

PIERRE VIRET
The Angel of the Reformation



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too commonplace to be mentioned in their correspondence. As one historian has noted,

At Calvin's return [to Geneva] Viret joined him as a colleague, and the sweetest epistolary relationship was enjoyed between the two. During nearly twenty years continual messages passed from Geneva to Lausanne. Everyday news, events involving the Church or State, household troubles, memories, plans, confidences, all are found in this friendly correspondence, which never closes without feeling and emotion, filled with testimonies of the truest affection. The two friends never laid the pen aside except to visit each other, and what a time was their every meeting! "Someone told me," wrote Calvin, "that you are inclined to come to Geneva. I have seized the hope with as much fervor as if you were already here. If such is truly your intention, come Saturday. Your arrival could not be more timely. You will preach for me Sunday morning in the city so that I can preach at Jussy, and join me after dinner. We'll take a visit to Monsieur de Falais; then, crossing the lake, we'll enjoy the pleasures of the country together at the home of our friends Pommier and Delisle, and we shan't return until Thursday. The day following, if you'd like to go to Tournay or Bellerive, I'll accompany you. Above all, you can count on the warmest reception."¹⁴

Warm indeed was the reception when these two Reformers again found themselves in each other's presence, and how diligently they sought these meetings! Calvin's many letters to Viret are marked by numerous requests for the latter's presence in Geneva. Whether it was a matter of creating peace between two opposing factions in the city or merely a wish to take a day off with a valued friend, Calvin was not hesitant in calling for his brother's company. "Would that you could make a run as far as [Geneva]," he wrote at the end of a letter in August of 1542; "I would willingly have half a day's free conversation with you."¹⁵ At other times the note was shorter still, though the plea remained the same: "Adieu; salute all the brethren, and pay a visit sometimes to Geneva."¹⁶

14. "Les Amitiés de Calvin," *Bulletin de la Société de L'Histoire du Protestantisme Français* (Paris, 1864), page 93.

15. Calvin to Viret, August 19, 1542, in Bonnet, ed., *Letters, volume one*, page 344.

16. Calvin to Viret, July 1, 1543, in *Ibid.*, page 388.

Calvin and Viret

The friendship of these brothers is a striking portrayal of the bond of Christian love enjoyed by the fellow-laborers of Christ's Kingdom, a depiction revealing itself in a variety of forms throughout the lives of these men. Calvin, so often accused of being a man of severity and lack of emotion, found cause often enough for a joke or a good laugh when dealing with Viret. In July of 1541 he penned a lengthy missive to Viret and Farel, acquainting them of all his doings and the recent news worthy of note. Upon completion of the letter he included a short note to Viret upon a separate sheet of paper:

To-day I have written hurriedly to you and Farel; but because this youth [courier] thought that it would not be in his favour if I did not give him a line in writing addressed to yourself, he made me promise that I would do so. I write, therefore, but without having anything to write about. You may pretend, however, that you have received something serious, that you may humour the joke.¹⁷

Truly the cold severity so often attributed to Calvin melts away when his letters to Viret are opened. As Abraham Sayous so ably wrote: "it is in [Calvin's] correspondence with his closest friends, above all with Viret and Farel, that the facets of his character so neglected by history begin to emerge."¹⁸

Indeed, Viret was truly a man that could bring a smile to the dourest of faces. His loving temperament and ready sense of humor rarely left him, even within times of difficulty, of which he had a large share. His health particularly was a constant cause of concern for the Reformer. Ever since the poisoning at Geneva he had suffered from ill health which at times worsened to such an extent that he was often confined to his bed. He was therefore regularly required to seek assistance from numerous doctors. Benoit Textor, Calvin's doctor and a resident of Geneva, was a particularly knowledgeable physician, and it was to him that Viret had continual recourse. However, even when his infirmities caused him the greatest pain and troubles, Viret was not to be found without a smile. When he was constrained on one such occasion to journey to Geneva to consult Dr. Textor, Calvin was absent from the city, having been called away for some

17. Calvin to Viret, July 25, 1541, in *Ibid.*, page 277.

18. Andre Sayous, *Études Littéraires sur les Écrivains Français de la Réformation, tome premier*, (Paris and Geneva, 1841), page 102.