

A Recent French Reformed Theologian:

Auguste Lecerf

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Introduction

Around 1930, Auguste Lecerf opened the door of his apartment on the Left Bank of Paris to find a female professor standing before him. She was interested in talking with someone about Calvinism, and a friend had suggested that she seek out Lecerf, whom the friend termed “the last of the French Calvinists”.¹ But strikingly, Lecerf has proved to be, not the last of the French Calvinists, but the first of the modern French Calvinists.

Lecerf’s Life

Ironically, Auguste Lecerf was born, not in France or in a French colony, but in London, England, and did not have a drop of French blood in his veins. His mother, Elisa Romenetti, had a British and Italian ancestry. His father was a Scottish nobleman, with whom his mother had an affair while she and her husband took refuge in England after they participated in the ill-fated Paris Commune of 1871. Lecerf was born on 18 September 1872, and his mother’s husband, René Lecerf, permitted Auguste to use his name.

Auguste Lecerf’s parents were not simply irreligious; they were consciously anti-clerical and atheistic. To their dismay, they discovered that Auguste was plagued by religious questions. “Why”, he would ask, “do the church bells ring?” When they could not answer his question, Auguste would burst into tears.²

The Lecerf family took advantage of an amnesty and returned to Paris. There, Auguste’s religious interest took a serious turn. At the age of twelve, he passed a Protestant Sunday School in session. Entering, Auguste was challenged by the message of the teacher. Later, Auguste purchased a Bible, and began to read it.³ Years later, he was to confess that it was on reading Romans 9 through 11 that he was converted to Christ,⁴ which is not so surprising when one considers that his father’s family was Jewish.

As a teenager, Auguste Lecerf was browsing along the banks of the Seine River in Paris, when he spotted a worn copy of Calvin’s magnum opus, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Perusing the book, he felt drawn to its clear teaching on divine sovereignty, just what had struck

¹ While this story is included in several studies about Lecerf, I have not been able to establish an authoritative source for it, nor its date or the identity of the female professor.

² Thomas Reid, Interview with Pierre Marcel, 7 June 1978.

³ Auguste Lecerf, *Études calvinistes* (Neuchatel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1949), 6.

⁴ “Le renouveau calviniste”, *Bulletin de la Faculté libre de théologie protestante de Paris* 3, no. 9 (janvier 1937): 1.

him several years before in reading Romans.⁵ Lecerf's theological identity had now been established: he was a Calvinist.

Falling seriously sick when he was seventeen, Lecerf beseeched God to heal him, with the promise to consecrate his life to God's service if God responded to his prayer with healing. Auguste recovered, and, searching for an avenue of service, he spent a short time at a Roman Catholic school near Angers, in the Loire River Valley southwest of Paris. Dissatisfied there, he returned to Paris, and was baptized and admitted as a communicant member of the Reformed Church of the [Holy] Spirit.

Believing that the Lord was leading him into the ministry, Lecerf entered the Preparatory Theological School at Batignolles in the Paris region, despite strong parental opposition.⁶ Immediately following, he studied at the Protestant Theological Faculty (or Seminary) of Paris from 1891 to 1895, where "[h]e was noted both for his exceptional gifts for grammar and philology and by his passion for questions about dogmatics."⁷ In order to more fully discuss theological questions, Lecerf formed a small study group in 1893 – the so-called "Calvinistic Trinity" – with two other students.⁸ The Faculty, established by and for theological liberals, was hardly a happy place for the young Calvinist. Yet, to earn his baccalaureate degree in theology, Lecerf presented a distinctively Calvinistic thesis on "Determinism and Responsibility in Calvin's Theology".⁹ The quality of the work both theologically and technically is striking.

The Seminary refused to permit Lecerf to continue on to his doctorate, due especially to his rejection of evolutionary theory.¹⁰ Already married (in 1893) and father of a son Jean (in 1894), Lecerf entered the pastoral ministry. Three daughters were later born to his marriage to Andrea Elisabeth Céré: Renée (1896), Esther (1897), and Jeanne (1899).¹¹ Following Mrs. Lecerf's death in 1953, one of Lecerf's disciples, Jean G. H. Hoffmann (1906-1987) bore this witness to her important role: "The person of Madame Lecerf is inseparable from that of her husband, with whom she shared the struggles to manifest in all its purity a theological viewpoint to which the whole atmosphere of the century was excluded from the outset." But Mrs. Lecerf was no more an unpleasant ideologue than was her husband. Hoffmann goes on in his eulogy to ask, "How many times have we not found from her understanding and true sympathy?"¹²

Although Lecerf was closer theologically to the Evangelical Reformed Churches than to the Liberal Reformed Churches, the former denomination refused him entry, while the second received him, since their largeness of spirit permitted each pastor to preach and minister as he chose best. In that context and time, liberals were "liberals"! Lecerf was ordained on 2 February

⁵ "Auguste Lecerf", *Rapport annuel sur l'année scolaire 1942-1943* (Paris: [La Faculté libre de théologie protestante?], 1944), 11.

⁶ Lecerf, *Etudes Calvinistes*, 6.

⁷ "Auguste Lecerf", *Rapport annuel*, 11.

⁸ *Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire du protestantisme français* 87, no. 2 (avril-juin 1938): 226-227. The translation from French into English is the author's, here and throughout the paper.

