The Huguenots were French Protestants who, if one counts their forerunners the Waldensians, were persecuted with varying intensity for five or 6 centuries right up to the coming of Napoleon. Their forerunners, the Waldensians, arose in the 12th century and were led by Peter Waldo, a rich merchant of Lyons who, at a time when the Holy Scriptures were a closed book, declared the Bible to be the only rule of faith and life, and used lay preachers to proclaim the Gospel. The Waldensians did not believe in the doctrine of purgatory, and they rejected prayers and masses for the dead. Eventually they (together with the Manichean Albigenses) grew so numerous that they became a threat to the very existence of the Roman Catholic Church. They were declared heretics and fearfully persecuted by the Inquisition and the armies of Pope Innocent III. It is said that for twenty years "blood flowed like water." As a result, the fairest provinces of Southern France were turned into a wilderness, and their cities into ruins. The Albigenses were rooted out, and the Waldensians who survived were later integrated with the Huguenots.

By 1500 Protestantism in France was again on the rise. A scholar by the name of Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, translated (parts of) the Bible into simple French and published commentaries which were used even by Martin Luther in his classes. Lefèvre taught that: "True repentance consists of a change of heart, a conversion, a return to God - a movement initiated by the Holy Spirit and not stemming from any bodily fear, chastisement or sacrifices..." 1) It was the Biblical Reformation message: Justification is by faith, not by works, and led to a revival in France. But it did not please the Roman Catholic Church which held to a religion of works, and for most of his life Lefèvre was condemned and persecuted. Nevertheless, he had a profound influence on his students, among them John Calvin. One historian recorded: "A genuine start was made in France to control and fight against Satan as never before... The faithful were taught by hearing explicit exhortations without regular sermons or the administration of the sacraments or an established church council... They met in order to worship God without the assistance of preachers other than the martyrs, except perhaps for a small number of monks and others whose sermons were less unsound than those of their fellows." 2)

Today it is difficult to understand that the Biblical Gospel message to which we have such free access, could have evoked persecution and even cruelty such as burnings, killings, and war.

John Calvin was born on July 10, 1509, in Noyon near Paris. His mother died young, and the child who was very gifted and intelligent, was brought up in the household of a nobleman. His father was secretary to the Bishop of Noyon, and through his influence young John was appointed a cathedral chaplain when he was only 11 years old. This gave him an income to finance his studies in French, Latin, Law, and Theology. Calvin had a nephew, Pierre Robert Olivian, and this young man introduced his uncle to what he called the pure religion. In 1533 Calvin was converted and later wrote: "Through a sudden conversion God brought my soul to obedience." He became active in Reformed circles, and one day drafted a speech for his friend Nicholas Cop, who was Rector of the university of Paris. Its message was: "We are not accepted by God because we have fulfilled the law but only through the promise of Christ. Whoever doubts this cannot live a pious life but prepares himself for the fire of hell." This speech caused such a furor that both Nicholas Cop and John Calvin had to flee from Paris. Calvin took refuge in Strasbourg, and there he married the widow Idelette van Buren. Then he went to Basel, and there, in 1536, published the Institutes of the Christian Religion. As he was returning to Strasbourg via Geneva, the Swiss Reformer Guillaume Farel came and asked him to help the reformation in Geneva. Calvin refused. He wanted to continue his studies. But Farel was so eager and insistent that he called out: "May God curse your studies if now in her time of
need you refuse to lend your aid to His Church!" This is how Calvin came to Geneva, and from Geneva, through letters, writings, a new Bible translation, and religious songs, the Gospel was taken abroad. Refugees, Swiss merchants, military men, and hundreds of pastors who had studied at the Christian Academy of that theocratic town took the Gospel not only into France but all over Europe. Calvin authored the Confession of Faith of 1558, the Confessio Gallicana 3) and wrote the Church Ordinance of 1559, which a.o.t. outlawed dancing, masquerades, gambling, taverns, cabarets, and idleness.

