

Church History (30): Peter Martyr Vermigli

In this lesson, and perhaps the next, I want to consider some of the lesser-known Reformers. "In a description of the movement of Reformed theology beyond Calvin during the sixteenth century, four names stand out as most important and representative: Peter Martyr Vermigli, Jerome Zanchi, Theodore Beza, and Zacharias Ursinus" (Gonzalez).¹

I. Peter Martyr Vermigli

1. *A brief survey of his life and ministry.* "Peter Martyr (1499-1562) was born in Florence, Italy, on September 8, 1499. His parents consecrated him to a saint named Peter Martyr, so his baptismal name was Peter Martyr Vermigli. At the age of sixteen, he joined the order of St. Augustine, and eventually took the position of abbot of the monastery of St. Peter in Naples" (Beeke).² It was in Naples that Vermigli discovered the writings of Bucer and Zwingli. As he read their works, he began to read Scripture in a new light. His change brought him into conflict with the Roman Catholic Church. "People noticed the difference in his preaching, and he faced opposition from the Catholic clergy. In 1542, twelve years after his arrival in Naples, he renounced the Roman Catholic Church and embraced the Protestant faith as truth" (Beeke).³ In December 1542, he traveled to Strasbourg, to assist Martin Bucer. He remained in Strasbourg for five years, lecturing on the OT and the book of Romans. "He also published a commentary on the Apostle's Creed that denied the Roman Catholic doctrine on the Lord's Supper and the papacy" (Beeke).⁴

In 1547, Vermigli was invited by Thomas Cranmer to assist the Reformation in England. "A year later, he was appointed Professor of Theology at Oxford University, the highest theological office in England. After his wife's death in 1551 and Queen Mary's ascension to the throne, he returned to Strasbourg, where he lectured once again at the university" (Beeke).⁵ After Bucer died in the same year (1551), the church in Strasbourg embraced a Lutheran view of the Lord's Supper. This led Vermigli to move to Zurich in 1556, where he married for the second time. "They had two children, both of whom died very young. When Vermigli died, she was expecting her third child" (Beeke).⁶ Vermigli remained in Zurich until his death in 1562. "Many scholars say Peter Martyr is nearly as important to the Reformation as John Calvin was, especially in defining Reformed doctrines" (Beeke).⁷ "Vermigli ranks alongside John Calvin and Heinrich Bullinger as among the chief architects of the Reformed Protestant tradition."⁸ "Martyr stands alongside Luther, Melancthon, Zwingli, Bullinger, Bucer, and Calvin as a giant among the Protestant leaders of the 16th century" (Needham).⁹

2. *A brief survey of some of his writings.* "Peter Martyr was unique among the early Reformers in combining his Protestant faith with a high regard for Aristotle. His immense impact on his fellow Protestants came chiefly in three ways: (i) Martyr wrote a number of biblical commentaries which were admired as models of Reformed exposition for the next 200 years. (ii) Soon after Martyr's death, mass quotations from his commentaries were gathered together and arranged under topical headings as a systematic theology (*Loci Communes*). (iii) Along with Calvin, Martyr crafted the Reformed doctrine

¹ Justo Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 3:267

² Joel Beeke, *Reformation Heroes*, 114

³ Joel Beeke, *Reformation Heroes*, 115

⁴ Joel Beeke, *Reformation Heroes*, 115

⁵ Joel Beeke, *Reformation Heroes*, 116

⁶ Joel Beeke, *Reformation Heroes*, 116

⁷ Joel Beeke, *Reformation Heroes*, 117

⁸ From back cover of *The Works of Peter Martyr*

⁹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 3:198

of holy communion into its final form" (Needham).¹⁰ Vermigli's views on the Supper are found in three treatises: *A Disputation on the Eucharist* (1549), "when he single-handedly defended the Protestant understanding of the Lord's Supper against three Catholic opponents" (McLelland);¹¹ *A Treatise on the Sacrament of the Eucharist* (1549), "that provides systematic treatment of the arguments, biblical and patristic in source, with transubstantiation the target" (McLelland);¹² and *A Dialogue on the Two Natures in Christ* (1561), "which was aimed at the Lutheran doctrine" (Needham).¹³ Concerning his writings on the Supper, Calvin said, "Peter Martyr brought the entire doctrine to perfection, leaving nothing more to be desired."¹⁴