⁹ The thesis was published, as was expected at the time: *Le déterminisme et la responsabilité dans le système de Calvin* (Paris: Henri Jouve, 1895).

¹⁰ Interview with Marcel.

¹¹ Renée and Jeanne died rather young of tuberculosis.

¹² "Madame August Lecerf", *La Revue Réformée* 4, no. 2 (1953): 48.

1896 in his home congregation, the Reformed Church of the Spirit in Paris. He served as auxiliary pastor for one year, 1895-1896, in Elbeuf in the Department of Seine-Maritime. Next, Lecerf was named full pastor at St. Lô-Le Chefresne, in the Department of the Manche, where he ministered from 1896 to 1902. Despite the fact that these two churches were in the liberal camp, and despite three liberal pastors having served before him, Lecerf discovered to his astonishment that both parishes were filled with people who were Trinitarian in their beliefs. Those wily liberals had mouthed enough orthodox words that the faithful had naively taken them in their Biblical sense and thus remained orthodox. During Lecerf's next pastorate, at Courseulles-sur-Mer in the Department of Calvados (1902-1908),¹³ the state and the church were separated in 1905. He and his Courseulles Church associated with the churches in the third French Reformed synod, the Jarnac Synod, before returning to the Liberal Reformed Synod in 1912 with the rest of the Jarnac Synod. In Normandy, one of the local priests was saying black masses; twice, Lecerf calmed a lynch mob searching to kill the priest.¹⁴ His next pastorate took him to Lunéville in the Department of Meurthe-et-Moselle, from 1908 until 1914.

Despite his intellectual bent, Lecerf was an excellent pastor, although not a great orator.¹⁵ Years later, he urged his students to engage in the following routine: arise at five in the morning, study Hebrew for one hour, study Greek for one hour, and pray for one hour. He modestly admitted that he had only followed his own counsel about half the time.¹⁶

At the outbreak of World War I, Lecerf was called up as a chaplain, never to return to the pastorate. At the close of the War, he moved with his family to Paris, where his hope of devoting himself to theological studies was limited by financial woes, necessitating that Lecerf take up several jobs. He served three institutions as part-time Protestant chaplain. In 1922, Lecerf began work as an "agent" of the Protestant Bible Society of Paris, where his linguistic gifts were put to work on its mammoth project to prepare a *Centennial Bible* in honor of the Society's one hundred years of ministry.¹⁷ Ironically, throughout his tenure at the Bible Society, Lecerf opposed the Society's liberal translation policies.

From 1922 on, Lecerf taught at his alma mater, the Protestant Seminary of Paris, which described itself as "a Faculty which has the honor to incorporate within its bosom representatives of all the currents of Protestant thought."¹⁸ Lecerf began by teaching Greek and English, but he later provided instruction also in Hebrew and Latin; he could speak fluently in English, and read Dutch and German as well. Several students requested a more regular instruction in dogmatics from a Reformed perspective. Thus were born the weekly "free" lectures in Reformed theology which Lecerf gave to large audiences until 1936. Lecerf earned his Th.M. and Ph.D. degrees at the Seminary in 1931 and 1938. In the former case, the candidate, before the public defense of his thesis, presented a public lecture on a theological subject given to him on short notice. Pierre Marcel reports,

Dean H[enri] Monnier chose the subject of the public lecture ... He gave Lecerf

¹³ On D-Day in 1944, Canadian troops came ashore near Courseulles on Juno Beach. Both St. Lô and Courseulles were devastated in the intense fighting following the Allied invasion.

¹⁴ Madame Auguste Lecerf, "Mon mari", *La revue réformée* 45, no. 1/2 (janvier 1994): 16-18; Letter of René Muller, 22 July 1978, 1.

¹⁵ Interview with Marcel.

¹⁶ Letter of Roger Belmont, 11 August 1978, 1.

¹⁷ Completed only in 1947, twenty-nine years after the centenary.

¹⁸ "Le renouveau calviniste", *Bulletin de la Faculté de Théologie Protestante* 3, no. 9 (janvier 1937): 1.

intentionally the most difficult question in Reformed theology: prevenient grace. Auguste Lecerf, with his usual aplomb, having suspected the intentions of his friend, confided to us a week before he had been given the subject, “I suspect Henri Monnier wants to give me the subject of prevenient grace. It is the most difficult question. There is nothing about it in the Reformed bibliography.”¹⁹

Despite the difficulty of the task before him, Lecerf lectured, according to one eyewitness, “brilliantly” on “common grace”, even granting with a big grin that God worked even in Arminians.²⁰

Such a talent even the Paris Faculty could not suppress forever. So, in 1936, at the age of sixty-four, Lecerf became Professor of Reformed Dogmatics. He thus entered a period of public notice and acceptance beyond anything he had hitherto enjoyed. Students reported later that Lecerf’s theological lectures were spiced with memorable comments like, “Men, when you preach, you do not know what you are accomplishing,” and “Men, never doubt the power of the Holy Spirit.”²¹ Pierre Marcel writes of his favorite Lecerf quotation:

