

## **Jean Henri Merle d'Aubigné (1794-1874)**

### **Introduction**

A disillusioned Frenchman described the first decades of the 19th century as: "After Napoleon, nothing!" He was wrong. The years between Napoleon's final defeat in 1815 and the revolution of 1848 were eventful. There was no major conflict between the great European powers. The period was characterized by political, religious and intellectual ferment, economic growth, progress in the sciences, and literary and artistic vitality. There was a return to religious faith. The great majority of Europeans attended church. Industrialism and urbanization had not yet so far advanced that traditional faith was weakened. Even the most liberal churchgoers, while keeping up a steady drum-fire of criticism against the basic doctrine of Scripture, maintained that churches had a legitimate and important role to play in society. For centuries, Scripture, creeds and confessions had been considered the foundation of Christian theology. But due to the influence of German liberal scholars, the reliability of Scripture and its authority were questioned. New theologies allowed modern thought to sit in judgement over it.

The Reformed Church in Geneva had come under the spell of rationalism. It had turned away from its once strict adherence to the Reformed confessions. The city, which in its glory days had made a large contribution to the global expansion of Calvinism, no longer knew Calvin and the Scriptures he so faithfully taught. Theological students received one hour a week of instruction straight from the Bible, and only for the purpose of studying Hebrew. After completing their four year curriculum, they had not followed one course in New Testament studies. In 1817, Geneva's consistory forbade ministers to mention in their sermons the way the divine nature had united with the man Jesus, original sin, how grace works, and predestination. The church had become a society for moral people. It preached Jesus, the great moral example. He was no longer the Saviour of sinners. Only a few pastors had not bowed down the Baal of modernity and continued to witness to the historic Reformed faith as it had been formulated in the 16th century. The Swiss Reformed Church had abandoned the Gospel, but the Lord did not forsake it. He sent an awakening (the Réveil) to Geneva, which had wide repercussions. And one of the men greatly used by the Lord was Jean Henri Merle d'Aubigné.

### **d'Aubigné's early years**

d'Aubigné, born August 16, 1794, in Eaux-Vives near Geneva, was a most unlikely character for leadership in the Réveil (Revival). His father was not a Calvinist, but an enthusiastic follower of Rousseau (1712-1778), whose teachings had paved the way for humanistic liberalism. d'Aubigné grew up in a home where church attendance was rare. He became a great lover of theatre attendance and dancing. Yet he was attracted to the ministry. As a student he neither believed in the Trinity nor in the deity of Jesus Christ. But he was not indifferent. He searched for truth. While a student, he came in contact with Robert Haldane (1764-1842), Scottish evangelist, writer and philanthropist, who began a study of Romans with some 20 to 30 theological students, most of whom had never read this epistle before. Haldane didn't teach his own personal opinions. He

believed that the Bible was the inerrant Word of God and the Sword of the Spirit. Through Haldane's careful Bible expositions, d'Aubigné became convicted of his sin. He was led to Christ. He found in Him his Saviour and Lord. By laying on of hands by Haldane, d'Aubigné and eight other students were ordained for the Gospel ministry. d'Aubigné's first church was a small French speaking congregation in Hainburg, Germany, whose rationalistic majority strongly resisted the Réveil.

## **Revéil**

The Réveil, which began in Geneva, was a back-to-the-Bible movement. The Bible was accepted as the only infallible rule for faith and practice. The doctrines of Christ's divinity, the sinfulness and lost condition of man, the atoning death of Christ on the cross, and salvation through Christ alone received strong emphasis. The Réveil leaders were burdened for the salvation of individuals. And as personal experience had taught the necessity of sound doctrine, their preaching had strong doctrinal content. They also declared themselves champions of the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), which presents Calvinism as evangelical Christianity, refutes the Roman Catholic claim to be true successor of the early church, affirms the doctrine of election from eternity, defends infant baptism, teaches participation in civil life and taking up arms in self-defense, albeit only as last resort.

