



It is important for us to reflect on our spiritual heritage, and in particular on our often forgotten French heritage. As European and American Christians, we have a deep and long-standing debt to our French brethren. They gave their lives for Christ so that we would come to know Him. We generally associate the first stirrings of the Reformation with Martin Luther. But when Luther posted his 95 Theses on the church door in Wittenberg in 1517, he had already been greatly influenced by the writings of Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, a scholar-priest in Paris, who published his work on Paul's doctrine of justification by faith in 1512.

Take any book of systematic theology or doctrine, popular or scholarly. You will likely be following a structure first outlined by John Calvin, in his Institutes of the Christian Religion and followed by nearly all western theologians ever since. Since Calvin spent the greater part of his life in Geneva, many assume that he was Swiss. No! He was French, born north of Paris in Picardie, in a town named Noyon, forced to flee his homeland because of his biblical convictions. Calvin spent the rest of his life teaching Scripture and preparing a generation of pastors and missionaries, most of them French, who would give their lives in the cause of Christ in France (many as martyrs), Holland, Hungary, England and Scotland, the New World, and all the way to South Africa.

In the large park in downtown Geneva stands Reformation Wall, with the four large central characters of Calvin (French), William Farel (the fiery, red-haired preacher from Gap in southeastern France), Theodore Beza (the scholarly successor to Calvin's work in Geneva, born in Burgundy in Central France), and John Knox (the Scotsman who worked for years with Calvin in Geneva and who was later instrumental in ordering Scottish Presbyterianism). These three Frenchmen and a Scot, are courageously remembered by the Swiss for being used by God to bring light after the darkness (hence Geneva's motto : « Post Tenebras Lux »).



When we stand and sing the doxology... Praise God from whom all blessings flow ! Chances are we'll be singing the « Old Hundred » tune composed by Parisian Louis Bourgeois, (heard even in contemporary services !). Many French hymns and tunes are still sung in our American churches.

Turn in your New Testament to ... any particular favorite verse. You couldn't find your way around without the references. But those verse divisions were put in our New Testaments by a Frenchman, Robert Estienne, in 1551.



Do you have any enameled pottery in your home ? The process was perfected by Bernard Palissy, the French Huguenot (name given to French Protestants) who maintained that not even the king himself could « constrain a potter to bend his knees to statues, for I know how to die. »

The term Huguenot comes from an ancient Swiss word found in a legend of a macabre danse published in Sion, Switzerland, in 1505. Long before Luther, Zwingli and Calvin, individuals who broke their vows and separated from their brethren were named « ungotés ». The sense of the word therefore means disunited, separated and became the nickname « hugenots » all those who dared to leave the Roman Catholic Church.



Have you checked your barometer lately ? Used a calculator ? Then thank God for your brother, Frenchman Blaise Pascal, whose Christian apologetic writings in his *Pensées* have left us a far more enduring treasure than have his scientific writings.

Have you ever visited the city of New York, founded by the Dutch as New Amsterdam ? Many of those Dutch were Huguenots of French descent, as are so many in the United States today.

Do you own a pair of jeans ? Denim was the staple fabric developed and worn by the persecuted believers in the south of France, near the city of Nîmes, hence « de Nîmes » or « denim ». Didn't know you were dressed as a Huguenot, did you ?



Time will fail to tell of: Admiral Coligny and the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre in Paris (you can still find his statue, across from the Louvre, just down the street from where he took his last stand for Christ before being stabbed, thrown from the window, and beheaded on the pavement below ) ; of Marie Durand and her 38 years in a prison tower in the city of Aïgues-Mortes for refusing to recant her faith – she scratched out the inscription on the stone wall of her prison cell “*Résistez*” (resist!) ; of the thousands of Huguenot families whose children were taken from them and

whose homes were confiscated because of their attachment to Christ and to the Bible ; of the hundreds of pastors who died rowing as slaves on the galleys of Louis XIV (it makes you look at his Versailles Palace in a different light). The story can go on and on.



Few countries in history have shed as much blood or have shined as brightly for Christ as has France. Some scholars estimate that nearly 50% of the French population was at one time committed to Huguenot biblical teaching. Today, that is less than 1%. But have we as Christians forgotten the godly heritage that our French brethren have passed on to us?

I have many times needed to remind missionaries serving here in France, as well as churches in the States: Please don't become critical or embittered against this great people just because of the rhetoric of politicians, foreign policy stances and biased media. *Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you, and ... imitate their faith* (Heb.13.7). We should be grateful for these heroes from the past. And steadfastly praying that God will give us more in the future.



- Population: over 66 million
- France - number one tourist destination for a country
- Paris - most visited city in the world
- 70 million visitors annually
- Evangelical Christians: between 0.8% - 1%
- There are 36,551 cites/towns/villages in France. The vast majority of them (35,000) are without an Evangelical church.

For years, intellectuals proclaimed the end of Christianity in France, swallowed by the tides of modernity, science, and reason. Protestants were mostly evicted or "invited to leave" during the Counter-Reformation in the 17th century. The use of religious language and symbols was outlawed in public in the years after the French Revolution against the Catholic nobility. "Having faith" or "being spiritual" is often seen as odd, or a form of ignorance, or superstition.

Evangelical Christianity required two centuries to take root in France and germinated as the context transitioned from a closed and hostile religious market to a much more open spiritual marketplace with a plurality of options. *“French society has gotten more horizontal and associational,”* says Mr. Fath, author of a 2011 study titled *“A New Protestant France.”*

Evangelicalism has been growing quietly since the 1950s. The number of believers has risen from 50,000 to 600,000 today. Half of the country's Protestants are evangelicals, according to CNRS figures. *“France itself is changing, and this is a reflection of this transition,”* says Sebastian Fath, a researcher at France's National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) and an expert on evangelicalism.