In a formula both striking and accurate, without the slightest contradiction, both on the theological and psychological planes as well as the philosophical, professor Lecerf loved to repeat, “We believe in a God sufficiently powerful – because He is all-powerful – to realize freely concerning creatures what he wills necessarily concerning Himself.”²²

Marcel adds, “Voilà the all-powerful God, the Scriptural God. There is no other.”²³

Lecerf supported the move toward organic unity among the divided Protestant denominations in France, leading to the formation of the Reformed Church in France in 1938. He argued that the unity of the church should take priority over its purity, the latter being “something eschatological”.²⁴ Lecerf served as a member of the united denomination’s Commission on Female Ministries. Lecerf prepared a report on such ministries in the New Testament, observing that, “Women can speak in reunions which do not have the character of an official convocation of the people of faith ... It seems to us that one can take from the preceding texts applicable directives for female ministries of charity and even teaching in the contexts of evangelization, missions, and catechism.”²⁵

Lecerf attended the First International Conference of Calvinists in London in 1932, where he spoke on “The History of the Reformed Faith in France”. Lecerf was present at the Second Congress in The Netherlands, in October, 1934, where he considered the subject, “The

¹⁹ Pierre Marcel, “Le baptême: Sacrament de l’alliance de grâce”, *La Revue Réformée* 1, no. 2/3 (octobre 1950): 176.

²⁰ His address was printed in *La revue réformée* 11, no. 3 (1960): 27-33.

²¹ Interview with Marcel.

²² Pierre Ch. Marcel, Review of *Calvin directeur d’ames*, by Jean-Daniel Benoit, in *La revue réformée* 1, no. 1 (avril 1950), 44.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Le Bulletin de la Société de l’histoire du protestantisme français* 84, no. 2 (avril-juin 1935): 83.

²⁵ Auguste Lecerf, “Les ministères féminins d’après le Nouveau Testament”, 2, among his unpublished papers.

Sovereignty of God according to Calvinism”.²⁶ Lecerf co-directed the Calvinistic Theology Congress in Geneva in 1936, where he addressed the subject of “Election and Sacrament”.²⁷ Lecerf travelled to Edinburgh, Scotland, in July, 1938, for the final Calvinistic Conference before the outbreak of World War Two, bringing greetings from “the members of the Calvinist Society of France [and] of the Calvinistic probationers and students of the Faculty of Paris ... [and] in the name of congregations and also of isolated believers who share our faith.”²⁸

Lecerf received two honorary doctorates, the first in 1937 from St. Mary’s College, the theological faculty of the University of St. Andrew’s in Scotland, and the second the following year, from the University of Debreczen, Hungary, of the Reformed Churches in Hungary, although he was unable to travel there to receive the award in person, due to tensions in Europe.

Lecerf was a fervent patriot and, burdened by the French defeat of 1940 and weakened by the privations of the German occupation, he died rather suddenly in Paris on 1 September 1943, aged seventy.

Lecerf’s Writings

Auguste Lecerf’s first published work, as already noticed, was his undergraduate thesis. Observing all of his writings, one must conclude that, “the theological corpus of Lecerf represents a remarkable unity,”²⁹ as had the work of John Calvin four centuries earlier.

In his undergraduate thesis, Lecerf intended to defend Calvin’s concept of both “absolute determinism” and “complete responsibility”, the expressions which Lecerf chose to describe Calvin’s thinking.³⁰ Lecerf contrasts Calvin’s view with the slightly divergent positions of fellow reformers Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), Martin Luther (1483-1546), and Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560), but especially with the opposing viewpoint of the Dutch theologian Albert Pighius (1490-1542), with whom Calvin had conducted a debate by pamphlet.

Most of the Protestant reformers begin their reference to God’s predestination and man’s responsibility with reference to God’s omniscience.³¹ Calvin prefers to start with man’s sense of dependence upon God.³² Because men believe, salvation is all of grace; because not all believe, predestination must be true.³³

God’s providence is His absolute will, “but this action, purely regulatory, does not carry any

²⁶ *Deuxième congrès international calviniste, Amsterdam 23-26 octobre 1934: Comptes-rendus* (s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1935), 25-29.

²⁷ “L’élection et le sacrement”, *De l’élection éternelle de Dieu: Actes du Congrès international de théologie calviniste, Genève, 15-18 juin 1936* (Genève: Éditions Labor, 1936), 252-262.

²⁸ Auguste Lecerf, untitled discourse, *Proceedings of the Fourth Calvinistic Congress, Held in Edinburgh, 6th to 11th July 1938* (Edinburgh: Congress Executive, 1938), 97.

²⁹ “Auguste Lecerf”, *Rapport annuel*, 11.

³⁰ Lecerf, *Le déterminisme et la responsabilité*, 56.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 13-16.

³² *Ibid.*, 17.

³³ *Ibid.*, 20.

moral transformation in the world.”³⁴ But such a transformation of man is vitally necessary, as God left man free to fall into sin, and man, represented in Adam, did so.³⁵ “Original sin makes us truly worthy of the wrath of God and is indeed the pivot of man’s responsibility.”³⁶ Nevertheless, God can accomplish much in man short of regeneration, but only irresistible grace transforms a person into what pleases God.

