



## **Jean Claude (1619-1687)**

### ***Pastor of the Huguenots***

The Reformed Church in France fared better than most Protestant Churches in Catholic countries in the seventeenth century. In 1589, King Henry of Navarre denounced Protestantism and joined the Catholic Church in order to become King Henry IV of France. By doing this, he opened the door to legalization of the Protestant religion. In 1598, he did this officially by issuing the Edict of Nantes, which granted freedom of religion and toleration to the "Pretended Reformed Church."

After the assassination of King Henry in 1610 by a fanatical Roman Catholic, Henry's son, Louis XIII ascended the throne at the age of eight and a half. King Louis and his famous counselor, Cardinal Richelieu, were not as favorable to the Protestants as Henry IV had been. Cardinal Richelieu led the armies of France against the Huguenots and destroyed their political power, although they did affirm their freedom to practice their religion.

It was in this latter and more difficult period of the Edict of Nantes, when they could no longer secure their freedoms by arms, that God raised up men to defend the rights and the religion of the Huguenots by the pen and the tongue against the onslaught of the clergy and theologians of the Roman Catholic Church. One of the greatest of these men was Jean Claude, the pastor of Charenton, the leading Huguenot Church in France. He was one of the most respected pastors and theologians of the Reformed Church in his day, not only in France but throughout Europe. It is the life and work of this man that we consider in this article.

### **Before Charenton**

Jean Claude was born into the home of Rev. Francois Claude in Le Sauvetat in southwestern France in 1619. Francois Claude made sure that his son received a liberal arts education, and Jean performed very well in his studies. At some point, probably in his later teens, Claude went to study at the Protestant Academy of Montaubon, which was one of the four Academies established for the training of ministers in the French Reformed Church. Francois had the privilege of ordaining his own son in 1646.

Jean Claude began his ministerial work at La Treyne or Treine, serving there only one year. He then went to the strongly Protestant city of Saint-Afrigue, where he served as minister for eight years. In 1655, the Church at Nimes, one of the most important Protestant Churches, was looking for a man who could bear the burden of the extensive work in that city. They called Jean Claude to come and serve as pastor. Although there was a Protestant Academy in Nimes, Claude did not teach there. However, he gave private lessons to the students, particularly in exegesis and preaching. It is reported that many excellent preachers came out of this private schooling.

Claude was widely appreciated as a masterful preacher. His speaking was so clear and accurate that his hearers could never tell when he was reading his sermons and when he was not. Claude later wrote a book on preaching where he explains the classic Protestant plain style of preaching. Claude warns in this book that all learning and show should be avoided as well as anything that in any way points to the preacher instead of to Jesus Christ. The text of Scripture should provide the form, structure, and content of the sermon and the minister should bring out its force in such a way as to

*...instruct, solve difficulties, unfold mysteries, penetrate into the ways of divine wisdom, establish truth, refute error, comfort, correct, and censure, fill the hearers with an admiration*

*of the wonderful works and ways of God, inflame their souls with zeal, (and) powerfully incline them to piety and holiness.<sup>1</sup>*

In this way, the preacher's task is to bring the people to the words of Jesus Christ and seek by preaching to bring out the meaning, the emotion, the wonder, and the glory of the text of Scripture and thus of Jesus Christ Himself.

Claude's work in Nîmes prospered as he both taught his flock and defended the Reformed faith against its many Catholic opponents in the area. His success brought hostility from the local Catholic clergy and governor. The governor of Languedoc was Armand Bourbon, Prince of Condé (the next successor to the throne outside of the immediate royal family). The Prince's ancestors had fought for the freedom of the Huguenots, but now he sought for a reunion of the Protestants and Catholics in his province. The Provincial Synod of 1661 was to deal with the question of reunion, and Jean Claude was elected moderator of the Synod. The Synod voted unanimously to reject the proposed union. Claude responded by saying that it would be easier to reconcile light with darkness and Christ with Belial than to bring the two religions together. The result of this courageous stand against compromise was that Claude was blamed for the rejection of the proposal and banished from the province of Languedoc.

Claude did not desire to leave the Languedoc, and so he went to the court in Paris in order to seek the removal of the sentence. Claude was unsuccessful in getting the banishment lifted. However, during this six month period, Claude first entered into the national debates between Catholicism and the Protestants. The Jansenists were a party of the Roman Catholic Church following Cornelius Jansen who advocated an Augustinian theology of election and grace over against the Jesuits who held to a semi-Pelagian view. The Jansenists were eager to distance themselves from the Calvinists, with whom they were often lumped together. Thus, two of their leading theologians, Pierre Nicole (1625-1695) and Antoine Arnaud (1612-1694), wrote a book defending the perpetuity of the faith of the Roman Catholic Church on the subject of the Eucharist against the Protestants. Claude anonymously wrote a short book in answer to it, which was well-received by many and infuriated the Catholics.

Since he was unable to continue as minister in Nîmes, he made his way to Montauban where he had studied for the ministry. There, he was soon called as a minister and was greatly edifying to that congregation. He confessed that his four years there were the happiest of his life. In part because of his success and in part because of the continuation of his work on the Eucharist against the Roman Catholics, he was once more banished. He could no longer pastor in Montauban.

## **Charenton**

What men meant for evil, God meant for good. In 1665, Claude once more went to Paris to seek to get the sentence lifted. He was once more unsuccessful, but in the process, he was called to serve as minister in the Reformed Church in Charenton. According to the Edict of Nantes, no Reformed Church was permitted in Paris proper. Consequently, the many Reformed Christians there had to travel outside the city in order to go to church. They were permitted by Henry IV to build a church at Charenton, a few miles from Paris. Because of its proximity to the court in Paris and its prominent members, it became the most important church in France. Claude took up his work there in 1666 and served there until the revocation of the Edict of Nantes.

