

Guillaume Farel (1489-1565)

In 1492 a devout Roman Catholic, Jacques Le Fevre, a popular doctor of divinity and scholar in languages, became professor at Paris university. He soon took a leading role with his colleagues. He began to read the Bible earnestly and was challenged by many verses. He began to expound passages and an increasing number of students were attracted to his Bible studies. After 17 years at the university he met up with a 20 year old Roman Catholic, Guillaume Farel. Farel was disturbed by the sinful lifestyles of Parisians and found friendship and a like mind with Le Fevre. He became a disciple of Le Fevre, and they became lifelong friends and often read the Bible together.

Fevre began to study more deeply the epistles of Paul and this led him to a conviction to teach salvation by grace alone. Although this was before the time of Zwingli and Luther, it was not new teaching, as the Waldenses and other Protestant groups had taught this for centuries. But in France at this time, this was a dangerous teaching that would bring one into direct conflict with the Roman Catholic religion. In some places the threat of death was real.

By 1521 the danger of teaching such Biblical doctrines forced many such as Fevre and Farel to flee to Meaux where a Roman Catholic Bishop, Briconnet, was sympathetic to their teaching. Bishop Briconnet tried to educate his people by giving away copies of scripture. With the threat of punishment diminished, Farel began to preach in churches and in the open air. His sermons taught grace alone through faith for salvation and with the promise of complete forgiveness of sins: *'He who is God himself so humbled himself as to die for us, he the holy and righteous one, for the ungodly and for sinners, offering himself up so that we might be made pure and clean. And it is the will of the father, that those whom he thus saves by the precious gift of his son, should be certain of their salvation and life, and should know that they are completely washed and cleansed from all their sins...for that blessed day the whole creation groans; that day of the triumphant coming of our saviour and redeemer, when all enemies shall be put under his feet, and his elect people shall ascend to meet him in the air.'* (1)

Many of the locals were converted from this preaching and some from reading the Bible alone, parts of it being freely supplied.

The Roman Catholic Franciscans in Meaux complained to the Roman church and to the University in Paris about these conversions. They were disturbed by the growing numbers of conversions away from Roman Catholic teaching and the free use of the scriptures for the laity to read. The Bishop was threatened with losing everything in his parish as well as his life if he continued with his policies. Under pressure he gave in and restored Roman Catholicism outwardly, but inwardly he remained convinced of the truth of the Scriptures. By this time the Christians in Meaux were numerous and strong enough for them to arrange secret meetings to study the Bible and worship.

One of the converts from the Bishop, a Jean Leclerc, visited house to house and put placards against the cathedral doors exposing Roman Catholic teaching. He was soon captured and for three successive days was whipped through the streets and then branded a heretic on his forehead with a red hot iron. His mother cried out from the crowd of

onlookers, encouraging her son and praising the Lord. The bishop endured the shame of seeing one of his parishioners tortured. Leclerc was then removed to Metz where, until his death, he taught the scriptures to all who would listen.

On the outskirts of Metz was a grove where Roman Catholics came to pray. There were many statues of the Virgin Mary and the saints. One night Leclerc destroyed the statues. When he later admitted to the deed, he was condemned to the flames. First they horribly tortured him while he cried out the words of Psalm 115 and the verse pertaining to idols: *'their idols are silver...'*

One of those converted at the time was Francois Lambert who was raised with the Franciscans in Avignon but who disagreed with the Roman system of doctrine. He read the Scriptures and Luther's writings. Even though as a priest he went in and out of the monastery, he eventually married, being the first of the French priests to take this step against the Roman Catholic rules of non marriage for priests. As a result, in 1524 he and his wife were driven out of Metz. The Roman Catholic authorities then began to tighten the screws on the 'heretics'.

Another who was converted at that time was an Augustinian monk, Jean Chaistellain. They captured him, degraded him horribly and then burnt him alive. Yet the converts continued to grow in numbers. Nothing seemed to control the growth of Christians in Metz.