By 1561, c. 2500 Protestant congregations had been established in France, many of them led by pastors from the Geneva Academy. The saints were fearfully persecuted. Church services, and indeed the first synod of 1559, had to be held in secret. Yet Protestantism was rising to such an extent that the Venetian ambassador worriedly reported back to his own country: "Three quarters of France is contaminated with the heretical doctrine."

At first the Reformed Christians were called "Lutherans", but as Calvin's influence grew, they were called "Huguenots". Nobody really knows where the name comes from. Some say it comes from a pious King named Huguet who lived in the Loire valley. Others say it had something to do with John Huss. Some associate it with the confederate Swiss Eidgenossen. The Huguenots came from all levels of society, but after 1560 the leadership went into aristocratic hands. The Protestants were led by the house of Bourbon. The Catholics were led by the house of Guise.

St Bartholomew's Day Massacre

After 1547 two young kings reigned and died, and France needed a regent. By law the regency should have passed to Antoine de Bourbon, the leader of the Huguenots. But the mother of the boy kings, Catherine de Medici, called in the Catholic Guises and assumed the regency herself. She was an ardent Catholic at the time of the Counter Reformation, and though she wanted peace, she also, with the help of the Pope and the King of Spain, wanted to rid France of "the contagious disease of Protestantism." But the thwarted Huguenots were marching on Paris, and she had no choice but to conclude the peace of St Germain of 1561, which allowed them religious freedom in all towns except Paris and granted them four secure cities. But the Paris Parliament refused to ratify the treaty. Tensions and aggression continued, and on Sunday 1.3.1562, as the Huguenots were holding a service in Vassy, the Catholic Duke Francois de Guise and his soldiers broke into the church and killed and wounded 250 Huguenots. Then he triumphantly returned to Paris and was welcomed with cries of "Viva Guise!"