Having described Calvin’s method and system, Lecerf proceeds to defend Calvin’s view against five major attacks. First, to those who argue that predestination leads to lawlessness, Lecerf critiques the false assumption that to struggle against sin is useless, if one is elect. Doing so forgets that election has its goal in the believer’s sanctification.³⁷

Second, to those who maintain that predestination requires that God either defend evil or He is a hypocrite, Lecerf has recourse to distinguishing the two wills of God, the revealed will and the secret will, while insisting that, because God is One, “the will of God is simple and one.”³⁸

Third, to those who ask how people can be punished for sin if they are predestined, Lecerf explains, “God does not create evil in us; he finds it ... This voluntary perversity, it is we.”³⁹

Fourth, to those who observe than man has a sense of being free, undercutting if not contradicting predestination, Lecerf responds: Just because one does not feel determined does mean that one is not.⁴⁰

And fifth, to those who argue that, if God is sovereign in predestination, then we should blame Him and not the sinner for sin, Lecerf replies and concludes his work: “To believe in predestination in the Calvinistic sense is to believe in the justice of God, despite all appearances[,] and to affirm thus His right to be our legislator and our judge.”⁴¹

Auguste Lecerf published only a few articles before he settled in Paris. During his quarter of a century there, he wrote many articles for virtually all the French Protestant magazines, usually in defense of the Calvinistic position on some theological question. He also penned a few articles of Biblical exposition and some concerning current affairs. His few book reviews were almost exclusively concerned with philosophical tomes. Lecerf’s output may have been relatively modest, but he wrote in an easy style that was understandable to the average church member.

The only other books which Lecerf published during his lifetime were the two volumes of his

³⁴ Ibid., 30, 33, 34.

³⁵ Ibid., 38-42.

³⁶ Ibid., 42.

³⁷ Ibid., 69.

³⁸ Ibid., 72.

³⁹ Ibid., 88.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 78.

⁴¹ Ibid., 121.

Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics in French.⁴² The English translation by André Schlemmer was published posthumously in London by Lutterworth Press in 1949 in one volume. The first French volume represents the thesis he submitted in 1931 to the Paris Faculty for the equivalent of the Th.M. degree, the second for his doctorate in 1938. Together, the two volumes represent a monumental effort to found the Christian religion on such a basis that it will appeal to modern, post-Kantian thinkers. These volumes show their author to have been widely read in both modern theology and philosophy, for only such a scholar could have attempted such a work. Indeed, Lecerf was part of the active philosophical scene in Paris between the Wars, being a good friend of Jacques Maritain (1882-1973),⁴³ among many others.

The *Introduction* is not easy reading. Prof. John Murray (1898-1975) of Westminster Seminary, hardly a master of light prose himself, made this observation in his review of the English translation of the *Introduction*.⁴⁴ Here is a list of the most important difficulties. First, the structure is not always clear, with Lecerf providing extended book reviews of often obscure volumes. Second, the language is very sophisticated, both theologically and philosophically. Third, the subject matter demanded that Lecerf introduce several substantive ideas from English or Dutch into French nomenclature. Nonetheless, Lawrence Gilmore, writing in the *Westminster Theological Journal* of the two French volumes, opines: “Lecerf’s work on dogmatics is a gain for the Reformed theology. Like other real Calvinism of the present day[,] it is less showy than the dialectical writings, but it represents genuine progress.”⁴⁵

As its name implies, the *Introduction* is not truly a Dogmatics, for it was concerned with the prolegomena issues of systematic theology. In the face of the long-entrenched French rationalistic tradition, Lecerf tries to establish the possibility of religious knowledge. In the face of rationalism’s infiltration of Christian theology, Lecerf attempts to show Calvinism to be the only true and Biblical religious knowledge. Thus, his work might be better characterized as a philosophy of religion rather than as a Dogmatics as such.⁴⁶

The first volume of the *Introduction* is particularly characterized by an apologetical concern. In it, Lecerf attempts to determine whether religious knowledge is even possible. This question he answers affirmatively by the use of what has been called a “moderate critical realism”.⁴⁷ Gustave Lagny describes this concept as follows:

Realism: for faith is considered as the organ of true knowledge and not only ethical experience. **Moderate:** because the knowledge of faith is not only analogical; it is only

⁴² *Introduction à la dogmatique réformée: Principes et methods, Premier cahier: De la nature de la connaissance religieuse* (Paris: Éditions “Je sers”, 1932), and *Introduction à la dogmatique réformée: Second cahier, Du fondement de la spécification de la connaissance religieuse* (Paris: Éditions “Je sers”, 1938).

⁴³ Born into a Protestant family, the famous French philosopher converted to Roman Catholicism.

⁴⁴ John Murray, Review of Auguste Lecerf, *Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics*, *Westminster Theological Journal* 12, no. 2 (May 1950): 184.

⁴⁵ “The Present State, Progress, and Prospects of the Reformed Theology”, *Westminster Theological Journal* 1, no. 2 (May 1939): 86.

⁴⁶ Pierre Bergelin made this observation about the first volume in “Le christianisme et la philosophie”, *Foi et vie* 33, no. 41 (septembre 1932): 661.