The Réveil stressed religious experience. The Christian faith touches not only the mind but also the heart. With John Calvin, the Réveil leaders confessed "that those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon Scripture." And the truth of Scripture as God's Word "is sealed upon our hearts through the Spirit" (*Institutes*, I, vii, 5). d'Aubigné said that "Christianity is neither an abstract doctrine nor an external organization. It is a life from God communicated to mankind, or rather to the Church. This new life is contained essentially in the person of Jesus Christ, and it is given to all those who are united to Him."

## **d'Aubigné and Groen**

In 1823 d'Aubigné accepted an invitation to become the court chaplain for King William I in Brussels, the capital of the Southern Netherlands. His years of service at the royal court were fruitful. The king faithfully attended the Sunday morning services, except when he planned to attend the theatre in the evening. He knew that d'Aubigné didn't approve of Sabbath breaking.

Since many members of the court were from the Northern Netherlands, d'Aubigné also influenced church life there. Among the dignitaries and government personnel were Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876) and his wife Betsy. When d'Aubigné asked Betsy one day if she was ready to die, she gave no reply but burst out in tears as she had never been confronted with this question before. This led to her conversion. She became a devout Christian who loved the Lord above all else. The Holy Spirit also used d'Aubigné's Biblical and enthusiastic ministry to lead Groen into a vital and living relationship with Christ. And through the influence of d'Aubigné, Groen became fascinated by the Geneva Reformation.

d'Aubigné also introduced him to the works of the British statesman and philosophical writer Edmund Burke (1729-1797). Burke opposed the French Revolution. He believed that it was directed toward the destruction of tradition in the name of an imaginary ideal. In his book *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, he calls the French revolution a turning point in history. He observed that "The age of chivalry is gone. That of sophists, economists and calculators has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever." Burke also predicted the terrible results of revolt and irreligion.

Through reading Burke, Groen slowly came to see the connection between political movements and religious convictions. And thus he came to realize that the French Revolution was the systematic outworking of the rejection of God. Groen, secretary of the king's cabinet, became one of the greatest Reformed thinkers of the 19th century. He was a strong supporter of Christian schools and Christian political involvement. D'Aubigné's contact with the Van Prinsterers did not stop after his departure from Brussels. They remained lifelong friends.

## **Réveil in Holland**

The Réveil made its impact in Holland. Willem Bilderdyk (1756-1831), lawyer, poet and devout Christian, translated d'Aubigné's sermons into Dutch. God had called him to work! Despite the strong Swiss influence, the Dutch Réveil developed its own unique character. It became shaped by its national Calvinistic heritage. Its followers were active in charities, the establishment of Sunday schools as well as day schools, orphanages, and so on.

## **Historian**

d'Aubigné became the Réveil's talented and gifted historian. In 1817, on the occasion of the third centennial celebration of the Reformation, he visited Eisenach, Wartburg, and all the other places associated with Martin Luther. These historic places gave him the inspiration to write the history of Martin Luther and the Reformation. When d'Aubigné lived in Germany, he began the research for his project. His thirteen volume work, which was published in the years 1835-1878, attained a wide circulation in French, Italian, Dutch and English translations. He was an engaging writer, whose works are still worthwhile reading today. In the preface of the first volume of the American edition of his *History of the Reformation of the sixteenth century*, d'Aubigné gave thanks to God for "the success which he has given in America to my History of the Reformation. What I ask of the Sovereign Disposer is, that by this humble labour *the Son of God may be glorified*." He traced God's hand in the history of the church. He was unashamedly Reformed. He wrote:

The Reformation was quite the opposite of a revolt: it was the re-establishment of the principles of primitive Christianity. It was a regenerative movement with respect to all that was destined to revive; a conservative movement as regards all that will exist forever.

