 177.

[26] Pierre Courthial, *La Confession de Foi de La Rochelle: Commentaire* (Aix-en-Provence: Kerygma, 1979), 100.

[27] This is amply documented in Glenn S. Sunshine, *Reforming French Protestantism: The Development of Huguenot Ecclesiastical Institutions, 1557–1572* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2003), and Philip Benedict, *Christ's Church Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

The first French Discipline is close to Calvin's *Ordonnances ecclésiastiques* for the Genevan Church, just as liturgy in the French Reformed churches is close to Calvin's model of congregational response, in contrast with John Owen's later criticism of liturgy.[28] However, the French had to face a new and novel situation and in particular the question of the relation between the local church council and the synod. At the grassroots level the Discipline placed the government of the local church in a council of elders called the consistory. The church is congregationally governed, but not in the sense of *congregationalism*; later, in 1645, the Synod of Charenton warned against the congregationalism of independents arriving from England, who would not recognize the authority of synods.[29]

The local elders, numbering five to ten, in each church, are elected by the community to oversee the preaching of the Word and order in church life. Pastors are chosen by the council of elders, but later, after 1571, they were also to be examined by the provincial synod. In the early years, most of the French pastors were formed at the academy in Geneva, before academies were established in several regions of France.[30] The synods assembled representatives of the churches, both pastors and laymen, on the principle of delegation, and acted as temporary organs of liaison between the local churches, with the aim of furthering the common interests of the churches and solving problems. The synod itself elected its *président*, later called moderator, whose duties, according to article 2 of the Discipline, were to be limited to the duration of the synod and were to terminate at its end. This measure was a defense against centralization and episcopacy, and also against the domination of powerful personalities. At the end of each synod, an organizing congregation was delegated for the following year, although during the century following 1559 only twenty-nine synods were able to convene.

The pastoral body, which grew to eight hundred by the middle of the seventeenth century, was very often composed of a strong representation of the intellectual elite, particularly in southern France, and during this

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[28] John Owen, "Discourse on Liturgies," chap. 1, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965–1968), volume 16. Cf. Paul Wells, "Worshipful Worship," Lecture presented at the Rutherford House Systematic Theology Conference in Edinburgh, September 2015, publication forthcoming.

[29] Van Raalte, "The French Reformed Synods," 65.

[30] At the synod of Alès in 1620 the academies of Die, Montauban, Nîmes, Saumur, and Sedan were officially established. They were destroyed successively under Louis XIV: Nîmes in 1664, Sedan in 1681, Die in 1684, Saumur and Montauban (Puylaurens) in 1685. Pierre-Daniel Bourchenin, *Étude sur les académies protestantes en France aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles* (Paris: Grassart, 1882).

period, more than a third of them were sons of pastors. Originally there were no permanent church commissions or standing agencies. In 1563 at Lyon, France was divided into nine provinces, and the consistories of each province were to elect delegates to the national synod. From 1578 a system of appeals for doctrinal and other questions was developed.[31]

So within twenty or so years after the Edict of Nantes a system of church government emerged in France that was nonhierarchical but characterized by a pyramid system of delegation of authority:

Local church → Council of elders and consistory of local churches → Provincial synod → National or general synod

At a later point *colloques* or colloquiums [the equivalent of the Dutch *classes*] were added as instances between the local consistories and the regional synods in order to deal with local and secondary issues, although their status was really outside the pyramid structure of Presbyterian delegation.[32] An example of the workings of the local church is seen in the case of Nîmes in the Gard region, often called the capital of French Protestantism. Pierre Viret established churches in this area from 1562 onwards, and Theodore Beza attended the national synod there in 1572. "From 1561 to 1685, the Reformed church in Nîmes was governed by a consistory, an assembly of deacons and elders moderated by a pastor, and had the function of organizing worship and the overseeing the church, the instruction of the faithful, and the distribution of charitable aid."[33]

The organizational structure of the Presbyterian-synodal system has been called "democratic centralism." It implies a centralized collectivity existing in complementary extension to the local instances of government, and a system of representation based on the election of delegates with equal representatives from the body of pastors and laymen. The influence of this system for the development of representative democracy in France and Western Europe is a subject of hot debate.[34] It has been noted that since the French Revolution the system of elected local councils, regional councils, departments, and parliament with a president is not foreign to the original structure of government in the Reformed churches in France.

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[31] Van Raalte, "The French Reformed Synods," 75.

[32] Ibid., 69–70.

[33] Patrick Cabanel, ed., *Itinéraires Protestants en Languedoc, XVIe–XXe siècle: 2. Espace gardois* (Montpellier: Presses du Languedoc, 2000), 298.

[34] André Gounelle et al., *Démocratie et fonctionnement des Eglises* (Paris: Van Dieren, 2000).