⁴⁷ Lecerf, *Introduction I*, 120-139.

the relative knowledge of mysteries. Critical: (Lecerf sometimes says transcendental): for, because of total depravity, religious knowledge is acquired exclusively by faith, *solī fide*.⁴⁸

The second volume of the *Introduction* is easier reading than the first. Lecerf begins by setting out his methodology and his apologetic stance. In the second part of the volume, he contrasts theism, deism, and pantheism, the three sole possibilities, as he sees it, for Christian thought. Next, he dismisses the agnostic and atheistic pretensions of possessing the truth. Lecerf then deals with the problem of determinism and indeterminism. He concludes that the sovereignty of God frees man from the horns of this dilemma: “the problem of evil”, for instance, has been transformed into “the mystery of evil”.⁴⁹

Lecerf maintains that Dogmatics must be “orthodox”, that is, it must be in agreement with the main lines of Christian belief as set out in the creeds of the early church. And Dogmatics must be “Protestant”, for Scripture alone is our authority.⁵⁰

Lecerf weakens his argument in four ways. First, he is not content with B. B. Warfield’s classic formulation of the doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible.⁵¹ For instance, he quotes approvingly Jan Ridderbos (1879-1960), who wrote, “Human languages ... are ... imperfect vehicles for the transmission of human thoughts and, a fortiori, divine thoughts.”⁵²

Second, Lecerf was obviously moving from the semi-rationalist apologetics of nineteenth century Calvinism to the presuppositional apologetics of the twentieth.⁵³ However, Lecerf continues to give man’s reason the formal possibility of discovering the truth, undercutting the fact of man’s total depravity.⁵⁴ Indeed, volume 2 is better than volume 1 in this regard, showing progress in Lecerf’s thought in the six intervening years.

Third, Lecerf seems to have too much ignored the growing threat to Reformed orthodoxy from Karl Barth (1886-1968).⁵⁵ While it is true that Lecerf could read Barth in the original German, it is also true that, “the influence of German or American theologians in French Protestantism is in direct relation with the moment of their translation.”⁵⁶ Since Barth was not substantially translated into French until well into the 1930s, Lecerf believed that he could forego publicly

⁴⁸ Gustave Lagny, “L’œuvre théologique d’Auguste Lecerf”, *Le christianisme au vingtième siècle* 63, no. 5 (4 février 1944): 27.

⁴⁹ *Introduction II*, 123.

⁵⁰ Lecerf devotes several chapters to the subject of Scripture, considering its inspiration and authority, the canon of both Testaments, and the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit, which convinces man that the Bible is the Word of God.

⁵¹ See especially his *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, c1948).

⁵² Lecerf, *Introduction I*, 246.

⁵³ Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987) and Gordon H. Clark (1902-1985) pioneered this apologetical stance, following Lecerf by a generation.

⁵⁴ See especially: Lecerf, *Introduction I*, 33, 116-117; Lecerf, *Introduction II*, 47.

⁵⁵ As late as 1938, Lecerf makes a soft remark about Barth as “the genial one restoring reforming theology”. Lecerf, *Introduction II*, 22.

⁵⁶ *Histoire des protestants en France* (Toulouse: Edouard Privat, 1977), 327.

criticizing Barth.⁵⁷ Lecerf was privately critical of Barth,⁵⁸ and told his classes in the early 1930s that “it is necessary to listen to Barth more as a ‘prophet’ than as a ‘dogmatician’.”⁵⁹ Overall, in Lecerf’s extant writings, he is more critical of Puritanism than he is of Barthianism.

Fourth, Lecerf uncritically accepted Abraham Kuyper’s doctrine of “common grace”.⁶⁰ Lecerf freely admitted the influence of the Dutch Reformed tradition on his thinking, including as well Valentin Hepp (1879-1950) and Herman Bavinck (1854-1921),⁶¹ and many other Dutch Reformed names appear in Lecerf’s writings from the flourishing period in this tradition at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.⁶² French philosopher Alain Probst observes about Dutch neo-Calvinism, “Auguste Lecerf was very influenced by this current of confessional dogmatics.”⁶³ Lecerf’s commitment to common grace is most obvious in his lectures, published posthumously, on “Sin and Grace”.⁶⁴ In this long article, Lecerf teaches that Calvinists do not distinguish between the “pagan” and the “sacred”, but rather make the distinction between “particular grace” and “common grace”.⁶⁵ Sin makes both kinds of “grace” necessary, since, where sin abounds, grace must abound even more (Romans 5:20), even if it is not salvific.⁶⁶ Lecerf writes:

“Common grace” has for its field of action the temporal domain, and has for its goal to maintain or restore in sinful man the image of God in the large sense ... the religious and moral instincts. This grace engages the personal responsibility of the sinner when it puts him in the presence of the law and the Gospel ... because [this grace] formally brings to him the power, the ability, to obey. [Such grace] is resistible.⁶⁷

The indebtedness of Lecerf to Kuyper is obvious here; this concept does not come from classic Calvinism, which has refrained from using the word “grace” (or its related terms) in any but a

⁵⁷ Lecerf was succeeded as Professor of Reformed Dogmatics at the Protestant Seminary of Paris by the Barthian Pierre Maury (1890-1956). But even Barthianism ran out of steam in French Protestantism by the late 1950s, to be replaced by more radical dialectical theologies. *Ibid.*, 326.

⁵⁸ Letter of Marcel, 4.