(1) *A Disputation on the Eucharist* (1549). The debate took place on four days: May 28, 29, and 31, and June 1. Vermigli debated all three Catholic theologians in turn. "William Tresham on the first and third days, William Chedsey on the second and fourth days, and Philip Morgan on the third day. Tresham and Chedsey proved worthy opponents; Morgan less so" (McLelland).¹⁵ Vermigli sought to defend three propositions: "(1) In the sacrament of the Eucharist there is no transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. (2) The body and blood of Christ are not carnally and physically in the bread and wine, nor, as others say, under the species of bread and wine. (3) The body and blood of Christ are joined with the bread and wine sacramentally."¹⁶ The debate ended on June 1, and Richard Cox, the commissioner and chancellor of the University of Oxford, gave the closing address.

Other learned men, who I know not why, have kept quiet in such great matters, by their silence have in a way marked themselves with the sign of denial. But Peter (who is worthily called Peter for the firmness of his stance), Martyr (and worthily called Martyr for the countless witnesses to the truth that he regularly produces) deserves great thanks at this time, from us and from all the faithful. First, because he has accepted heavy labors in sustaining the burden of disputation. For if not 'Hercules against two,' what say we of Peter alone against all? Again, in undertaking to debate he curbed the vain sayings of vain men, who spread envious and odious things against him, namely that he would not or dared not defend himself. Finally, he has met extremely well the expectation of the leading magistrates and of his Majesty the King. Not only has he delivered to the university the doctrine of Christ out of those living fountains of God, but (so far as lay in him) has allowed no one to disturb or to block the fountains. We have listened to this Christian encounter, which was taken up in order to search out and to examine the truth. In every debate this same way of proceeding should always be the only goal to which all turn their faces. Everyone having sincere religion at heart should search this out. For what else is meant by the saying, 'Search the Scriptures,' than to hunt down the truth from the Scriptures?¹⁷

(2) *A Treatise on the Sacrament of the Eucharist* (1549). Vermigli's *Treatise* followed his *Disputation* as a summary of it. Thus, Vermigli had the *Treatise* published along with the *Disputation* as a prefix to it. "Therefore I deliver this *Disputation* to you, along with a *Treatise* on the same matter for its clearer explanation. I have written them all in simple terms, and without style as it were, but

¹⁰ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 3:200-201

¹¹ Joseph McLelland, *The Peter Martyr Library*, 7: xiii

¹² Joseph McLelland, *The Peter Martyr Library*, 7: xv

¹³ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 3:201

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, 2:535

¹⁵ Joseph McLelland, *The Peter Martyr Library*, 7: xviii-xxix

¹⁶ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Oxford Treatise and Disputation on the Eucharist*, 133

¹⁷ Richard Cox, *The Oxford Treatise and Disputation on the Eucharist*, 289

faithfully."¹⁸ Vermigli begins by defining transubstantiation, provides arguments against it, refutes Rome's appeal to the patristics (church fathers), and then examines two alternatives to transubstantiation: the Lutheran and Zwinglian views. "First we shall deal with that union through which, as they generally state, the bread and wine are transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ; this seems to be a complete joining of the sacrament with the reality."¹⁹ By this, he of course meant the Roman Catholic view. "Next we shall examine another opinion, which holds that the bread and wine are retained in the sacrament in their complete and true nature, so as to have the true body and blood of Christ joined to them naturally, physically, and really."²⁰ By this, he meant the Lutheran view. "Thirdly we shall consider what still others say, that they are joined together in no other way than sacramentally; this is by signification and representation."²¹ By this, he meant the Zwinglian view. (a) The Catholic view. "It is best to begin with the opinion of transubstantiation, since it is both grosser and more recent, and since the other two views refute it with equal enthusiasm. We may summarize as follows. When the minister ordained for this purpose utters the words instituted by the Lord over the bread and wine, providing he has an intention to do this, the substance of bread and wine is converted into the substance of the body and blood of Christ."²²

