

**PIERRE VIRET ON WAR AND PEACE**  
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The subjects of politics and political theory have long attracted the attention of historians of the Reformation and political thought.<sup>1</sup> Christianity has helped to shape politics in the Western World since the fourth century and most likely will continue to influence political culture into the foreseeable future. Because political theory and its application in particular has such a profound impact upon Western society and the social existence of human beings around the globe, it is important to know what church leaders have said about politics over the years.

The command that civil government should be limited in its role and jurisdiction is made clear throughout Scripture from Moses to St. Paul. On the other hand, Romans 13:1-7 is often cited by modern Christians to enjoin obedience to the state, especially during wartime. However, an absolutist reading of that passage of Scripture has been disputed and circumvented by many modern evangelical Christians, as during the English Civil Wars (1642-1649) and the American Revolution (1775-1783).<sup>2</sup> Political theorists during the past one hundred years have tended to

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see several of the many works that could be cited: J. W. Allen, A History of Political Thought in the Sixteenth Century (London: Methuen, 1928), Marc-Edouard Chenevière, La Pensée politique de Calvin (Geneva: Editions Labor, 1937), John T. McNeill, "The Democratic Element in Calvin's Thought," Church History, 69, no. 3 (September 1949):153-171), Robert D. Linder, The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1964); Robert M. Kingdon, "Calvinism and Democracy: Some Political Implications of Debates on French Reformed Church Government, 1562-1572," American Historical Review, 68, no. 2 (January 1964):393-401, Quentin Skinner, The Foundations of Modern Political Thought (2 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), see vol. 2, The Age of the Reformation; John Witte, Jr., The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Jacqueline Rose, Godly Kingship in Restoration England: The Politics of Royal Supremacy, 1660-1688 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Liam Atchison, "The English Interpret St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans Chapter Thirteen: From God Save the King to God Help the King, 1532-1649," PhD Dissertation, Department of History, Kansas State University, 2007; and Robert J. Clark, "Evangelical Understandings of Romans 13:1-7 in New England from 1763-

concentrate on two great issues: the welfare state and the warfare state. Experience has revealed that these two areas of political emphasis are the ones most easily corrupted and have often led to the dehumanization of people and the bankruptcy of many national treasuries. While many churchmen and churchwomen and various conservative scholars have addressed the drawbacks of the welfare state in recent years, little has been written concerning the devastating effects of the warfare state.<sup>3</sup> In any event, Pierre Viret, often overlooked as a political thinker, brought his considerable reflective powers to bear on sixteenth-century thinking about war.

### **Viret: The Timeless Commentator**

Pierre Viret (1511-1571), Calvin's closest associate, was a prolific writer.<sup>4</sup> Many of his more than fifty books offer a well-developed theology concerning church and state, political jurisdiction and authority, the Christian duty of the magistrate, and the problem of war. The personal and ministerial experiences of Viret's life fostered his theological development of a relatively comprehensive political theory.

Viret, along with Guillaume Farel and Antoine Froment, was in Geneva in 1534-1535 during the early days of the French-Swiss Reformation. With the blessing of the Genevan councils, these three preachers labored with great zeal to bring the Reformation to this embattled republic. Their work was both difficult and dangerous, and Viret almost lost his life there.

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1783: Absolute or Qualified?," Unpublished Seminar Paper, Department of History, Kansas State University, Spring Semester, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> A notable exception is historian Andrew J. Bacevich, Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Some assume that Guillaume Farel or perhaps Heinrich Bullinger was Calvin's closest friend. I argue for Viret in Robert D. Linder, "Brothers in Christ: Pierre Viret and John Calvin as Soul-Mates and Co-Laborers in the Work of the Reformation," in David Foxgrover, ed., Calvin and his Contemporaries: Colleagues, Friends and Conflicts, papers presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> Colloquium of the Calvin Studies Society, April 24-26, 1997 at Louisville Theological Seminary (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Product Services, 1998), 134-158.