⁵⁹ Pierre Courthial, “Karl Barth et quelques points des confessions de foi réformée”, *La revue réformée* 9, no. 1 (1958): 2.

⁶⁰ Kuyper developed his thinking in the mammoth three volume set, *De gemeene gratie* (Leiden: Donner, 1902-1904), never translated into French.

⁶¹ Lecerf, *Introduction I*, 11; Lecerf, *Introduction II*, 104.

⁶² Specifically: G. Ch. Aalders (1880-1961), Douwe Johannes de Groot (1898-1959), Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977), Cornelis van Gelderen (1872-1945), H.-E. Gravemeijer (1813-1890), Frederik Willem Grosheide (1881-1972), Jacobus A. C. van Leeuwen (1870-1930), Jan Ridderbos, Johannes Severijn (1883-1966), and Theodor Vollenhoven (1892-1978).

⁶³ A. Probst, “Abraham Kuyper”, *Le christianisme au vingtième siècle* 107, no. 33 (4 septembre 1978): 11. See also Gilmore, “The Present State”, 71, and F. F. Bruce, Review of Auguste Lecerf, *Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics*, *Evangelical Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (January 1950), 70.

⁶⁴ Auguste Lecerf, “Le péché et la grâce”, *La revue réformée* 11, no. 3 (1960): 1-33.

⁶⁵ Lecerf, *Introduction II*, 56.

⁶⁶ Lecerf, “Le péché et la grâce”, 11-12.

⁶⁷ Auguste Lecerf, “Des moyens de la grâce: La parole, le baptême, la sainte-cène”, *La revue réformée* 6, no. 2 (1955): 3.

salvific sense and confessionally limits God's favor to the elect.⁶⁸

The *Introduction* was intended to be just that. Lecerf prepared several chapters on various subjects within the theological encyclopedia, but he did not finish much of the project before his death. John Murray wrote, "We cannot but regret that the author [of the *Introduction*] had not furnished us with the fruit of his labors in the various loci of systematic theology."⁶⁹ Yet, the *Introduction* had its impact: Bassam Madany (1928-), Arabic language broadcaster for decades on the Christian Reformed Church's Back to God Hour, has written that, "The Lord used this book, as well as a study of Calvin's correspondence, to bring me to a complete conversion to the Reformed faith."⁷⁰ Lecerf's son Jean, late in his life, became a financial supporter of Madany's work.⁷¹

Some of the unpublished chapters in the Dogmatics were published posthumously, although Lecerf had prohibited their publication. Mrs. Lecerf gave permission for those he had prepared for publication to thus see the light of day. A number of Lecerf's more significant published articles were gathered together by André Schlemmer (1890-1972) under the title *Études Calvinistes (Calvinistic Studies)*⁷² and published in 1949. A few of Lecerf's articles were translated into English and published in *The Evangelical Quarterly* and other journals.⁷³

Following the publication of the English translation of the *Introduction*, both F. F. Bruce (1910-1990) and John Murray lamented in their reviews of that volume that Lecerf had not been sufficiently appreciated during his lifetime.⁷⁴ More than seventy years later, the same can be said, especially outside the Francophone world.

Lecerf's Influence

An anonymous reviewer in the *Bulletin of the French Protestant Historical Society* observed of Auguste Lecerf in 1932: "Does it not seem strange, and humiliating, in the homeland of Calvin, that pure[,] Calvinistic theology has not had a representative in a long time, since, can it be, Pierre du Moulin? There now exists an absolutely authentic one."⁷⁵ Du Moulin had died in 1658! But would Lecerf prove to be "the last of the Calvinists"?

For decades, Auguste Lecerf's only open supporter in the French Reformed Churches had been

⁶⁸ Editor's Note: This view presented by the author does not represent the position of the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary on the subject of common grace, which is consistent with the Testimony of the RPCNA (16.4)

⁶⁹ Murray, Review, 184.

⁷⁰ Bassam M. Madany, "Being Converted to the Reformed Faith", *Missionary Monthly* (September 1975): 21.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷² Neuchatel: Niestlé, 1949.

⁷³ The earliest such article seems to be "The Reformed Faith in France: An Historical Survey", published in 1932 in *The Evangelical Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (October 1932): 391-397, after Lecerf delivered it at the International Reformed Conference. *The Reformed Faith Commonly Called Calvinism: Report of the International Conference Held in May 1932* (London: Sovereign Grace Union), 45-53.

⁷⁴ Bruce, Review, 69-70; Murray, Review, 184.

⁷⁵ Anonymous reviewer, *Le Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire du protestantisme français* 81, no. 4 (octobre-décembre 1932): 430.

his seminary friend Marcel Cadix (1874-1951?), who presided at Lecerf's internment. André Jundt (1877-1947), who taught alongside Lecerf at the Protestant Seminary, wrote in 1938 that Lecerf "defended this cause [Calvinism] for many years, during which he was almost its sole defender."⁷⁶

With his work in Paris among students from several institutions and especially from the Protestant Seminary, Lecerf's influence in the lives of many of the future leaders of the French Reformed Churches grew into an identifiable movement. A periodic evening for theological discussion that the Lecerfs sponsored in their apartment developed into the French Calvinistic Society. The formal founding of the Society occurred on 10 December 1926, at the Library of the French Protestant Historical Society. Lecerf served as President, and Emile Doumergue was elected Honorary President. The Second Article of its statutes outlined these two goals for the Society: "To study and to propagate Calvinism, considered to be a strong and progressive element in Christian thought; to make known the person and works of Calvin and Calvinistic religious literature."⁷⁷ Article 3 committed the Society to working within the existing church structures, no matter what might happen, or had happened, to the church's confession of faith.

