

ServantReading

Pierre Viret: The Angel of the Reformation

by Riley D. Fraas

Pierre Viret: The Angel of the Reformation, by R. A. Sheats. Tallahassee, FL: Zurich Publishing, 2012, xx + 323, \$30.00.

Pierre Viret: The Angel of the Reformation by R. A. Sheats is the finest specimen of a spiritual biography that I can recall reading in recent memory. If the reader is looking for a work of academic history that objectively reports all the facts about Viret, this is not the source. Its bias is clearly in favor of the Reformation in general and Viret's ministry in particular. However, if the reader is looking for a source of inspiration, encouragement, and devotion to the Almighty, it is highly recommended. Here are six reasons why I recommend that you read it.

1. It Is an Action-Packed, Page-Turning Thriller

From conflicts with Romanists (55); Bernese Protestant magistrates assuming all ecclesiastical authority in Pays de Vaud and forbidding church discipline (151–202); ignorant parishioners; empoisonment (44–46); illness (206); exile from his home country (167); blessed ministerial fruit; to his surprisingly gentle character in the face of opposition, capture, and imprisonment (251), I just could not put this book down. The action is non-stop. One episode that stands out in my mind is this anecdote of the first impression the reformer Guillaume Farel made in a Catholic village:

Arriving thus in Orbe with the Bernese ambassadors, Farel proceeded immediately to the town church where he mounted the pulpit and attempted to preach. A Catholic eyewitness recounts the event:

... after vespers were said, Farel, with presumptuous audacity, without asking leave of anyone, mounted to the pulpit of the church to preach, and as soon as everyone saw him, men, women, and children all cried aloud and boomed with every exclamation, seeking to prevent him, calling him dog, scoundrel, heretic, devil; other abuses they hurled upon him, so much so that one couldn't even hear God thunder.⁴³

Farel, however, was not to be cowed, and patiently awaited the cessation of the noise. At sight of his calm obstinacy, the men of the city rose furiously from their seats and rushed forward with the intention of pulling Farel from the pulpit. The courageous

⁴³ Quoting Pierrefleur, *Memoires de Pierrefleur* (Lausanne, Editions La Concorde, 1933), 16.

preacher would certainly have perished at the hands of the incensed mob had not the bailiff taken him in hand and personally escorted him to his lodging. (11)

2. It Is Well-written

Sheats writes with an effusiveness and expressiveness of style that can only come from being immersed in sixteenth-century French literature for months on end. Her English prose ebbs, flows, and punches. This quality is admittedly easier to recognize than to describe, but I will offer an example, “Again, as in the years of Catholic power, the Scripture had been replaced, though it was now done not by a bishop’s command or papal decree, but by the pen of a Protestant magistrate” (166).

3. It Is Doxological

As a spiritual biography should, it glorifies God in all things. This book will drive you to your knees in thanks to God for his mighty acts in history. Sheats recounts the successful disputation held versus the Catholic clergy at the cathedral of Lausanne in 1536:

Upon this vital battlefield each of these three men contested for the Faith, the mystery hid from ages, but now revealed to the saints (Col. 1:26). And within this combat each among this brilliant array of Reformers was noted in his own way: men shuddered at the thunderings of Farel, they sat amazed at the memory and clear-headedness of young Calvin, and they marveled at the startling wisdom and refreshing gentleness of Viret. (70)

And,

Viret and Calvin. How often the Lord had brought the paths of these two men together! How often the Swiss Reformer had enjoined his French counterpart—in preparing Geneva to receive the man they had banished, in aiding Calvin upon his return to the city . . . ever spurring each other onward to the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. But now, after a lifetime’s friendship and companionship, it was Calvin who first attained the prize. (246)

4. It Fills in Important Historical Gaps

Pierre Viret (1511–1571) is a name that is largely forgotten, but clearly should not be. Viret, along with the more famous Calvin and Farel, together formed the *Triumvirate* (71–72). These three pastors worked closely together, were dear friends, and were used mightily in French-speaking Switzerland. Viret spent a significant part of his ministry in Geneva, so much that the Genevans thought of him as “our pastor” long after he had departed that city (247). At the founding of the Genevan Academy, the principal and most competent faculty members were those who had been exiled from Pays de Vaud as a result of their dispute with Bernese Protestant Lords over fencing the Lord’s Supper, professors from the Reformed Academy of Lausanne (204). This Academy had been established to train ministers for the newly Reformed city. During its short existence, the Academy of Lausanne of which Viret was a founding faculty member yielded some of history’s most influential Reformers. Sheats writes:

Indeed, in the days prior to the establishment of Calvin's Academy in Geneva in 1559, the preeminent place of study in the pays de Vaud was unquestionably Lausanne. The Academy turned out countless pastors for the Reformed faith, and, aside from the preachers who left the Academy to proceed as missionaries to the surrounding Roman Catholic countries, were many world-renowned men of the Faith who also received their training at Viret's school. These students included Zacharias Ursinus and Casper Olevianus, authors of the Heidelberg Catechism of 1562, and Guido de Brès, author of the Belgic Confession of 1561." (92)

5. Pierre Viret Is an Inspirational Figure

Viret was known for being dauntless, courageous, gentle, pastoral, and a true peacemaker. Here are some notable quotes from the author: "If Farel was the Peter of the French Reformation and Calvin was the Paul, of a certainty Viret was the John" (64). "Only the fear I have of Him holds me to my post"⁴⁴, (175).

Just as Beza, Viret recognized the innumerable difficulties and almost certain defeat that awaited him in Lausanne. But, despite the seeming hopelessness surrounding him, he knew he could not forsake his call. As pastor of Lausanne, he must remain and fight for the Reformation of that city until every means possible had been exhausted. (174–75)

Sheats describes an incident in Lyon, France, where Viret ministered for a time, involving a Jesuit priest who had newly been condemned to death by the Protestant authorities for his false teachings:

Viret requested that clemency be shown the condemned man and that time be granted him to consider the Reformed teaching before he was brought to execution. The baron, however, would hear of no delay, and ordered the execution to continue. Viret, seeing that all entreaties were vain, leapt upon the scaffold and, interposing his very life to save his enemy, declared that if Auger were to die, he also would share his fate. (223)

As a result, the execution was interrupted, and Auger was not long after sprung out of prison by Catholic comrades, and lived on to trouble Viret's ministry (246). Viret was so universally appreciated as a peacemaker that when the French crown issued an edict that only French-born pastors could remain in the country, the Catholic clergy in Lyon, fearing what might happen in their city if his peacemaking influence were absent, lobbied for the Swiss Viret to be given special treatment by allowing him to remain in Lyon (235).

6. The Beautiful Glossy Color Photographs

This book contains copious photographs taken on location in Switzerland, France, and the Netherlands of cities, cathedrals, castles, and council buildings relevant to the life and ministry of Pierre Viret. If you have never been to any of the locations pictured, as I have not, you may want to go after seeing these photographs. The high volume of

⁴⁴ Quoting Henri Vuilleumier, *Notre Pierre Viret* (Lausanne: Librairie Payot & C^{ie}, 1911), 228.

photographic pages and the extended bibliography and index reduce the prose sections to considerably less than the official 323 pages.

I won't say that you must read the book. I will only say that if you don't, you're really missing out.

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ServantPoetry

Robert Herrick (1591–1674)

The New-yeeres Gift

Let others look for Pearle and Gold,
Tissues, or Tabbies manifold:
One onely lock of that sweet Hay
Whereon the blessed Babie lay,
Or one poore Swadling-clout, shall be
The richest New-yeeres Gift to me.

ServantHumor

With All My Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind?

by Eutyclus II

Distractions in worship are a problem—the little kid who won't sit still, the little kid who continues to bounce around after the initial fidgeting, the little kid's parents who won't attend to the bouncing toddler fast enough, the teenager two aisles ahead who looks back to see when if the parents are attending to the little kid. Incidents like these are what lead congregations to create nurseries or designate seating for families with young children. Of course, these "solutions" don't remove distractions. Loud children are still a distraction even if they sit at the back of the meeting space or don't wind up in the nursery. And that leads to the post-worship distraction of wondering about whether to talk to the parents and calculating the good that may come for peaceful services over against the antagonism that such an intervention may produce.

And then come the distractions beyond the control of parents or the progress of covenant children's self-control. During a recent service, elders went forward to sit in the front pew nearest the communion table to receive and distribute the elements of the Lord's Supper. One of the elders noticed a bee flying around the front of the room. When it landed on the table, the elder thought the pastor would also notice the insect and take proper action. But the minister did not since he was in the middle of instructions about the sacrament. The elder tried to concentrate on the words of institution but could not because the bee had crawled from the table into the napkins that enfolded the loaf of bread about to be broken by the pastor before being distributed to the congregation. The pastor went ahead, seemingly oblivious to the danger.