Catherine de Medici, the regent, was convinced that the young Henry of Bourbon, son of the Huguenot leader, would one day become a danger to the royal house of Valois. Henry was the son of Antoine de Bourbon, King of Navarre, who by law should have become regent. So, in order to avert future perils she proposed that her daughter, Marguerite de Valois, should marry Henry. The wedding was arranged, and the Huguenot aristocracy came to Paris. But shortly before the great day, the bridegroom's mother died suddenly, and the Huguenots feared that she had been poisoned. Then the Huguenots' military leader, Gaspard the Coligny, was shot at and injured as he was returning from an audience with the king. Tension was mounting. The Huguenots debated whether to stay in Paris or leave. They decided to stay out of respect for the king. But the King, Charles IX, who was only a teenager and very superstitious, was being incited by his Catholic advisers. Fearing an uprising, he cried hysterically: "Kill them all. Leave none alive to reproach me afterwards." Shortly after midnight, at 2 a.m. on August 23, 1572, the church bells started to ring in Paris and a slaughter began which lasted for 2 days. One of the first to be killed was Gaspard de Coligny, the military leader of the Huguenots. His enemy, Duke Henry de Guise, stood in the street below his window and waited for his body to be thrown down. He then embalmed Coligny's head and sent
it to Rome. On that day of St Bartholomew 10,000 Protestants were killed in Paris alone. The governors of the provinces were then instructed to do likewise, and altogether 100,000 Protestants lost their lives. It is said that, when the Pope was told of the massacres, he knelt at the altar of his palace and recited the <em>Te Deum</em>. A writer called Ferals alleged, that the report of the massacre was many hundred times more pleasing to the Pope than 50 victories won by his legions against the Turks. (Courtzen, p. 25) The pope decreed that the streets of Rome be lit up, and he and 33 cardinals went in procession through the streets. He minted a special medal with the words, in Latin, "Slaughter of the Huguenots 1572, Gregorius XIII." The artist Vasari was commissioned to paint three frescoes of the massacre in the <em>Sala Regia</em> of the Vatican. <p>The St Bartholomew massacre severely weakened the Huguenots and devastated France. All the liberties which had been granted to them were cancelled. The Huguenots now asked God what a Christian should do whose king and government treated them so cruelly. A number of treatises were published, one by Calvin himself, addressing the question: Are subjects obliged to obey a prince when he acts contrary to the law of God? Is it permissible to rebel against a prince who violates the law of God and destroys the Church and the state? The answer was Yes, but that such rebellion should come through the chosen leaders of the people or by the intervention of a neighbouring prince. <h3><strong>Freedom for the Huguenots - the Edict of Nantes</strong></h3> But at last, God in His mercy brought relief. The teen-age king Charles IX, who had caused the St Bartholomew Day massacre, died, and in 1589 the crown passed to Henry of Bourbon, King of Navarre, the Huguenot who had married his sister. He assumed the title Henry IV, but had to virtually conquer the country before being able to ascend the throne. Especially the city of Paris refused to accept a Huguenot king. After having beleaguered it for three years, Henry decided to renounce Protestantism and spoke the now well-known words: "Paris is worth a Mass." The state religion thus remained Catholic, but he appointed a brilliant and dedicated Huguenot as his Prime Minister. Henry IV established also the Edict of Nantes of 1598, which granted the Huguenots complete freedom of conscience and worship, and gave them their own churches, cemeteries, schools, hospitals, and even public benefits. He granted them up to 50% representation in the various parliaments, and permitted them to establish 4 academies. They were also given stronghold cities, where they could have their own garrisons, among them La Rochelle, Montauban, Montpellier, and Nimes. Thus the Huguenots became virtually a state within a state. They had 150 strongholds, civilian government, and military power. They had peace. Between 1562 and 1598 there had been eight major wars of religion in France. But now, for the next 12 years, the Huguenots prospered, and so did the whole of France. Then, on 4.5.1610 Henry IV was murdered, and the oppression started again. <p>The new king was Louis XIII, and he was only 8 years old. His chief minister was the cardinal and Duke of Richelieu, a brilliant and merciless man. His view was, that as long as the Huguenots formed a state within a state in France, the king could not be ruler of his own kingdom. Though the Edict of Nantes still stood, it was now used as an instrument of oppression rather than of freedom. The Huguenots were deprived of their rights. Their church services, burials, hospital visits, writings etc were forbidden. Churches and properties were destroyed or confiscated. One by one the stronghold cities were captured by the armies of the king, and many Huguenots fled to La Rochelle which was the strongest of their citadels. Richelieu realised that if La Rochelle were to fall, the power of the Huguenots would be broken. He therefore took personal command of the siege which began in 1627 and lasted for about 15 months. When it was at its worst, 800 people died every day from hunger and scurvy. Of the 25,000 people living in La Rochelle
20,000 died during the siege. At last, on October 28, 1628, la Rochelle surrendered and again became a Catholic city. The Church then sent out armies of mercenary missionaries and paid them money for every Huguenot soul which they "converted" back to Catholicism.

Clearly the aim was to extinguish Protestantism altogether. Indeed, a religious system which is built on falsehoods is so threatened by the living truth, that it needs to defend its power with violence. But the Huguenots, in their heroic suffering, their unshakeable faith and steadfastness, became a living example of courage and godliness for all time.

Revocation of the Edict - flight of the Huguenots

In 1661 Louis XIV ascended the throne. He was called the Sun King, as his splendour and absolutism exceeded everything that had gone before. In 1680 this king is said to have been converted under the guidance of Roman Catholic priests. He wanted to be known as "the most Christian king in France." His view was that crown and country must be of one religion, and in 1685 he revoked the Edict of Nantes which had given the Huguenots their freedoms. This was such an injustice that even the philosopher Voltaire exclaimed: "With this the King has signed and sealed France's misfortunes." And indeed, a hundred years later, the French revolution took place, and one of Louis' successors, King Louis XVI, was executed. France lost its splendour, and has been a secular country ever since.