All this granted, it should not be forgotten that church government, though under the authority of Christ as Lord, was not an end in itself and only existed to further the proclamation of the gospel. The main activity of the church being preaching, the quality of the pastoral body was always a concern and continually preoccupied the synods. Preaching and Protestantism became synonymous. To illustrate: between 1660 and 1680 there were four preaching services each Sunday in the Grand Temple at Nîmes, and certain parishioners who attended two or three of these had to be removed to make way for others. Sermons lasted an hour or more, and in the Temple at Charenton near Paris, which was the largest in France (3000 capacity), there was an hour glass that the pastor turned over to time himself at the start of his sermon. It has been estimated that between 1598 and 1685 more than two million sermons were preached in the 700 churches authorized by the Edict of Nantes. The most famous were published in collections by Jean Daillé, Charles Drelincourt, Pierre Du Moulin, Isaac Sarrau, and Jean Claude.[35]

## IV. *Synodical Life and Problems*

The main problems faced by the local instances and consistories were ethical issues—offences of moral laxity, feuds, frequenting papist services or dancing—and led to excommunication.[36] The local instances also took steps through diaconal work in assisting the poor or those suffering because of persecution. On the national level the problems were of another order. Provincial and national synods were called to deal with two sorts of issues: firstly, structural politics of church government, and secondly, theological polemics.

### 1. *The Politics of Church Government*

From early days a classic distinction was observed between *églises plantées* [church plants] and *églises dressées* [established churches]. In the first, the Word was preached and the sacraments distributed by a pastor without a church council having been established. In the second case, the church was placed under the authority of the council or consistory. When several

[35] References from Cabanel, *Histoire des Protestants en France*, chap. 5. A fine example of Huguenot preaching is analyzed by Michael A. G. Haykin in his article "'The Glorious Seal of God': Jean Claude (1619–1687), Ephesians 4:30 and Huguenot Pneumatology," in Klauber, *The Theology of the French Reformed Churches*, 321–34. Cf. also Lucien Rimbault, *Pierre Du Moulin, 1568–1658: un pasteur classique à l'âge classique, étude de théologie pastorale sur des documents inédits* (Paris: Vrin, 1966).

[36] Cabanel, ed., *Itinéraires Protestants en Languedoc*, 298–300.

established congregations existed in the same area, the question of the authority of the consistory was raised. As early as 1562, the Synod of Orleans condemned a tract by a Jean-Baptiste Morély defending the idea that the entire congregation is called to elect the elders and pastors and exercise discipline. Morély in fact was advocating that authority lay with all church members to take decisions under the guidance of the Spirit, whereas he limited the power of the consistory to administrative matters.[37] At a subsequent synod in Paris three years later, a decision was taken that it is unbiblical to remit such elections to "*la voix du peuple*" (the suffrage of the people). This thesis was defended at length by Antoine de Chandieu at the request of the Paris synod in a major work, *Confirmation of the Ecclesiastical Discipline Practiced in the Reformed Churches in the Kingdom of France with a Reply to the Objections Proposed against It*.[38] This decision was confirmed by successive synods at La Rochelle, Nîmes, and Sainte-Foy, and has remained the theoretical position of the Reformed church in France ever since.[39] Both Calvin and Chandieu saw the Reformed consistory as being patterned after the Sanhedrin, and exegeted Matthew 18:16, "tell it to the church," to mean the governing body, the Sanhedrin or the consistory, in line with the eldership pattern of the Old Testament. So from an early stage in the history of the French church, the government of the church was rooted squarely in the authority of the consistory or council, made up of elders and pastors. Even the much-respected general synods of the church had legitimacy not of themselves, but only as meetings of the delegated representatives of the churches. No intrusion of the civil magistrate was permitted in the life of the church, theoretically avoiding Erastianism.

The major concession made by the church under the Edict of Nantes was to recognize the right of the king to authorize or deny the meeting of a synod. This said, it must be added that the Reformed churches received the "King's bounty," a sum that increased in time, before becoming more and more infrequent. Distribution of this sum was a thorn in the side for the synods, for which the king also paid the bill. This royal grant allowed the king to impose greater strictures on the churches over the years. For instance, no

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[37] Robert M. Kingdon, *Geneva and the Consolidation of the French Protestant Movement, 1564–1571* (Geneva: Droz, 1967), 37–148; Jean Rott, *Jean Morély et l'utopie d'une démocratie dans l'Eglise* (Geneva: Droz, 1993); Scott M. Manetsch, "Theodore Beza and the Crisis of Reformed Protestantism in France," in Klauber, *The Theology of the French Reformed Churches*, 40–41.

[38] Antoine de Chandieu, *La Confirmation de la discipline ecclésiatique observée dans les églises réformées du royaume de France, avec la response aux objections proposées alencontre* (1566). Kingdon, *Geneva and the Consolidation of French Protestant Movement*, 77–82.