The Society planned to work by means of conferences and publications of Calvin, Calviniana, and classic Reformed writers (Article 4). And so it republished, in modernized French, Calvin's Catechism (with the Confession of La Rochelle and the Belgic Confession) in 1934,⁷⁸ Calvin's *Thoughts on the Holy Spirit* in 1936,⁷⁹ and Calvin's *Institutes* in four volumes from 1936 to 1939.⁸⁰

The Society desired to have close contact with similar Reformed organizations in other countries, with a view to establishing a worldwide Reformed association (Article 5). The four Calvinistic conferences, held at London (1932), the Hague (1934), Geneva (1936), and Edinburgh (1938), were the first fruits of Lecerf's and others' dreams of such an organization. These Calvinists were to succeed only after World War II, with the founding of the International Association for Reformed Faith and Action in 1955.⁸¹

The French Calvinistic Society almost immediately began publication of a *Bulletin*, with Lecerf as editor. He served in this capacity until his death; the *Bulletin* continued to be printed until 1946. It was published irregularly, especially during the War years.

Regular conferences, sponsored by the Society were held until the outbreak of World War II. The membership grew gradually from forty-four in July, 1927, to a peak of three hundred, as Lecerf's Calvinistic movement progressed.⁸²

⁷⁶ André Jundt, "Soutenance de la thèse de doctorat de M. Lecerf", *Le Bulletin de la faculté protestante de Paris* 4, no. 14 (mai 1938): 10. Lecerf is described as "long isolated" in *Histoire des protestants en France*, 310.

⁷⁷ "Société Calviniste de France", *Le Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire du protestantisme français* 125, no. 4 (octobre-décembre 1926): 535.

⁷⁸ Jean Calvin, *Le catéchisme de Genève en français modern* (Paris: Éditions "Je sers", 1934).

⁷⁹ Jean Calvin, *Pensées sur le Saint-Esprit* (Paris: Éditions calviniennes, 1936).

⁸⁰ Jean Calvin, *Institution de la religion chrestienne* (Paris: Société Les belles lettres, 1936-1939).

⁸¹ The Association seems to have disappeared during the 1980s (its *International Reformed Bulletin* ceased in 1981), not having survived into the second generation of its supporters.

⁸² The Society seems to have faded away in the 1970s as its first generation of leaders passed away.

The most prominent of Lecerf's disciples for many years was Pierre Marcel, who should have succeeded Lecerf as Professor of Reformed Dogmatics at the Protestant Seminary, but was snubbed by the liberals. Lecerf had arranged for Marcel to study in the Netherlands with Herman Dooyeweerd at the Free University of Amsterdam, with that very goal in mind. Marcel remained in the pastorate for his entire life of ministry, much of it in St-Germain-en-Laye, west of Paris. Following the demise of the *Bulletin* of the French Calvinistic Society, he established *La revue réformée* in 1950, which has appeared four or five times yearly ever since. Within its pages, Marcel published the works of Lecerf which were essentially ready for the press before his death. Marcel also published translations of significant Reformed works from Dutch and English, such as by Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) and John Murray, as well as translations of important creedal documents such as the Westminster Shorter Catechism and the Canons of Dordt in modern French. Finally, Marcel encouraged a generation of French Reformed writers to think and to write, by giving them a platform for their literary productions in the years before French language Reformed book publishers began to emerge. Three of Marcel's own books were so significant that they have appeared in English translation: *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*;⁸³ *The Relevance of Preaching*;⁸⁴ and *In God's School: Foundations for Christian Life*.⁸⁵

A little younger among the disciples of Lecerf was Pierre Courthial (1914-2009), who served as a pastor in the Ardeche Department, Lyon, and Paris, in which last congregation his parishioners included members of the Peugeot family of car manufacturers. In 1974, Courthial left his prominent position in Paris to serve as dean of a new Reformed Seminary in Aix-en-Provence. Following the reunion of so much of French Protestantism in 1938, a small remnant of the Evangelical Reformed Churches of France remained outside the united denomination. Two years later, they established a seminary in the university city of Aix-en-Provence. After functioning for a quarter of a century, the Seminary closed down, having never found a clear Reformed voice.⁸⁶

But the Evangelical Reformed Churches did not give up on theological education. The Seminary was reopened in 1974 with a new name declaring its Reformed theological convictions: The Free Reformed Faculty of Theology.⁸⁷ Help from the United States through President Edmund Clowney (1917-2005) of Westminster Theological Seminary, and from the British Isles, the Netherlands, and French-speaking Switzerland, permitted the institution to survive and, in French terms, flourish. Before his death, Pierre Marcel transferred *La revue réformée* to the Reformed Seminary in Aix, which still publishes it. Over time, *La revue réformée* has become more distinctively French in the source of the majority of its articles, as more Reformed writers have become available to write for it. The Seminary established a publishing house, Éditions Kerygma, which has been very active in expanding the Reformed bibliography in the French language, particularly of modern language versions of Calvin's commentaries.