Later, as the chief pastor of the Reformed Church in Lausanne from 1536 to 1559, Viret had to battle constantly the overreaching arm of the Bernese magistrates who exercised suzerainty over the Pays de Vaud. The Bernese tried to keep the Lausanne Reformation under their tight control lest the Vaudois be swept into the orbit of their more natural allies, the Genevans. If they were, the Pays de Vaud would be lost as a buffer zone between Bern and Geneva. Viret spent much time and many trips to Bern dealing with what he deemed the unwarranted intervention of the Bernese magistrates into the affairs of the Reformed churches of the Pays de Vaud.

Finally, in 1559, Bern had had enough of Viret's resistance and sent him into exile. Viret was never to return to Lausanne. After a brief stay in Geneva assisting Calvin with the work of the Reformed Church there, Viret spent the last ten years of his life (1561-1571) pursuing a dynamic and fruitful ministry in southern France. Though born in the Pays de Vaud, upon entering France, Viret became the immediate leader of the French Reformed Church there because of his positive reputation among Reformed Christians in French-speaking lands.

Nevertheless, his time in France was tumultuous and was further complicated by the circumstances of the first three of the so-called "wars of religion" in France (1562-1563, 1563-1567 and 1568-1570, respectively).<sup>5</sup> Viret's political theory was molded by his observations of these conflicts, by what he believed to be the interventions of Providence and by the Bible. Thus, his theology of war did not come primarily from tearoom discussions or his personal library but mostly from the Bible and his personal experiences in France as he searched for answers to the political problems of the day.

Many believe that Viret's observations, though over four centuries past, are as timely as if he were peering through a window into the twentieth-first century. Among other things, his timelessness and his unusual thoughtfulness unmask the generally accepted corruption of the

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<sup>5</sup> For a recent account of the Wars, of Religion, including an interpretation of them as a series of conflicts that lasted at least until 1629, see Mack Holt, The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

current era. Because Viret's reference point was almost always the Bible, his insights are as relevant to biblical Christianity today as they were in his own time.

### Viret's View of War

Viret claimed that he was a man who loved peace and disliked violence. He wrote to Gaspard de Coligny in 1565: "I have always loved peace and have always held in horror dissensions and troubles."<sup>6</sup> Viret saw all war as evil and the worst of all possible blights. He described war as a "sickness" that plagues human society, and, from a purely utilitarian point of view, he believed that it generally hindered the spread of the gospel. Viret's letters from Lyon during the course of the first war of religion in France revealed how weary and heartsick he was over the fighting. During the first war of religion, he wrote to the Council of Geneva: "For I do not know why it pleases God to place me here among the tumults of war, of which I am already weary."<sup>7</sup> His conclusion was that peace was always to be desired over war and that every effort should be given to maintaining the peace, if at all possible.<sup>8</sup> Viret declared, "I desire it to be well considered ... that every war is so exceedingly dangerous and full of hazards that there is nothing of which Christians should be more wary to employ nor which is less suited to their profession."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Viret, L'Interim fait par dialogues, prefatory letter to Gaspard de Coligny, dated 25 September 1565, at Lyon (Lyon: Claude Senneton, 1565), Sig. [I. vii]. Also see Viret, De l'estat, de la conference, de l'authorite, puissance, prescription et succession tant de la vraye que de la fausse Eglise, depuis le commencement du monde, et des Ministres d'icelles et de leurs vocations et degrez (Lyon: Claude Senneton, 1565), 903-905.

<sup>7</sup> Viret to the Council of Geneva, 6 February 1563. Published in Paul-F Geisendorf, "Pierre Viret à Lyon," documents inédits, Les Cahiers Protestants, 45<sup>th</sup> année, no. 5 (November 1961), 260.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Viret, Traitez divers pour l'instruction des fidèles qui resident et conversent es lieux et pais esquels il ne leur est permis de vivre en la pureté et liberté de l'Evangile (Geneva: Jean Rivery, 1559), part 5, 291.

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Viret, Remonstrances aux fidèles qui conversent entre les Papistes: et qui ont offices publiques, touchant les moyens qu'ilz doivent tenir en leur vocation, à l'exemple des anciens serviteurs de Dieu (Geneva: Jean Girard, 1547), 342-343.