Vermigli then provides several arguments against transubstantiation. "First, holy Scripture lays down that this is bread; therefore it is not true that its substance is changed. The evangelists say that Christ took bread, broke it, and gave it to His disciples. Paul mentions bread five times in 1 Corinthians. When Christ says, 'This is My body,' He means that very same that is offered in John 6 when He said, 'I am the bread of life.' He was speaking of Himself, of the body and flesh delivered to death, as is clear from His words. He wished only that they might be bread and drink for us, by which we are strengthened"²³ "Another argument is that the ancients (OT saints) had the same sacraments as we, yet had no need of transubstantiation. Neither the rock, nor the water flowing out of the rock, nor manna was transubstantiated, for this was impossible; therefore, it is not required for our sacraments."²⁴ "Moreover, we see that in the sacrament of baptism the Holy Spirit and the remission of sins are conferred, yet we do not say that they lie concealed in the water. In fact, we put on Christ, yet no one holds that the water is transubstantiated. They say that Christ is in the Eucharist in one way and in baptism in another."²⁵ "Another argument can be made from the properties and qualities of human nature: Christ was truly man because He hungered, slept, was surprised and saddened, wept and suffered. Such arguments are lost if substance is not demonstrated by these qualities, so that one could no longer say: it is the form, the same taste, the same color as bread; therefore it is really bread. If the bread substantially changes into the body of Christ, His true humanity would be destroyed."²⁶ "Further, this corrupts the nature of the sacrament. Augustine states (on John): 'The word comes to the element and is made a sacrament.' Its nature is to be composed of these two things; but they would remove the elements, bread and wine. Then Augustine should not have said the word comes to the element, but rather it destroys or removes the element."²⁷

(b) The Lutheran view. Vermigli first states the Lutheran view, and then refutes it from Scripture and the fathers. "The Lutherans retain the substance of bread and wine, and also the body and blood of the

¹⁸ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Oxford Treatise and Disputation on the Eucharist*, 4

¹⁹ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Oxford Treatise and Disputation on the Eucharist*, 22

²⁰ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Oxford Treatise and Disputation on the Eucharist*, 22

²¹ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Oxford Treatise and Disputation on the Eucharist*, 22

²² Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Oxford Treatise and Disputation on the Eucharist*, 23

²³ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Oxford Treatise and Disputation on the Eucharist*, 30, 65

²⁴ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Oxford Treatise and Disputation on the Eucharist*, 32

²⁵ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Oxford Treatise and Disputation on the Eucharist*, 35

²⁶ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Oxford Treatise and Disputation on the Eucharist*, 35

²⁷ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Oxford Treatise and Disputation on the Eucharist*, 36

Lord, joining the Lord's body and blood by the closest bond to these symbols which remain in their own nature. Still, as they have said, the body and the blood of Christ are really, physically and naturally in the bread and wine."²⁸ That is, Luther and his followers, differed from Rome in that they did not believe the elements change in substance, but they still maintained the literal body and blood of Christ was alongside the elements. But the Lutherans also differed from Rome, in that they believed, contrary to Rome, that Christ's human nature is always present (and not merely at the table). Vermigli summarized their view: "At the Supper where Christ's word and command are present, His body and blood are received so that they now become present also in a definitive way whereas previously they are present not locally but really, personally, and in a heavenly manner through the personal union of the two natures in Christ and His being seated at His Father's right hand. For Christ defines with His word where He wishes to make His body and blood available for consumption."²⁹

Concerning this view, I cannot allow such a crass connection of the body of Christ with bread so that He is contained in it naturally, physically, and really. For the holy Scripture does not drive us to this position; to increase and multiply such miracles without its testimony is not theological. Moreover such a presence is not necessary, and has no bearing on our salvation. Nor do I agree that the wicked receive the body of our Lord. For whatever the Lord instituted He did for our health; but a carnal and physical eating is not healthy for the wicked. Further, we will not agree that the body of Christ is everywhere, or scattered through everything or in many places, since this is against the conditions of human nature.³⁰

(c) The Zwinglian view. Vermigli begins by admitting Zwingli denied that "scattering of Christ's body by which it can be everywhere, since it is against the property of human nature."³¹ He went on to describe Zwingli's view more as a memorial. "They maintain that there is no reason why anyone should say that the communion is superfluous, since in frequent communication we celebrate the memory of the lord, we give thanks, and the mind is stirred up by the appearance of those things which are done."³² "If they are asked whether Christ is present in the Lord's Supper, they answer that He is; but they say this through synecdoche, since one part of Christ, the divinity, is truly present. In this way they grant that Christ Himself is present, as the sun which keeps its own place is nevertheless said to be present in the world, ruling it with its motions and light. How faith can make something present, they think Paul has stated in Galatians, that Christ was described before their eyes, and crucified among them."³³