The elder did not know what to do. He considered intervening, which would have meant standing up, walking to the table, picking up the tray, and provoking the bee to fly somewhere else. But this would turn the elder's distraction into a complete disruption of the sacrament. On the other hand, the elder also considered what kind of distraction would ensue if the pastor went ahead, opened the napkin, alarmed the bee, which then inflicted its stinger on an exposed part of the pastor's body. And if the pastor were allergic to bee stings and started to swell up, the disruption would have been disproportionately much greater than if the elder had intervened.

As it turned out, the service went ahead, the pastor removed the napkin, the bee flew away, the pastor broke the bread, and the elders took the pieces to the congregation. Whether the elder had actually examined himself properly or heeded the pastor's exhortation is not hard to say since he had not. But he had avoided acting in a way that would have distracted everyone else.

The greatest commandment—to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind—is a challenge any day of the week. But it takes on dimensions not sufficiently appreciated when Christians gather together to embody such love in corporate worship. I may be prepared to give my whole being (as much as possible, anyway) to the worship of God on a given Sunday morning, but the presence of other people can ruin that effort to

give up my entire self. What other people wear, how they smell, what noises they make can throw any worshiper off. If I worshiped God all by myself—in the proverbial prayer closet—I could conceivably approach God without any distraction, though everyone would likely admit to having thoughts during prayer or Bible reading that make us less than single-minded.

The challenge of distractions is arguably greater for pastors. A fairly easy example is the challenge a minister faces when he sees one of his adolescent children—no longer seated with and policed by his mother—whispering and laughing too frequently during the service. Should he call out his child by name—even during a sermon or administration of a sacrament—or should he wait to discipline the child at home? Either way—the child making noise or the pastor calling attention to the child—the pastor distracts the congregation.

But the duty of not diverting attention away from worship falls to ministers and officers in more subtle ways than the obvious ones that come with fractious children. Leading in worship requires a pastor to function as a kind of moderator. Whether he announces every element or calls on the congregation to rise or sit, the pastor has a duty to monitor the time (when to begin, how long the service is going), observe the actions of the people and ensure they occur in good order (such as allowing people taking the offering to complete their rounds before the congregation rises to sing a hymn), and to follow the order of service printed in the bulletin (admittedly some Presbyterian communions frown on bulletins but Orthodox Presbyterians generally do not). If a minister forgets a part of the service that has been listed in the bulletin—and this can happen any time a guest minister leads worship—congregants will likely take notice and wonder, for instance, whether the pastor will simply skip the Lord's Prayer entirely (because he forgot to say it at the designated time) or make up for his mistake and insert it at another point in the service.

A similar calculation extends to how much a minister inserts his own personality into the way he conducts a service. Of course, voice modulation, pronunciation, volume, cadence – in other words, the simple manner in which a pastor speaks is part of his personality and will be part of the way he leads a service, not to mention facial expressions and body language. But pastors can insert more of themselves than they realize in distracting ways. A joke in a sermon, an illustration, even the way he makes announcements can take members of the congregation's thoughts away from the elements of worship to wonder about the propriety of the example or to consider the illustration more than the sermon's biblical text. Some have argued that the minister needs to “get out of the way” when he preaches so that the people will give their due attention to God's word. This is no less true for the rest of the service where the pastor leads in such a way that worshipers do not notice him as they offer up praise and prayer to God.

The danger in our time of a subdued minister who goes out of his way not to draw attention to himself is that he will not be attractive to would-be members who evaluate a pastor by his likeableness. Pastoral restraint, of course, need not govern interactions after a service or other forums. But pastoral moderation for the sake of congregational participation is not a recipe for displaying a minister's charisma. And if people are going to look for a church on the basis of a pastor's personal charms, looks, or demeanor, a “get-out-of-the-way” approach to leading in worship could harm the appeal of a local congregation.

In the end, whether something in a service appeals to people or distracts from worship is impossible to control. God's people come in all shapes, sizes, and personalities, and that means that what some believers find disruptive, others will not even notice, or what some find attractive will put others off. The lesson, then, may have less to do with each Christian's temperamental idiosyncrasies and more with the corporate nature of the Christian life. If Christianity is less about me, my needs, my criteria for a good pastor, my pet peeves with unruly children, and more about what I share in common with all believers—from a common confession to sitting under the oversight of the same elders—then perhaps we as a body will have fewer distractions in worship and in the life of a congregation. If that is so, then maybe the Greatest Commandment needs to be understood not simply as a directive for me to be all consumed, but for Christians corporately to worship with all of their collective heart, soul, strength, and mind. In which case, I end up giving up of myself for the good of the body just as little Johnny does as he tries to sit still and stay quiet for seventy minutes.