Viret considered ambition, avarice, covetousness and corruption to be the fundamental causes of most wars. In his view, most men waged war in order to plunder, pillage, and seize what was not rightfully theirs. Viret denounced this sort of war and predicted divine judgment eventually would overtake such international brigands. He was not willing to support any kind of politically inspired offensive war against another nation. Even what Viret called the holy idealism that originally motivated the religious Crusades of the Middle Ages did not in his eyes constitute a just reason for waging war.<sup>10</sup>

Nor did Viret desire to inspire Reformed Christians in France with Old Testament accounts of conquest, such as the story of the subjugation of Canaan by the ancient Hebrews. He observed: "We are not in the same state that the people of Israel were in the land of Canaan. We have not the commandment, nor the leaders and magistrates ordained by God, to drive out and kill the papists and our enemies."<sup>11</sup>

### **Viret on the Enterprise of War**

In general, Viret's attitude toward armies, the military way of life and militarism was negative. He disliked roving military bands and detested most mercenaries. He also denounced those who made their living manufacturing military equipment and munitions because Viret was

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Viret, Instruction chrestienne en la doctrine de la loy et de l'Evangile; et en la vraye philosophie et theologie tant naturelle que supernaturelle des Chrestiens; et en la contemplation du temple et des images et oeuvres de la providence de Dieu en tout l'universe; et en l'histoire de la creation et cheute et reparation du genre humain (2 vols., Geneva: Jean Rivery, 1564), vol. 2, prefatory letter to the Church at Montpellier, 12 December 1563, at Lyon, Sigs. [C ii and C ii, verso] and 160; Viret, De la providence divine, touchant tous les estats du monde, et tous les biens et les maux qui y peuvent advenir, et adviennent ordinairement, par la volonte et le juste jugement de Dieu (Lyon: Claude Senneton, 1565), 406-12; Viret, Le monde a l'empire et le monde demoniacle, fait par Dialoges (Geneva: Vincent Bres, 1561), 129-30; and Viret, De l'estat, 810-15.

<sup>11</sup> Viret, Remonstrances aux fideles, 239.

convinced that to profit by the shedding of human blood was particularly vile.<sup>12</sup> A special target for his wrath were those who manufactured and used artillery in warfare. He believed that the conventional instruments of warfare were horrible enough without resorting to the newly developed, terrible weapon of mass destruction called cannon. He considered artillery an invention of diabolic origin and warned that it was a threat to the very existence of the human race. He censured those who used it to ruin whole villages, killing and maiming human beings by the hundreds. He held that no true Christian prince would use such a terrible and destructive a weapon.<sup>13</sup> All in all, his long discussion of artillery sounds much like a modern-day pacifist denouncing weapons of mass destruction. Still, he was confident, that in the end, spiritual arms are vastly superior to the dreaded artillery. His antidote to the most despised and destructive weapon of war of the age was to remind his readers that in the end, the weapons of the spirit would triumph. As he noted: "For spiritual arms are not only stronger than carnal arms without any comparison, but they are also completely invincible."<sup>14</sup>

In 1566, as Viret reflected on the first war of religion in France, he concluded that it was caused more by nonreligious and semi-religious considerations than by any genuinely spiritual issues. He observed that differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics had been nurtured and deliberately exploited by ambitious, unscrupulous, greedy men who hoped to profit from war. He maintained that the real issues of the recent war were not eternal salvation or the Mass or the Holy Supper but secular matters like land and material goods. Therefore, he concluded that "it is

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<sup>12</sup> Viret, Instruction chrestienne, 1564, vol. 1, 604-5; and Viret, Dialogues du desordre qui est a present au monde, et des causes d'iceluy, et du moyen pour y remedier (Geneva: Jean Girard, 1545), 368-9.

<sup>13</sup> Viret, Dialogues du desordre, 162-70.

