Over the past three decades, a veritable cottage industry of important new scholarship has emerged dedicated to the history of rights talk in the Western tradition prior to the Enlightenment. We now know a great deal more about classical Roman understandings of rights (iura), liberties (libertates), capacities (facultates), powers (potestates), and related concepts, and their elaboration by medieval and early modern civilians. We can now pore over an intricate latticework of arguments about individual and group rights and liberties developed by medieval Catholic canonists and moralists, and the ample expansion of this medieval handiwork by neo-scholastic writers in early modern Spain and Portugal. We now know a good deal more about classical republican theories of liberty developed in Greece and Rome, and their transformative influence on early modern common lawyers and political revolutionaries on both sides of the Atlantic. We now know, in brief, that the West knew ample “liberty before liberalism,” and had many fundamental rights in place before there were modern democratic revolutions fought in their name.

In this essay, I focus on the development of rights talk in the pre-Enlightenment Protestant tradition. More particularly, I show how early modern Protestants, especially followers of Genevan reformer John Calvin (1509–1564), developed a theory of fundamental rights as part and product of a broader constitutional theory of resistance and military revolt against tyranny. With unlimited space, I would document how various Calvinist groups from 1550 to 1650 helped to define and defend each and every one of the rights that would later appear in the American Bill of Rights and other eighteenth-century instruments, and how these Calvinists condoned armed revolution to vindicate these fundamental
rights when they were chronically and pervasively breached by a tyrant. In this short essay, I focus on the early development of these Calvinist ideas during the sixteenth-century French wars of religion, and then sketch out briefly the channels of later influence of these ideas within and beyond the Protestant tradition.

Some parts of the story of this essay will be familiar to various specialists. Constitutional historians have long known that these early modern French resistance theories were important counterweights to the political absolutism of Jean Bodin and his followers, and important prototypes to the more famous revolutionary theories of the French Revolution.\(^4\) Political theorists and historians have often looked to the work of sixteenth-century French, Dutch, and Scottish “monarchomachs” for the first signs of democratic revolution in the early modern West.\(^5\) Church historians have sometimes focused on the powerful political implications of early Calvinist theories of covenant.\(^6\) And Calvinist specialists of various sorts have long known about – and sometimes decried – the growing radicalism of Calvinist resistance theorists from the 1550–1800. But, to date, these specialty discourses have remained largely isolated from each other, have usually overdrawn the distinction between Calvinist and other Protestant traditions of resistance, and have largely ignored the theories of fundamental rights and social contract developed by these early modern Calvinist writers.

**THE ST. BARTHOLOMEW’S DAY MASSACRE**

In the early morning of August 24, 1572, armed soldiers acting on royal orders, broke into the Paris bedroom of French Calvinist leader, Admiral