In 1525 King Francis I of France was defeated by Emperor Charles V. The Pope used the occasion to gain access to Meaux and have a show of force against 'heretics'. He targeted Bishop Briconnet. Although Briconnet had previously outwardly submitted to the Pope and reversed his policies, the Catholic authorities believed an example needed to be made of him by having him publicly recant. Bishop Briconnet gave in and performed the necessary ceremonies of penance and repentance.

At that time there was also a famous 'hermit of Livry' who lived in a forest hut outside of Paris. He had been converted through Briconnet and had spread the Gospel to many who visited him or wanted to be taught by him. He was eventually brought to the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris with a great fanfare and with bells tolling so as to bring the public to see the spectacle. Then he was burnt before all.

Meanwhile Farel had managed to escape death. His open air preaching in various towns was convincing, passionate and bold. He had seen his three brothers converted also through his preaching. His knowledge of scripture and doctrine was above that of most of his contemporaries. However, he was more an evangelist for most of his life than a teacher. He had a strikingly deep voice and a long red beard and many were attracted to hear him. He did not tolerate compromise and disagreed with Erasmus who he considered half hearted in Reform.

Many believe that it was Farel who was the vessel used to reform French Switzerland. He was later considered to be the 'apostle of French Switzerland'. He once preached in Neuchatel where he caused a revival amongst many of the hearers. But this also generated violence from others. The revival spread to other towns including Valangin where he and a companion narrowly escaped being drowned by an angry mob in the river Seyon. He was also beaten in the

chapel of the castle where his blood stained the walls. He was eventually thrown into prison but rescued by sympathetic men from Neuchatel.

By 1530 Neuchatel had adopted the reformers religion against Roman Catholicism.

Farel also visited the Waldensian hamlets in the scattered mountains where they had for centuries adopted the Bible based faith of the Gospels. The Waldensians were an interesting anomaly to the Reformation (as were the 'Anabaptists' who were non conformists to some of the rituals and traditions still carried over into the Reformation from the Roman church). For centuries the Waldenses had not been absorbed into the church systems but remained independant. At a meeting on Sept. 12th 1532 at the synod of Chanforan in the Waldensian valleys, Farel and other Reformers met with the Waldenses. Farel had urged more separation from any Romish practices. However, the question that excited most discussion was that of how a man is made right with God. Farel taught that God elected people before the foundation of the world and that all that God chooses will come, (Eph. 1; Rom. 8:29,30; Jn.6:37-44). The majority were unable to refute Farel's teachings and most adopted them. The synod also decided to spend 500 gold crowns on a translation of the Bible into French.

Later a young man named Jean Calvin was forced to leave Paris because of his Bible teachings and he came to Geneva.

Calvin was considered by most to be the foremost theologian of the day. Calvin met Farel who convinced him to stay there and help. Calvin eventually imposed a state and church that ruled in religious matters.

Farel later came under the influence of Lutheran ideas and became an avid promoter of them. Although he had drawn Calvin to the city, he disagreed with him over the 'Eucharist' (communion). Farel eventually came into conflict with the state run side of Geneva - the council. Among other things they accused him of placing too much emphasis on the church rather than the council. He was forced to leave Geneva in 1538, in part for his strict ideas on some issues. He retired to Neuchatel, where he died September 13, 1565 of unspecified causes.

Farel's impact on the French speaking Switzerland was important to the Reformation in Europe. Many souls were converted under his ministry, particularly in his earlier preaching days. He was also a key figure in the lives of other Reformers and Protestant groups. His evangelistic preaching saw God win the hearts of many through the Word of God.

Terry Arnold

Extracted from various sources including: '*The Pilgrim Church*' by E.H. Broadbent; '*The Renaissance and the Reformation*' (books.google.com/); and various files with TA Ministries.

(1) '*Life of William Farel*' by Francis Bevan