In fact, French scholars say, evangelicalism is likely the fastest-growing religion in France – defying all stereotypes about Europe's most secular nation.

The reasons are manifold: growing minority populations in France from Africa and Asia are less strictly secular and more religious. Evangelicals offer a “friendlier” and less hierarchical model of worship, with more community warmth and room for emotive expression, “speaking to the heart” of people in a Europe preoccupied with wealth and worldliness and providing a haven in times of harsh economic setbacks.

Most of this activity takes place far off the French cultural radar, although the phenomenon stretches beyond smaller suburbs and towns.

That's a contrast with the Catholic vertical and hierarchical model. French society is more decentralized. There's greater emphasis on consumer and citizen power, shaping local policy, and a growing impatience with approval or dictates from the top.

French evangelicals face tough cultural hurdles. Faith in France is viewed with skepticism if not hostility. French enlightenment philosophy contained an “animus against Christianity,” as the late US historian Page Smith noted. French discourse is Marxist, atheist, and secular. Religion is mostly Catholic or Islamic. French evangelicals proselytize far less openly. Sharing is often discreet and relies more on deeds than words.

The French church model is more modest than the American megachurch. When William Ayers, pastor of the Willow Creek Church and innovator of the megachurch concept, on a visit to Paris, suggested to us that France build “100 churches of 10,000 members” our overall response was: “we would rather have 10,000 churches of 100 members”

Studies show this trend on the ground. Daniel Liechti, vice-president of the The National Council of Evangelicals in France (CNEF), found that since 1970, a new evangelical church has opened in France every 10 days. The number of churches increased from 769 to 2,184 in 2015. Currently, there is 1 evangelical church for every 32,000 people in France. In order to reach the goal of 1 church for every 10,000 inhabitants, there is a need to triple the number of churches in France! Churches are being planted at an increasing rate (a 15.5% increase in the number of churches from 2012-2015!

Perhaps one of the most encouraging demonstrations of what God is doing on a national scale in France came in 2001.

Responding to the invitation from the National Council of the French Evangelical Alliance (AEF) and the Board of the French Evangelical Federation (FEF), the large majority of the persons in charge of French church movements and Bible Institutes met on January 6, 2001, at Nogent-sur-Marne. Different aspects of the position of the French Evangelical movement were discussed: sociological and statistical, theological and relational.

Aware of their dispersion and the harm that this was doing to present a clear Evangelical witness to the country, this assembly decided to reunite on June 18, 2001, in the same place, for a day of fasting and prayer. It was at this meeting that several leaders expressed, in the name of their Federation and of their Union, a request for forgiveness for the distances maintained in the past. All rejoiced at the quality of the dialogue which showed the mutual desire for recognition and development of true fellowship.

It was decided to begin work on the project of an Evangelical platform and to transmit the details about what had occurred to the Unions, Associations, and respective Federations throughout France. The group would reconvene on January 7, 2002 to continue their work. A text was composed at the time of this encounter defining the possibilities of the National Counsel of Evangelicals in France. This text was revised and finally adopted one year later.

After many years of work, in 2010, the CNEF was officially created as a separate association. It remains a place of dialogue, reflection, and prayer – a platform aiming to reinforce the visibility of and connections within the France Evangelical Protestant world while respecting its diversity.

The CNEF now represents 70% of all French evangelical congregations connected to a church fellowship.

Members of the CNEF are all committed to the goal of "1 for 10 000" - creating one evangelical church for every 10,000 people in France. To help achieve this goal, the CNEF has started establishing Regional Church-Planting Training Centres (CFRi in French, for Centre de Formation Régional implanteurs).

The following information is taken from Daniel Liechti's 2015 publication, *Les Eglises protestantes évangéliques en France – Situation 2015: Evangelicals by the numbers*:

- **600 000** - Out of a total of 1.7M French Protestants, 600,000 regularly practice their faith (all ages).
- **460 000** - Of these 600,000, 460,000 identify themselves as Evangelicals and 140,000 as Reformed/Lutheran.
- **3/4** - Evangelical Protestants represent 33% of all Protestants but 75% of those who regularly practice their faith.
- **10** - The number of Evangelical Protestants has increased 10 times in the past 60 years (in 1950, there were 50,000 practicing Evangelicals)
- **2,442** - There are 2,442 local churches in France, counting those communities that offer at least 3 services per month on the weekends (in 1970, there were 769). Additionally, there are 500 more houses of worship that meet less frequently.
- **10** - A new local church is born every 10 days – about 35 new churches per year.
- **45** - The majority of local churches belong to one of 45 denominations.
- **70** - Out of all the local churches who belong to a denomination, over 70% are affiliated with the CNEF.



2015 IMPACT

Each dot represents a local church

## Vision

We partner with the AEEI (Evangelical Alliance of Interdependent Churches). There are three main elements to the vision of the AEEI and partner mission boards (TEAM, BMW, GEM): planting new churches, supporting church growth, and developing new leaders. All of this is summed up in our French slogan: *Bâtir des Églises qui se multiplient* (literally: "Building churches that multiply themselves").

We have developed a strategy to help flesh out this vision during the past ten years. It revolves around five key areas which feed into one another:



And this is what we're praying the Lord will help us to do in each of these five key areas:

### Leadership:

- selection of new leaders
- training & equipping them well
- providing well-structured support for their ministry

### Church growth:

- encouraging healthy church growth
- leading to more mother churches planting daughter churches

### Worship:

- promoting celebrations that are focused on God
- accessible to non-believers

### Discipleship:

- developing a culture of discipleship within every church
- encouraging all believers to live out the gospel

### Community involvement:

- helping churches develop appropriate outreaches and services
- so that God might be glorified

**Roger Peterson**

**BMW-France**