<sup>14</sup> Viret, Epistres aus fideles, 179.

not a case of rejecting the guilt laid upon the Gospel or upon religion but to impute and attribute it to the evil affections and passions of men.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Viret on Politicians Who Use Religion for Their Own Ends**

Viret also said that certain “detestable, villainous” secular rulers and selfish people who “pretended the Christian religion” were taking advantage of religious differences for their own gain. He exclaimed that he could not understand how these people could “grieve and torment one another like they do over the goods of this miserable life which they should have renounced in order to become a bourgeois and a citizen of the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>16</sup> Viret is here alluding to a city-state like Geneva. On the one hand, “Inhabitants” had official permission to live in the city-state but no political rights. On the other hand, bourgeois could hold office and vote but were excluded from the highest positions, and “citizens,” who were native born, were eligible to vote and to hold all offices in the city-state.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Viret is rebuking those hypocritical or nominal Christians who, if they were true denizens of the heavenly city, would act differently. It is clear from what Viret said that he believed a number of secular leaders had joined the Reform movement for social and political and not spiritual reasons. To Viret, there was no room in the ranks of the Reformation for such men, especially because they set a bad example before the world of what true Christianity was like and “greatly abused the name of God, the Gospel, and the Christian religion.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Pierre Viret, De principaux poincts qui sont aujourd’huy en different, touchant la sainte Cene de Jesus Christ, et la Messe de l’Eglise Romaine, et de la resolution d’iceux (Lyon: Claude Senneton, 1565), 24-5.

<sup>16</sup> Viret, Dialogues du desordre, 183.

<sup>17</sup> Robert M. Kingdon, Thomas A. Lambert and Isabella M. Watt, eds., The Registers of the Consistory of Geneva in the Time of Calvin, 1542-1544, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 7.

<sup>18</sup> Viret, Instruction chrestienne, 1564, vol. 1, 124-5, 378, and vol. 2, prefatory letter to the Church at Montpellier, 12 December 1563, at Lyon, [Sig. C ii.]; and Viret, Dialogues du desordre, 368-9.

### Viret on the Just War

However, it is not that Viret failed to conceive of such a thing as a “just war.”<sup>19</sup> With a bow to St. Augustine, Viret argued that there were two conditions, in his view, under which a legitimate war might be waged.<sup>20</sup> The magistrate or prince could morally resist invasion of his territory as he intervened to stop aggressive violence. Further, and as a last resort, he was justified to engage in a war for defense and pacification.<sup>21</sup> In the second instance, the prince or magistrate might engage in a just war over what Viret called “a good quarrel.” By this he meant engaging in armed conflict to protect the righteous and to chastise the perpetrators of wickedness. He, of course, made these judgments based what he believed to be biblical norms.<sup>22</sup>

Viret reasoned that if one magistrate or prince were called to defend one or several innocent people, or if the same were similarly called to punish one or several legitimate offenders, then why could not a group of magistrates or princes legitimately defend a thousand innocent people and punish a thousand wicked individuals? It would be better, he argued, to take the sword than watch true Christianity ruined.<sup>23</sup> Still, Viret admitted, even a “just war” produces undesirable results because the foregoing conditions should be invoked only as a last resort, and the taking up of arms remained a serious enterprise. In sum, all possible measures should be taken to avoid war, yet the pursuit of it—in behalf of a Christian duty against the forces of evil—can be just.

<sup>19</sup> For a much more detailed discussion of Viret and the just war theory, see Robert D. Linder, “Pierre Viret’s Concept of a Just War,” Andrews University Seminary Studies 22, no. 2 (Summer 1984):213-30.

<sup>20</sup> For a reliable treatment of St Augustine’s just war theory, see Paul Ramsey, The Just War (New York: Scribners, 1969).

<sup>21</sup> Viret, Instruction chrestienne, 1564, vol. 2, prefatory letter to the Church at Montpellier, 12 December, 1563, at Lyon, [Sigs. C. ii., verso; and Viret, Epistres aus fideles, 167-8.