[39] François Méjane, *Discipline de l'Eglise Réformée de France* (Paris: Je sers, 1947), 18–20.

French delegate was permitted to attend the Synod of Dort, no foreigner could be a pastor in France, and letters from churches abroad to the synods had to be opened and read by the royal commissioner. Reduction of the king's bounty often meant that theological colleges could not be financed.[40]

No human system of organization is free from functional friction; power remains power, even if it is delegated power. The problem that the French church structure had to deal with was that of two complementary authorities: the authority relationship between the local consistory and the congregation was not the same as that between the national or provincial synods and the local consistories. If the consistory "governs" the local church, it cannot be said that the synod "rules" or "governs" the provincial synods or the local consistories. The synod derives its authority in an indirect way from the agreement of churches to be in union with a federal principle, under a common confession. This point was much discussed in the French church and continues to be, down to the present.

The famous jurist Pierre Jurieu tackled the problem that had been rumbling on in his 1686 work *The True System [or Structure] of the Church*. Churches, says Jurieu,

> assembled synods in which they made some rules and canons by the power of their federation. … They voluntarily submitted to certain rules which they themselves made. … The right that these synods have to censure and chastise those who break the order is founded upon the very will of those who are censured.[41]

This recognizes that although such synodical institutions are not contrary to the will of God, they exist by human voluntary consent and are not specifically instituted by him.

A downside of synodical life is therefore recognized, as well as two positive factors. Synods cannot claim more than a relative authority and can waver in their decisions and deliberations. Therefore, their actions are not above scrutiny and criticism. Positively, in the first instance, insofar as they are subject to Scripture they confess the faith of the churches as the bond of unity in witness to the truth and properly represent the will of the churches. Secondly, because they are human institutions, they can never legislate new doctrines or practices in the way that the Councils of the Roman Catholic Church might pretend to do. This carries a double consequence: congregations or individuals who introduce new teaching or practices in the church fall under the sanction of the synod, acting on behalf of all. Furthermore, if

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[40] Van Raalte, "The French Reformed Synods," 80–83.

[41] Pierre Jurieu, *Le vray systeme de l'Eglise*. Van Raalte, "The French Reformed Synods," 72.

a synod humanly errs in one of its decisions, it is legitimate for a local congregation to consider that the federal principle has been broken and separate for reasons of faithfulness to Scripture. It is for these reasons that the synod in 1601 adopted what has subsequently been the practice of French Reformed synods: reading and swearing on the Confession of faith and the Discipline at the opening of synodical meetings, "We promise to submit insofar as we judge it to be in accordance with God's Word."[42] In this context the French expression *d'un commun accord*, meaning that decisions are taken "by mutual consent," has been capital for the expression of the federative principle.

These considerations are important and capital for the situation of deviant Reformed churches today, including in France. When theological pluralism is imposed as a norm for church practice by synods on believing congregations, pluralism has itself become a creed that replaces the confession of the church and the *sola Scriptura*, and church authoritarianism becomes a principle demanding ultimate respect.[43]

### 2. *Theological Issues*

The second area of synodical activity during the seventeenth century in the French Protestant churches was that of theological debate and censure related in particular to Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, and Amyraldian theology. These were issues of common concern, and questions raised in consistories and provincial synods went higher if they had not been dealt with there. During this period the main polemic was obviously against the Roman Church. The synod at Saint Maxant in 1609 divided the Roman problem into fourteen subjects and assigned topics for study to provincial synods. The synods commissioned writings about the persecutions of the church and also designated authors to write on certain issues. One pastor, Théophile La Milletière, was condemned by the synod of Charenton in 1644–45 for seeking reconciliation with the Roman Church and was excommunicated.[44]

Three successive synods during a period of nine years, 1603–1612, examined the views of Johannes Piscator, a German theologian who denied the imputation of the active obedience of Christ and became a prominent

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[42] Ibid., 74.

[43] Cf. Paul Wells, "Le pluralisme, l'Ecriture et l'unité de l'Eglise" (1974), in *En tout occasion favorable ou non: Positions et propositions évangéliques* (Aix-en-Provence: Kerygma, 2014), 30–44.

