Religious Wars in France and the Rise of the House of Bourbon

As the Protestant Reformation grew, problems between Catholics and Protestants predictably worsened. Sometimes these clashes led to religious and political wars. Although these wars were often sparked by religious differences, they were also wars fought between nations as civil wars.

Despite their best efforts, the Catholic Reformation in France met with strong resistance from over a million Protestants, most of whom were Calvinists. In France, the Calvinists were known as Huguenots. The struggle between Catholics and Huguenots led to more than three decades of religious and civil war.

Calvinism managed to convert one-third of the French aristocratic families. These noble Huguenots resented the power of Catholic kings. In 1560, Charles IX (9) inherited the throne at the age of ten. Because of his age, his mother, Queen-Mother Catherine de Medici, served as the boy’s regent, or representative. Catherine was not popular with Protestants in France. She was a Catholic and an Italian. Although she encouraged a limited religious freedom and recognition for the Huguenots, conflict between Catholics and Protestants broke out in southern France in 1562.

The civil and religious war raged on for years with atrocities on both sides. Priests and other Catholic clergy were murdered. Both sides committed massacres in which hundreds were slaughtered. Catholic churches were destroyed. Monasteries and abbeys were invaded by Huguenot mobs, and monks and nuns were killed. Rampaging armies moved about the countryside murdering, pillaging, raping, and burning. The most climactic massacre took place in the streets of Paris in August of 1572. Catherine de Medici invited thousands of Protestants to celebrate the marriage of Henry of Navarre, a leader of the Huguenots. Henry was to marry the sister of Charles IX. A truce was arranged to allow the Protestants safe passage into Paris.

The great wedding was attended by Protestants and Catholics alike. During the celebrations, Catherine convinced the king that the Huguenots were taking advantage of their being in Paris and were plotting his assassination. The result was the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre where many of the Huguenot leaders were murdered. Possibly as many as 4,000 Protestants were killed in the streets or drowned in the Seine River. This urban massacre led to additional violence throughout the French countryside where 10,000 more Huguenots were slaughtered. This bloody series of attacks did not solve Charles IX’s struggle against Protestantism. Two years later, the king died, and his brother, Henry III began a 15-year reign. In 1589, Henry was stabbed by a crazed Catholic monk.

Henry III had not produced a male heir and the royal house of Valois died with him. This opened the way for the Bourbon family line to take over as the royal line. And who was next in line to the throne but Henry of Navarre, the Protestant leader. To keep the peace, Henry (now Henry IV) renounced his Protestantism and publicly declared himself to be a Catholic. (In Private he was still a Huguenot.) In 1589, he issued the Edict of Nantes, which recognized religious toleration in France of all Huguenots, bringing an end to religious wars in France.
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What is the major problem going on in France during the Protestant Reformation?

What was Henry of Navarre’s solution to this problem in France?