## **d'Aubigné in Geneva**

After king William was dislodged by the Belgian revolution of 1830, d'Aubigne returned to Geneva. There he founded and edited the weekly *Gazette Evangelique*. In 1831, he and his Réveil friends organized the Evangelical Society of Geneva; its purpose was the promotion of sound doctrine in Switzerland and France. The following year the society founded the Evangelical Seminary. d'Aubigné became one of its instructors. Support for this school came also from Holland. Dutch parents were encouraged to send their sons to Geneva. Soon two Dutch students were enrolled. Strong financial backing also came from the Dutch Réveil Christians. Because of the founding of this training school for pastors, d'Aubigné and his friend Francois Louis Gausson (1790-1863) were no longer recognized as pastors of the national church. The expulsion of the Swiss Réveil leaders was not unlike that of the Dutch Seceder, Rev. Hendrik de Cock, who, in 1834, was suspended from the ministry in the state church.

d'Aubigné's friend Louis Gausson wrote many Calvinist works. His major book, *Theopneustia: The Plenary Inspiration of the Holy Scripture*, translated into English in 1863, was a masterful defense of the verbal inspiration of the inerrant Holy Scriptures and exercised a powerful influence. Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-1892) testified: "In this work the author proves himself a master of holy arguments. Gausson charms us as he proclaims the Divine veracity of Scripture. His testimony is clear as a bell."

## **d'Aubigné's theology**

d'Aubigné wrote that the evangelical faith does not place human reason or religious consciousness on the throne of the church; but it sets thereon Jesus Christ, who is both the knowledge taught and the One who teaches it; who explains His word by the Word, and by the light of His Holy Spirit. The evangelical faith does not place on the throne civil power or the secular magistrate: but sets thereon Jesus Christ, who has said, "I am King," who establishes His kingdom here on earth, and preserves and develops it; and who, directing all events, is now making the progressive conquest of the world, until He shall exercise in person His divine authority in the kingdom of His glory. And the evangelical faith sets on the throne of Jesus Christ, the great high priest of His people, the God-man, who, by an act of His free love, bore in our stead, in His atoning sacrifice, the penalty of sin.

In his age of theological turmoil and crisis of authority, d'Aubigné called upon theologians and the church to base the whole theological enterprise upon the solid foundation of the inerrant Scriptures. In 1852, he gave an address for the opening of the Evangelical Theological Seminary. It was entitled "Which Theology Is Able to Cure the Diseases of This Age?" and its content has not lost its relevance. He noted that not every theology has a cure. A theology which hopes to save lost men through the means of men is an unfit, a weak theology. The new theology speaks of the Son and of the Spirit, but it is silent about the Father. d'Aubigné said that we need a theology from above; a theology which honours the Triune God. We need the Saviour who can reconcile us to God the Father. And this Saviour can only be known through the

Scripture. There is no Christian without the Bible. The written Word leads to the living Word. Theology students must stand firm for the Word in the midst of false teaching, old and new rationalism, and the sects. The theology of the kingdom will abide always because it is not built on sand, but on the solid rock of the God-inspired Scripture. We must reject the new theology because it contradicts Scripture. It is unable to cure the diseases of this age. Modern theology cannot save. We need certainty in an age of doubt. Our faith must rest on "the thus says the Lord." d'Aubigné repeatedly urged his audience to go back to the inerrant Scripture, which is a lamp to our feet and a light for our path (Psalm 119:105).

d'Aubigne taught not only orthodoxy in doctrine but also orthodoxy in practice. We must live our theology. Though we don't build our theology on personal experience, we must experience our faith. We need a living faith in the living God who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. d'Aubigné believed that Christians should be on fire for their Lord!

## **Conclusion**

Although I thank God for the courageous Reformed leaders who defended and proclaimed the full counsel of God, I don't believe in glorifying the past. But if we want to make an impact for the Lord today, we do well to listen to the voices of the past. A knowledge of God's work in history will make us long for a new movement of God. Much of contemporary Christianity in the Western world is shallow. Modern academic theology is in a state of crisis. It has gone from one fad to another; it has contributed to the demise of Biblical authority and to the intellectual and cultural malaise of our times. d'Aubigné's experience shows that the only cure for our sick society is a new reformation. This is d'Aubigné's legacy for us today: The Reformation is Jesus Christ.... The work begun in the age of the apostles, and renewed in the times of the reformers, should be resumed in our days with a holy enthusiasm; and the work is very simple and very beautiful, for it consists in establishing the throne of Jesus Christ in the church and on earth.... Let others follow the devices of their imaginations, or prostrate themselves before traditional superstitions, or kiss the feet of a sinful man.... O, King of glory, we desire but Thee alone!

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