[44] R. J. M. van de Schoor, *The Irenical Theology of Théophile Brachet de La Milletière, 1588–1665* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

Arminian. The synod of Privas (1612) drew up a form of prescription against his ideas that pastors were required to sign. Later synodical debate often centered around the strict Calvinistic position of the Sedan academy in the line of Dort, which was opposed to the Cameronian theology of the Saumur academy. There was ongoing debate about the Saumurian Josué De La Place's (Placeus) rejection of the immediate imputation of Adam's sin.[45] La Place argued that Calvin knew nothing of immediate imputation and replied in his *Disputatione de imputatione primi peccati Adami*, published at Saumur in 1655. Consequently, the synod of Loudon in 1659 withdrew the strictures. It was not until the *Helvetic Consensus* of 1675 that the Saumurian theology and "imputation mere and consequent" were condemned.[46] Amyraut himself came under examination at the synod of Alençon in 1637 and later at Charenton, and although the synod cautioned against certain theses, the explanations and promises given on the floor of the synod were received, and the right hand of fellowship was extended to Amyraut and Testard, in spite of protestations from foreign parts.

The major issue of the century was Arminianism and its derivatives, and polemic went on in the synods and out of them throughout the period, often centered around the reception of the Canons of Dort. Pierre Du Moulin, who was the principal adversary of both the Arminians and later the Amyraldians, published his *Anatome Arminianismi* at Leiden in 1619. He was elected moderator of the synod of Alès in 1620 and used his position to push through acceptance of the acts of Dort as a confessional standard alongside the La Rochelle Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. It appears that Du Moulin's influence was overbearing in obtaining this decision, as well as the instruction that all pastors should subscribe by oath to uphold this position. This roused some resentment against Du Moulin.[47] The following synod, which met in 1623, upheld the decision regarding the adoption of Dort, but removed the oath of subscription and reference to Dort, under pressure from the king, who objected to the subjecting of

[45] David L. Jenkins, *Saumur Redux: Josué de la Place and the Question of Adam's Sin* (Norfolk: Leaping Cat Press, 2008), presents the position of Placeus, but does not examine the back and forth of the theological polemic and the exegetical issues involved.

[46] Martin I. Klauber, "The Helvetic Formula Consensus (1675): An Introduction and Translation," *Trinity Journal* 11.1 (1990): 103–23. Canon XII of the Consensus states: "Accordingly we cannot, without harm to the Divine truth, agree with those who deny that Adam represented his posterity by God's intention, and that his sin is imputed, therefore, immediately to his posterity; and under this mediate and consequent imputation not only destroy the imputation of the first sin, but also expose the doctrine of hereditary corruption to grave danger."

[47] Particularly by Daniel Tilenus in his *Considérations sur les Canon et Serment des Églises Réformées, conclu et arrêté au Synode Nat. d'Alez és Cévennes* (Paris, 1622). Tilenus was forced out of the Sedan academy in 1620 and became an ally of Hugo Grotius.

French pastors to a decision taken in a foreign state. The synod also decided on a policy with regard to Arminians: only "dogmatizers" should be proceeded against in church courts, but for Arminians who were not militant in spreading their opinions, tolerance should be shown in an attempt to win them over to sound doctrine. If they showed no flexibility after three months' dialogue, they should be debarred from the Lord's Table.[48]

## Conclusion

Reformed church government came to be modeled in an exemplary way in France in the seventeenth century. The Presbyterianism proposed, with a church led by a council of elders, places authority under Christ in the leadership of the local church. This is close to the New Testament model for the local church, as described in the Acts and the Epistles. The unity of the church is expressed in the regular meeting of synods, although it may be doubted that the New Testament could justify anything more than occasional and punctual general meetings, rather than statutory annual assemblies. This structure has created stability in Reformed churches, regular ministry, and the exercise of discipline in practice.

In conclusion, regarding the seventeenth-century French church, two questions remain. Was the church in its government too attached to the Protestant upper crust and the intellectual elite, a fact particularly striking in some Protestant centers like Nîmes? Did this social factor hold back growth among the lower classes on the solid basis laid down by Calvin and then practically by Beza and Viret, who were both enthusiastic church planters? France in this century was largely unchurched in spite of Roman Catholic dominance, practice was weak, and the population generally was illiterate, and in many cases did not even speak the French language, instead speaking *patois*, local dialects that were incomprehensible from one region to the other. The Catholics set about a mission of evangelism in response to this situation. But over this period there was little vision for mission in the Protestant churches. Was this because of the growing oppression and their minority status, or was it an effect of their system of government, with its increasingly heavy organizational charges and acerbic ongoing internal debates? Did not these churches involve themselves too heavily in internal theological wrangling, while the world around them was slipping away from the Reformation? The stark fact remains that these churches not

[48] For details see Donald Sinnema, "The French Reformed Churches, Arminianism, and the Synod of Dort," in Klauber, *The Theology of the French Reformed Churches*, 98–136.

only registered negative growth during the century, but also they were poorly armed to stand up against absolute monarchy when it arrived in the person of Louis XIV.

Is not this a question that remains, in many situations, for Presbyterian churches, the danger of overly accenting internal affairs and forgetting about the world around? The missional challenge is the one that stares us in the face today, particularly in the secularized West and elsewhere with the challenge of militant Islam or paganism.