From this place, Claude defended the truth of the Reformed religion, foiled the machinations of the Roman Catholic clergy, and counseled the churches throughout France. As Claude's banishments indicate, the situation of the Huguenots became increasingly difficult. While the freedom of religion was maintained, every opportunity was sought to put pressure on the Huguenots to convert by taking away their privileges. Children were taken away from their parents on the slightest movement of a child toward Rome. Church buildings were burned to the ground. Ministers were forbidden from practicing where the churches were burned, and neighboring ministers were forbidden from conducting services anywhere but in their own parishes. In 1659, Louis XIV forbade

the Reformed Church from holding national synods. By the 1680s, soldiers were being sent into Protestant towns where they used all manner of torture and provocation to extort "conversions." It was in the midst of these hard circumstances that Claude served as a leader and pastor to all the Huguenots in France through his ministry at Charenton.

Because of his prominent position, Claude was often called upon to defend the truth of the Protestant religion. In response to a book against the Reformation by the Jansenist Pierre Nicole, Claude wrote a masterful defense of the Reformation, which was later translated into English. According to the Protestant encyclopedist Pierre Bayle, this work was the best written on the subject. In 1678, he also held a conference or disputation with the famous Catholic apologist Bossuet at the request of a Protestant noble lady. Through this conference, Claude gave his defense of the Reformed doctrine of the Church. Bossuet said that Claude had said the most and best of what could be said for a bad cause.

Many of the great Huguenot theologians were hindered from writing works intended for the laity because of their preoccupation with the defense of the Reformed doctrine against the powerful Catholic apologists. However, they did not forget at times to write works for the laity, and Claude is no exception. He published five sermons explaining the parable of the virgins in Matthew 25. In addition, he wrote an excellent little work on self-examination in preparation to take the Lord's Supper. There, he demonstrated that we must not be content with being better than some other people or hearing the Word of God, we must seek the signs of true godliness in order to be assured of our salvation. He gave a helpful and clear explanation of the difference between the regenerate and unregenerate in various stages of life and in various trials and temptations. He then applied his observations to encourage the sinner to humble himself before God and seek his salvation in Christ alone. This book was also translated into English and published in London.

As we can see from the many translations of Claude's works, Claude's fame spread throughout Europe. In 1681, he was called to serve as a professor of theology at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. This must have been a great temptation for Claude, since his son, Isaac, was already serving as a minister in the much freer and easier situation in the Netherlands. The leaders of the city of Groningen appealed to him and sought his services. But Claude listened to the people of Charenton and was unwilling to abandon them in their hour of need.

### **Pressing on**

Claude did eventually get to the Netherlands but not by his own choice. Louis XIV became more and more impatient with the unwillingness of the Huguenots to convert to Catholicism. Louis decided to revoke the Edict of Nantes. The Roman Catholic clergy secured the date of revocation in such a way that before it was actually published in Parliament, it would allow the Protestants one more Sunday of worship. Many Protestants were grateful for this seeming offer of mercy, but Claude knew better. He was sceptical of gifts from such a hostile quarter, and so he cancelled the service. Indeed, the Roman Catholic clergy had planned to have several Protestants abjure in the midst of the service at Charenton and cause a general confusion. The bishops were furious with Claude and secured his immediate exile. He was given twenty four hours and then taken by the king's valet to the border, never to return to France.

Claude was certainly grieved to the depths of his heart over these events. However, he was also happy to be with his son and able to practice his faith freely in the Netherlands. Upon his arrival at the Hague (where his son served as minister), he was welcomed by the Stadt-holder William and his wife, Princess Mary of England. They received him with the most cordial greetings. William gave Claude a pension, and Claude was thus able to spend the last year of his life in quiet, study, and counsel to those who sought him out.

Claude fell ill on Christmas day, 1686. He struggled with the illness for several days and then died on January 13, 1687 at the age of 66. Guillaume de Felice gives an apt summary of this man's greatness and life:

*A pious man, a learned theologian, and an able orator, a sage and comprehensive writer, gifted with a judgment and presence of mind which never left him at fault, he was best able to cope with the champions of the Catholic Church; and without presuming that his genius was equal to that of Bossuet's, we doubt if he did not surpass him in solidity of knowledge and power of argument.*<sup>2</sup>

Claude devoted his life to the preaching of the biblical gospel as expressed in the Protestant faith. His biographer, Ladaveze, said that in his final days before his death he told them that the Reformed faith was the *"trunk and body of the tree, to which it became us to keep steady without ever forsaking it."*<sup>3</sup> Claude himself gave us an example of valiant defense of the faith, even in the midst of the greatest peril. He was willing to give up his own country and comforts for the sake of the Gospel. His advice and example is one of the many faithful witnesses that we should keep before us as we battle for the biblical faith in our own day.

Wesley White

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Claude, *Essay on a Composition of a Sermon* (London: James Cornish, 1844), 2. Note that this book is available for free on Google Books. See my Reformed Theology bibliography of books available on Google at <http://www.spearfishpca.com/googleTheology.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Guillaume de Felice, *History of the Protestants of France*, tr. by Henry Lobdell (New York: Edward Walker, 1851), 357-358.

<sup>3</sup> Abel-Rudolphe Ladaveze, *The Life and Death of Monsieur Claude* (London: Thomas Dring, 1687), 49.