

Stephen M. Davis. *French Protestantism's Struggle for Survival and Legitimacy, 1517–1905*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2023.

This work is the third book Stephen Davis has written on the history of French Protestantism and the second on its history of resistance—after *The French Huguenots* and *Wars of Religion*. In this newest book, Davis traces the lines of French Protestants' struggle for freedom of religion—that is, of conscience and practice.

Davis's new work has noticeable strengths. The first is the book's unique place within the available resources. Beyond very technical and academic references, there are, in English, not many recent books dedicated to the history of French Protestants. With this third book, Davis positions himself as the author of reference on this topic for a general, though informed, audience.

The second strength is the clarity of prose and exposition. Davis not only has great ownership of his topic, but he can also explain it to a readership that has no previous historical expertise. He guides the reader through the turbulent and complex history of French Protestants with skill and patience, selecting what is necessary for the readership to know to follow the French Protestants' continuing struggle for survival and legitimacy.

A third strength is the contextualized approach to the Protestants' struggle, including the mention of the continuing efforts of the Roman Catholic Church to reform itself and the role of social and technological factors in French Protestant history. While these considerations are largely part of the academic landscape, they are also a necessary mention that could prove very instructive for the general readership.

The book is organized around the main periods of said resistance, from the sixteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century. Fifteen chapters lead the reader from the beginning of the Reformation, including a chapter on the Cénacle de Meaux, which has often been called a pre-Reformation movement. Chapters then follow a self-evident historical flow: from the persecution of the Waldensians and the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre to the Wars of Religion, the Edict of Nantes and its revocation, and finally the War of the Camisards. Up to that point, the storyline of resistance is rather straightforward.

Most accounts of French Protestants' struggle for freedom of conscience end with the time of the Desert and the reconstruction of organized churches under the leading figure of, among others, Antoine Court. This book, however, does not end there and then. Among the many strengths of this volume is the continuing history of resistance. Davis achieves this by including the French revolution, the Concordat, the attitude of the Protestants throughout the nineteenth century, the Dreyfus affair, and the law of separation of church and state (*laïcité*).

Particularly perceptive is chapter 10 on the French Revolution. While it is common to present French Protestants' role and reception of the Revolution positively, Davis also highlights its more negative aspects—including a ready acceptance of the new paradigm. The resistance of which he speaks is not only resistance against the persecuting church or state but also a resistance against Protestantism's own fragility in the face of philosophical influences. This weakness becomes an important part of Davis's observations of French Protestants' history beginning in the nineteenth century.

One weakness of the book is the overly positive perspective on the French Protestants' struggle. While the author has an excellent understanding of the history of resistance and makes very penetrating observations, some aspects of the Protestants' more debatable and problematic role throughout this history are not really discussed. The book gives the impression that Protestants were exclusively the victims of a persecuting society; the author rarely questions the actions of the leaders of the Protestant resistance and never wrestles with the difficult questions, one of which is whether and how the decisions, actions, and attitudes of French Protestants have played an unwilling role in the persecutions they have suffered. The previous critical remark is in great part a personal preference, though it highlights the general principle according to which one should always be wary of our tendency toward hagiography. If Davis does not explicitly fall into that particular historical trap, a clearer account of French Protestants' faults would have given greater depth to the overall goal of the book. Far from justifying the church's and state's opposition to French Protestantism, this would have helped account further for the complex web of motivations that explain the continuing persecution, physical, legal, and symbolic, of French Protestants in the period covered by the book.

This weakness, if it can even be qualified as such, does not detract from the great merits of this book. It is an excellent history of the "struggle for survival and legitimacy." Clear, precise, and accessible to a broader audience, this is an essential book for whoever wants to better understand the complex history of French Protestantism and Protestants' resilience.

It is vital to hear this history for, in these days and times, evangelicals in France still present themselves as part of the same storyline. There is a great desire and struggle for legitimacy that, if not checked against the lessons of the past, could in the long run lead to the same tragic consequences.

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