After the revocation of the Edict of Nantes the Huguenots were harassed intolerably. All Protestant meetings were forbidden, all pastors had to leave France. All newborns had to be baptised Catholic. Huguenot families were bribed to convert, and when this did not work, soldiers, the dreaded dragoons, were quartered in their homes "to tame them." These dragoons were so crude, cruel and uncouth, that many believers broke down. In 1681, 30,000 Huguenots were 'converted' in this cruel fashion. Streams of Christians left the country, but emigration was soon forbidden, and anyone who was caught was sent to the galleys and their possessions were confiscated. In spite of all this, it is variously estimated that (out of a total French population of 20 million which included 1 mio Reformed Christians) between 200,000 and 300,000, or even ♦ million, Protestants left France, mostly young, trained, and enterprising people who were God-fearing, virtuous, and hard working. Most of them went via Holland into all the world. In August 1685, 6600 Huguenots arrived in Geneva alone. Altogether 50,000 went to England, 30,000 to Germany, 26,000 to Switzerland, 10,000 to America, 2000 to Scandinavia, and many to Russia. Frederick William, the great elector of Brandenburg, Germany, sent emissaries to welcome the refugees at the border, and through the Edict of Potsdam offered them churches, homes, provisions, money, and exceptional privileges, such as their own administration and courts. The whole of Europe started to prosper and come alive with the arts, the professions, industry and trade, for the Huguenots believed that they were on earth to glorify God. They had daily family devotions with singing of psalms. Even the soldiers started the day with prayer. They attended church every Sunday, and believed that even the king receives his authority only from God. Indeed, they enriched the whole of Europe through their faithfulness, industry, experience, and skill.

Huguenots in South Africa

In the 17th century the Church was particularly vigorous in the Netherlands. More than half of the population of 2.5 Million belonged to the Reformed Church, and they sheltered and helped 60,000 French refugees. The Dutch East India Company which had established a supply station at the Cape of Good Hope, operated in the same spirit. It regarded the spreading of the true faith as part of its task. Its ships always carried a minister or sick comforter on board "in order that the name of Christ be spread and that the Company's interests be properly promoted." The Company did "not only want to colonise but also evangelise." Its formal prayer for every country in which they operated...
was, that God might help them to "spread and proclaim your true Reformed Christian doctrine... to the glory and praise of your Holy Name and the welfare of our principals." In 1687 the council of the Dutch East India Company, the Here Seventien, decided to encourage French Huguenot settlers to go to the Cape and engage in farming and trade. These settlers were offered free passage, as much land as they could cultivate, and implements and seed which they would only have to repay after the first harvest. The only condition was that they stay for 5 years, otherwise they would pay their own fare back. <p>The first Huguenot at the Cape was Maria de la Quellerie, Jan van Riebeek's wife, whose grandfather had been a French nobleman and protestant pastor and had fled France in 1572 after the St Bartholomew massacre. In the years following 1668, after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, 200-300 Huguenots arrived at the Cape (including 4 surgeons). At the time these Protestants made up one quarter of the Cape population. Simon van der Stel, the governor, said: "The French refugees will be received with Christian love and compassion and will be offered a helping hand in everything as far as our modest means will allow." So the newcomers received food, the use of a wagon to journey to their farm, cattle and sheep for meat and for breeding, and some money (even from the church charity fund of Batavia). They were given farms along the Berg River. Ten families were settled in Olifantshoek (now Franschoek), 21 in Groot Drakenstein, 15 in Klein Drakenstein, 5 in Paarl, 11 in Wagenmakersvallei, and others as far as Tulbagh and Piketberg, altogether an area as big as Holland. They had to cultivate virgin ground and fight off lions and leopards. Ten percent of their produce was to be paid in taxes, and they had to plant oak trees to stop deforestation. </p> <p>Of the Huguenots were accompanied by their own Pastor, Pierre Simond, after whom Simondium is now named, and their first church and school were built in that area. Simond was an able man who worked tirelessly in the interest of his people, travelled to his congregation in Stellenbosch, preached, taught the catechism and authored a book of metrical psalms. The first school teacher was Paul Roux who served for 35 years and was also the reader and later church warden. The French community had hoped to stay close together, but it was Company policy to integrate them with the Dutch population. After 13 years, in 1701, Pierre Simond went back to Europe and, having no French Pastor, the Drakenstein congregation had, by 1725, become Afrikaans and fully integrated with the Dutch Reformed Church. But though the French language was lost after only a short time, the names of the Cape Huguenots are firmly written into South African history. There are the Viljoens, du Toit, de Clercq, de Villiers, Hugo, Blignaut, Rousseau, Joubert, Malan, Theron, Fourie and many others. They testify of a true love of the Lord, of heroic battles of faith, of Christian endurance and sacrifice such as this generation might no longer know. They prospered because of the Protestant faith and work ethic and made a contribution to their host country quite out of proportion to their small numbers. The names of their farms are also a constant reminder of a noble Christian heritage. To mention but a few: La Motte, La Cabrière, L'Ormarins, Labrie, Picardie, La Provence, and many others. "By 1732 the church councils of Drakenstein and Stellenbosch could declare in a joint letter to the Amsterdam classis that they were richly blessed: the number of people in their communities had increased and their knowledge of the truth and their godliness had also increased." (Coertzen, op. cit)</p> <h3><strong>"Nowhere on earth has Calvin's work remained more alive"</strong></h3> <p>Even today, the whole area of Stellenbosch, Franschhoek, Paarl, Wellington, and beyond, bears the marks of a Huguenot culture. It abounds with Huguenot names, Huguenot institutions, Huguenot museums, and Huguenot memorials. The spirit of the Huguenots is still alive even after more than 300 years after their arrival. In fact, in his work "Het leven van Johannes Calvin", the historian D'Arbez came to the conclusion:
"Nowhere on earth has Calvin's work remained more alive than in South Africa, where the spirit of Calvin has not yet been weakened by twentieth century influences... If John Calvin were to rise today from his unknown grave on the shores of Lake Geneva to walk once again on the earth, then it would undoubtedly be only in faraway South Africa that he would find the fundamental principles of the doctrine for which he lived and worked still in a pure and uncorrupted form."