<sup>22</sup> Viret, Traitez divers, part 5, 290-1; Viret, Instruction chrestienne et somme generale de la doctrine comprinse ès saintes Escritures ou les principaux poincts de la vraye religion sont familièrement traittez par Dialogues (Geneva: Estienne Anastase, 1559), 119; and Viret, Epistres aus fideles, 167.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



### Viret as a Critic of Corrupt Government

Viret wrote that even though God had ordained the magistrate's office, nevertheless the magistrate was not beyond criticisms for corrupt and unjust actions. He was never timid in denouncing kings and princes when they were clearly in the wrong, and he sometimes got in trouble for this sort of thing. He bluntly stated that kings and princes had no right to steal from peasants, and if they did, they should be treated as a peasant who is caught robbing a king. He called princes who practiced rapine, brigandage, and fiscal corruption "the greatest of robbers." He laid the responsibility for dishonest public officials at the feet of those who appointed them. Viret was never awed by a prince merely because he bore a lofty title, but considered him to be a mortal man like himself, as prone to error and sin as any other human being.<sup>24</sup> But even when Viret was at odds with a group of magistrates, whether Bernese Protestants or French Catholics, the magistrates never lost their respect for him because he was clearly a leader of men and he obviously spoke and argued upon the basis of his Christian convictions.<sup>25</sup> In short, his enemies may not have agreed with Viret but most of them respected him.

### Examples of Viret as a Man of Peace

Viret was confronted with a number of practical problems connected with war and peacemaking during the last decade of his life in France. For example, he was preaching in Montpellier in late March, 1562 when word reached the city that the soldiers of the Duc de Guise had massacred a large number of Protestant believers at Vassy. The massacre not only marked the

<sup>24</sup> Viret, Instruction chrestienne, 1564, vol. 1, 572-3, 583-7; Viret, Traitez divers, part 5, 156-7; and Viret, Le monde a l'empire, 228-32.

<sup>25</sup> Henri Meylan and Maurice Guex, "Viret and the MM. de Lausanne," Revue Historique Vaudoise, 69, no. 3 (September 1961):113ff.; Emile Doumergue, Jean Calvin: les homes et les choses de son temps (7 vols., Paris: Editions de "La Cause," 1899-1927, vol. 7, 408-9; The Municipal Magistrates of Lyon to the Council of Geneva, 18 November, 1562, published in Geisendorf, "Pierre Viret à Lyon," 250-1; Viret, Le monde a l'empire, 60-9; Viret, Instruction chrestienne, 1564, vol. 1, 604-5; and Viret L'Interim, 454-5.

beginning of the first war of religion but also sparked rioting in many cities throughout France, including Montpellier. Viret temporarily lost control of the situation there although it appears that his insistence on moderation helped prevent a blood bath. After initial sporadic rioting, things settled down until Viret's departure in May.

The intrepid reformer first traveled to Nîmes and then headed to Lyon. As he pushed on to Lyon, he passed through the town of Valence located about halfway between Nîmes and Lyon. In Valence, Viret encountered the troops of Francois de Beaumont, Baron des Adrets, who had occupied the town. The Baron informed Viret that he was in the service of the Protestant leader, the Prince de Condé, and had seized the town in his name on 25 April 1562. The Protestant Reformer found the civil authorities and the Protestant populace about to execute a Jesuit priest name Emond Auger on the general charge of idolatry. The circumstances of Auger's trial are not altogether clear but it was something approximating a lynch mob that apparently was going to do the actual hanging or burning after they had placed Auger on the rack. Viret intervened and used his considerable personal influence to secure the commutation of the sentence thus saving Auger from death.<sup>26</sup>

After this incident, Viret journeyed on to Lyon and began his ministry there. When he arrived in mid-June of 1562, the Protestants were in control, the city was on a war footing and evidences of violence were everywhere. The devastating effects of the first war of religion were especially apparent in this region of France. On the night of 30 April 1562, the Protestants had seized control of the city by a bold coup d'état and their ascendancy was reinforced by the arrival of the Protestant troops of the Baron des Adrets. Viret now knew more of the Baron and his reputation and deeply regretted that he and his troops represented Protestantism in the area. By