Thus my own view does not make it necessary to draw Christ from heaven, or spread His body throughout infinite places, since everything we teach is spiritual. Yet it is not fictional, since illusions do not nourish the soul, as this certainly does. For we declare and insist that these symbols signify, offer, and most truly exhibit the body of Christ, although spiritually, that is, to be eaten with the mind, not the bodily mouth. If you question the way that the ancients in their sacraments could have the same as us, it is easy to make a reply, because we have established that what is done in this sacrament is not physical but spiritual. And we read in the book of Revelation, 'the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.' They awaited things to come, we honor what is already done.³⁴

²⁸ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Oxford Treatise and Disputation on the Eucharist*, 106

²⁹ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Dialogue on the Two Natures in Christ*, 148

³⁰ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Oxford Treatise and Disputation on the Eucharist*, 121-122

³¹ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Oxford Treatise and Disputation on the Eucharist*, 119

³² Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Oxford Treatise and Disputation on the Eucharist*, 119

³³ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Oxford Treatise and Disputation on the Eucharist*, 121

³⁴ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Oxford Treatise and Disputation on the Eucharist*, 124-125

(3) *A Dialogue on the Two Natures in Christ* (1561). The treatise entails a dialogue by two fictional characters: Pantachus (a Lutheran theologian) and Orothetes (a Reformed theologian). The fundamental issue concerns the person of Christ and whether or not His glorified humanity is spatially limited to heaven. "Vermigli repudiated the teaching that Christ's body can be in more than one place. This point was the crucial issue in the *Dialogue* published in 1561. Thus while his *Dialogue* is part of a long debate between the Lutheran and Reformed wings of Protestantism over the Eucharist, it deals only indirectly with the Eucharist" (Donnelley).³⁵ In order to support their view of the Supper, the Lutherans developed the doctrine that Christ's human and divine natures shared properties. This allowed His glorified human nature to be everywhere present. Vermigli charged the Lutherans with going beyond the Catholics, "who as the very essence of depravity, are not so lacking in reason, biblical understanding, and common sense that they ever made up this monstrous ubiquity for themselves."³⁶ Vermigli summarized their view by the term ubiquity (meaning omnipresence). "A new and marvelous reality needs a new and marvelous name. Since you teach that the body of Christ is everywhere, I don't see why that condition or imagined property, which you have badly tacked onto it, can't be called ubiquity. This is why I urge you to stop preaching that the humanity of Christ is everywhere, if you want us to avoid the term ubiquitist. Otherwise we are going to keep on calling you ubiquitists as long as you persist with your stubbornness."³⁷ The *Dialogue* revolves around eight related topics: The Humanity of Christ, Who is God; On the Property of the Natures in Christ; On Ubiquity; On the Ascension of Christ into Heaven; On the Place of Christ's Body in Heaven; The Presence of Christ's Body; Melanchthon's Position; The Refutation of Analogical Arguments for Ubiquity.

(1) Only God is everywhere present. Vermigli's argument is rather straightforward: only the Creator is all-present, whereas all created things are finite and limited. "The Scripture urges that the Holy Spirit is not a creature but God by arguing that He is simultaneously in many places and everywhere (Ps.139:7-16). You have to admit one or the other alternative: either the body of Christ is not a creature since you proclaim it to be everywhere or the argument of Scripture is useless."³⁸ "The divinity of the Holy Spirit is proved by these arguments, because at one and the same time He is found in far distant places. Hence if the same applies to the body of Christ, it follows that a created body is the Divinity. It is proper to God alone and not to a creature to be everywhere and at one and the same moment fill the heavens, the earth, the seas, and the lower depths, and so on. And so God says through the prophet, 'Do I not fill heaven and earth? Says the Lord' (Jer.23:24)? But He fills them by His Holy Spirit as is shown from the words of David in Psalm 139. And thus, I have proved that being everywhere should not be attributed to a creature."³⁹