In 1948, 260 years after the coming of the Huguenots, the Huguenot monument was inaugurated in Franschhoek. Prof Coertzen describes it as follows: "It shows the figure of a woman with a Bible in her right hand and a broken chain in her left, and thus personifies the spirit of religious freedom. The French lily (fleur de lis) on her dress is a sign of her nobility of character and spirit. She throws off the cloak of oppression to stand in freedom of spirit above the earth. Her eyes are fixed on a vision of the great things to come. At the depicted southern tip of Africa, to which the Huguenots came in small and unsteady ships, appear the symbols of their religion (the Bible), art, and culture (a harp), agriculture and viticulture (an ear of wheat and a vine) and industry (a spinning wheel). The three impeccable arches of the Monument symbolise the Trinity. Above them shines the sun of righteousness and above that is the cross as the symbol of the Christian religion. In the pool with its reflections and in the colonnade in the background is found the spiritual bliss and peace of mind won after much struggle and turbulence." (Pieter Coertzen, The Huguenots of South Africa 1688-1988, p. 151)

In the so-called Southern African liberation struggle of the 20th century, Calvinism once again became the target of intense hostility, for it is a testimony to the living God and a dynamic religion which brings spiritual and moral victory. It was and is hated by today's Humanists just as it was hated by yesterday's Catholic Church. A year or two ago, the authorities even tried to exchange the name 'Huguenot Tunnel' (in the Du Toit's Kloof Mountains) with 'Dullah Omar Tunnel', and to give its glory to the Muslim god, but they did not succeed.

When we consider the history of the Huguenots we can understand what Jesus meant when He said: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Christians in South Africa are now also entering a time of persecution, so let us remember that He says to us: "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you." May we be found faithful as the Huguenots were faithful. May we take our inspiration from them and look neither right nor left, but "run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." (Heb. 12:1)

To Him be all praise and glory for having given us such an excellent example in the Huguenots and such a sign and proof of His eternal victory."

Footnotes:

2. Op. cit, p. 8
3. This was ratified in 1571 at the Synod of La Rochelle, and was signed by the leading Huguenots, a.o. Queen Jeanne d'Albret and King
4. Henry of Navarre, Louis of Nassau (brother of the Prince of Orange), Gaspard the Coligny (Lord of Chatillon and Admiral of France),
5. Theodore Beza (Calvin's successor) and several Protestant ministers