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<sup>26</sup> Antoine Péricaud, Notice sur Le P. Emond Auger, Jésuite (Lyon: J.-M. Barret, 1828, 102-3, and Etienne-Joseph Poullen de Lumina, Histoire de l'église de Lyon (Lyon: J.-L. Berthoud, 1770), 209-10, are the main sources for details concerning this incident. For further information about Viret and Auger, see Linder, The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret, esp. footnote 102, 44-5.

all accounts, Baron des Adrets was ruthless, cruel and profane. In fact, the Baron was nothing more than a soldier of fortune and not a convinced convert to the Reformation. Thus, he made little effort to control his disorderly soldiers. They pillaged and robbed the Roman Catholic churches, smashed images, and forbade the Mass. Even though bodily harm seems to have been minimal, the Catholic citizenry was nervous about the presence of the Baron's mercenaries and great numbers fled the city rather than submit to Protestant rule.

Viret and the Baron des Adrets clashed several times before the Reformed minister was able to bring the rampaging army under control. Viret insisted that the Baron's troops restrain themselves and stop harassing Catholics and alarming their children. Later, on 18 July 1562, the more devout and certainly more capable Jean L'Archeveques de Parthenay, better known as the Sieur de Soubise, arrived to take command of the city and relieve the Baron des Adrets as head of the Huguenot army. Thereafter, largely through the efforts of Viret and the Sieur de Soubise, the army conducted itself in a more disciplined and orderly fashion. The Baron des Adrets, miffed over being relieved of command of the Protestant forces at Lyon by the Sieur de Soubise, later deserted to the Roman Catholic side. In any event, because of his skills as a negotiator, his reputation for fair play and integrity and his powers of persuasion, Viret was able to stem further bloodshed and bring an interval of peace to the shattered town.<sup>27</sup>

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Eugène Arnaud, Histoire des protestants de Provence, du Comtat Venaissin et de la Principauté d'Orange (2 vols., Paris: Grassart, 1884), 1:105-19; Histoire Ecclésiastique des Eglises réformées au Royaume de France (3 vols., new edition, ed. by Guilielmus Baum and Eduardus Cunitz, Paris: Librairie Fischbacher, 1883-1889), 3:260-7; Condé, Louis I de Bourbon, Mémoires de Condé (6 vols., Paris and London: Rollin fils, 1743-1745), 1:84-8 and 3:343-4; La Prise de Lyon par les fideles, le dernier d'avril 1562 (Lyon: n.p., 1562), reprinted in Archives curieuses de l'histoire de France, série 1, vol. 4 (Paris: Beauvais, 1835), 175-83; and Jean de Serres, A general inventorie of the history of France, trans. by Edward Grimeston (London: Eld, 1607), 298-9; Also see Pierre Viret, Prières ordinaires de soldatz de l'armée conduite par monsieur le Prince de Condé, Mémoires, 3:262-6; and Gabriel de Saconay, Destruction de la statuare de Saint-Jean par les soldats du baron des Adrets en 1562 (Lyon: n.p., 1565).

## Conclusion

Viret represents the paradox of a man of peace who lived most of his life amidst unrest, war and destruction. He was, of course, neither the first nor the last person to be caught up in such a dilemma. Nevertheless, he strove mightily to establish peace in order for the Gospel to be preached as widely as possible in his lifetime.

In so doing, Viret was neither a pacifist nor a warmonger. But he was more peaceful than most of the ecclesiastical and political leaders of his time. In this, he stands out among the Calvinist leaders of his generation. No doubt, he applied the lessons of conflict in Geneva and Lausanne to France in the last decade of his life. In any event, he pursued peace in that cauldron of strife and conflict and was often successful as he dealt with the problem of establishing tranquility in a troubled society. Most importantly, he taught that war should be an absolute last resort to settle disputes rather than an impulsive first one.

He also understood the need to underpin peace with restraint and integrity as he denounced and fought against greed and corruption. In so doing, Viret provided insights into how to live more peacefully to generations yet unborn in the sixteenth century.