⁸³ London: James Clarke, 1953.

⁸⁴ Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1963.

⁸⁵ Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, c2008.

⁸⁶ The Seminary did graduate Aaron Kayayan (1928-2008), who, during pastoral service in France, became the preacher for the French language Back to God Hour of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, eventually moving to the Chicago area. He produced a significant corpus of Reformed works, written and recorded.

⁸⁷ In 2011, the name was changed to La Faculté Jean Calvin, the John Calvin Faculty.

Pierre Courthial not only wrote for *La revue réformée*, but also served on the editorial team of a monthly magazine *Ichthus*, which did much to popularize Calvinism in the French speaking world between 1970 and 1996. A number of books came from his pen during his decade of service in Aix-en-Provence and during the early years of his retirement.⁸⁸

Some other publishers have also arisen to meet the need for French Reformed books, one related to Evangelical Press in England led by Jean-Claude Souillot, and Excelsis, in the Drôme Department, which, however, mostly publishes non-Reformed literature.

But there remains no Reformed denomination in France today, although several have some desire to be so, including the remnant Evangelical Reformed Churches and La Mission Timothée (The Timothy Mission), which is Reformed Baptist in its theological orientation.

It is clear that Lecerf's reformational movement has experienced very mixed results, which prompts the following question: is there anything in Lecerf's theology and conduct which has inhibited the growth of the influence of Calvinism in France and the Francophone world?

One possibility is Lecerf's view of Scripture. In his zeal to avoid what he considered a mechanistic concept of the inspiration of the Bible among some seventeenth century Reformed theologians, Lecerf all but admits that there are errors in the Bible, though what he terms "small ones".⁸⁹ Such admissions could do nothing but weaken the movement against the continuing frontal attacks on Scripture which French Calvinists have endured.

Second, Lecerf did not distinguish clearly enough between his own theology and that of Karl Barth, until so late that Barth's expanding influence quickly surpassed his own. As late as 1936, Lecerf viewed the Barthians as co-belligerents with him and his Calvinistic associates against the reigning liberal establishment.

Third, Lecerf was too polite to his non-Calvinistic theological foes, making it seem as if the issues which divided them were simple ones of little importance. Lecerf claimed in 1935, "We do not judge heretics, neither the modernists; we do not say that they do not have the Holy Spirit."⁹⁰ However, J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937) had trenchantly pointed out more than a decade earlier in his book *Christianity and Liberalism* that the two viewpoints constituted two different religions.⁹¹

Fourth, Lecerf did not have a clear ecclesiology, which would lead to the formation of a truly Reformed Church in France. For instance, he interpreted the Parable of the Yeast (Matthew 13:31-43) as if the loaf is anything that claims to be a church, the yeast is the Calvinist.⁹² Jesus

⁸⁸ Some of his more significant works are: *La Confession de foi de La Rochelle: Commentaire [The Confession of Faith of La Rochelle: Commentary]* (Paris: Les cahiers de "Tant qu'il fait jour" et Société des compagnons pour l'évangile, 1979); *Fondements pour l'avenir [Foundations for the Future]* (Aix-en-Provence: Éditions Kerygma, 1981); and *Le jour des petits recommencements: Essai sur l'actualité de la parole (évangile-loi) de Dieu [The Day of Small, New Beginnings: An Essay on the Relevance of the Word (Gospel-Law) of God]* (Lausanne: Édition L'âge d'homme, 1996).

⁸⁹ Lecerf, "Inspiration et grammaire d'après les théologiens protestants du 17^e siècle", *Études calvinistes*, 135-148, especially in light of Lecerf, *Introduction II*, 168.

⁹⁰ *Le Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire du protestantisme français* 84, no. 2 (avril-juin 1935): 189.

⁹¹ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1923). I have found no references to Machen in Lecerf's papers, although many to Machen's professor B. B. Warfield (1851-1921).

⁹² Lecerf, *Introduction II*, 218.

Himself interpreted this parable to express the idea that the Christian serves like yeast in the context of the world, not the church. Related to this weakness is Lecerf's embrace of Kuyper's "common grace" idea, which tends to break down the delineation between the church and the world.

Fifth, Lecerf simply did not write and speak enough. Buried in the pastoral activities of successive, remote parishes and effectively silenced by the church authorities for decades, Lecerf did not have the time to see his movement firmly established before the onslaught of World War II rendered him largely silent under the German occupation. For instance, had he completed his intended *Reformed Dogmatics*, the movement would have been greatly to see his movement firmly established strengthened.

But Lecerf did leave behind a legacy, perhaps more precious than many books. He left behind people, French men and women, who had been searching for Biblical Christianity and had found it through his works, something that has continued in the past seventy years through the legacy of Lecerf. We are now well into the third generation of those whom Lecerf has influenced. Much remains to be done; indeed, much can be done, as the sovereign God of Lecerf blesses such efforts.

Pierre Marcel was once asked why Lecerf had enjoyed such an impact in so many lives in such difficult circumstances. He replied, "Auguste Lecerf incarnated his message."⁹³ Not too shabby an epitaph!

⁹³ Interview with Marcel.