(2) Christ has two distinct natures. As Vermigli maintained, "the divine Word fills all things, but the humanity hypostatically united to it is confined to its own place," he was accused of dividing the person of Christ.⁴⁰ Vermigli responded to his antagonist: "You don't think that the unity of the person can hold firm if the conjoined natures are not equated. But we argue for one hypostasis, and in it we join the two natures as tightly as possible, but each of them according to its own way and extent. The divine nature is present and subsists with its diffusion and its filling all places. The human likewise is there, but within the limits and bounds of its creation. Hence it's clear enough that we propose one person with two natures, both of which don't have to be present in every part of space."⁴¹ The discussion then turned

³⁵ John Donnelly, *Dialogue on the Two natures in Christ*, xii, xx

³⁶ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Dialogue on the Two Natures in Christ*, 12

³⁷ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Dialogue on the Two Natures in Christ*, 12-13

³⁸ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Dialogue on the Two Natures in Christ*, 19

³⁹ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Dialogue on the Two Natures in Christ*, 20-21

⁴⁰ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Dialogue on the Two Natures in Christ*, 25

⁴¹ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Dialogue on the Two Natures in Christ*, 26

toward defining a nature. For Vermigli, a nature refers to "what something is, without which, it ceases to be what it is." Both sides agreed that a nature has various properties true of that nature. "I know that you are not ignorant that very many things can be said about God, such as His properties, which are commonly called His attributes."⁴² These are true of God in a way that they can never be untrue. God is immense, unlimited, and eternal. For God, His properties (attributes) and nature are one. He can be nothing else. Vermigli argued the same is true of man (which includes Christ's human nature). While it is true man can change certain properties and still be a man (he can grow old, lose a limb, suffer and die, and yet retain his nature), there are other necessary properties essential to his nature. "There are certain things which are so intrinsic to humanity that they cannot be removed from it without destroying it. Being mortal or immortal, being in suffering or without suffering, can be taken away from a man and again given to him without destroying his nature. But the same principle does not apply to limitation and place because these cannot be taken from a human body while preserving it. On this Augustine wrote clearly: 'Take away from bodies the space of their location, and they will be nowhere; and because they will be nowhere, they won't exist.'"⁴³

(3) Christ's human nature is in heaven. Because Christ's glorified humanity remains real humanity, it remains spatially and locally limited. "While Christ walked among us on earth, He had with Him those two natures conjoined in the same person, after the resurrection no less than before—and He still occupied a place just like other men. Therefore that union, in which He grew strong even in His mother's womb, cannot in the least interfere with His body's being contained in a place even after its glorification."⁴⁴ Simply put, Christ's humanity remained real humanity, in both states of His humiliation and exaltation. "Is He now in heaven boxed into a place so that He can't be present on earth? I say yes. For He Himself said clearly that He was leaving the world, and 'You do not always have Me.' These words can refer only to His humanity since His Godhead is always everywhere. Peter stated in the third chapter of Acts, beyond any verbal cover-up, that heaven must receive Him until the time for reestablishing of all things. We rightly gather from his statement that He ascended there and will remain there until the last day. And you can't brush off the fact that the Apostle spoke this way, that the heavens had to receive Him, as if at His ascension heaven accepted Him, whom previously it had not accepted so that He be there."⁴⁵

Christ could not have ascended into heaven as regards to His humanity, if He was already present there. Nobody goes off to places he already fills. And somebody who is everywhere doesn't have any more places to which he can go. But if we sometimes read that God, who otherwise occupies all things, came down or passed through, we are doubtless to interpret this as referring to the form or shape that He assumed temporarily to reveal Himself. That shape, since it was something finite and created, was capable of movement and change. Hence the divine hypostasis (person) of Christ, which was infinite, could not ascend as regards its nature since it already occupied everything. But the humanity, which has its fixed dimensions, truly ascended into heaven. If it had been there already, it could not have been carried up there. If the angel could himself rightly said that He was not with Lazarus when He died, then why can't we say, and very rightly, that as regards His humanity, He had not been in heaven prior to the time when He ascended there.⁴⁶

⁴² Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Dialogue on the Two Natures in Christ*, 41

⁴³ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Dialogue on the Two Natures in Christ*, 41

⁴⁴ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Dialogue on the Two Natures in Christ*, 42

⁴⁵ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Dialogue on the Two Natures in Christ*, 111-112

⁴⁶ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Dialogue on the Two Natures in Christ*, 111