

A Lamp Unto My Feet:

Peter Martyr Vermigli's Doctrine of Revelation in His Sacred Prayers

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In 1548, Peter Martyr Vermigli, an Italian reformer in exile, arrived in England to assume a teaching post as regius professor of divinity at Oxford. Despite the ongoing turmoil of the Reformation, Vermigli was confident that Scripture was sufficient to address all the theological controversies raging around him.¹ To this end, Vermigli began his post with a prefatory lecture on both the doctrine and practice of knowing Scripture, and for simple instruction in this, he believed there was no better guide than the Psalms. In his opening lecture, remarking on the qualities of Scripture, Vermigli counsels his students: “If you wish to know in more detail the peculiar properties of the sacred writings, you should read Psalm 19 where they are described with amazing conciseness and the greatest elegance.”² Then, Vermigli advises them on the method of growing in the knowledge of Scripture:

Now we must discuss by what method someone is able to prepare for himself the resources for understanding the words of God just now surveyed. Since it must be carried out with prayers we have specified the prime interpreter which is the Holy Spirit. Therefore David prayed: “Open my eyes that I may consider wonderful things from your law.” Likewise, “teach me your righteousness, give me understanding, and I will examine your commands.” Almost an infinite number of items of this kind are contained in Psalm 119.³

The purpose of this paper is to explore Vermigli’s doctrines of Scripture and revelation and their practical import, through the unique lens of his own collection of prayers, known as the *Sacred Prayers*, which he composed based on the Psalms. These prayers offer unique insight into the consistency between Vermigli’s claims about the clarity and sufficiency of God’s revelation, the epistemological limitations of fallen man, and the practice by which a believer grows in knowledge of God and His Word. As others have noted, these prayers offer an intriguing

¹ Peter Martyr Vermigli, “Commentary on 1 Corinthians,” in *The Peter Martyr Reader*, ed. John Patrick Donnelly, Frank A. James, and Joseph C. McLelland (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 1999), 67.

² Vermigli, “Commentary on 1 Corinthians,” 72.

³ Vermigli, “Commentary on 1 Corinthians,” 76.

perspective into both the theology and the spiritual life of this influential Italian reformer.⁴ In particular, as this paper will show, the *Sacred Prayers* demonstrate Vermigli's belief in the need for divine illumination for fallen man to understand God's Word, the clarity of Scripture and the need for diligent study of it, and the sufficiency of Scripture to instruct in doctrine and worship.

Historical Background of Vermigli and the Sacred Prayers

In his day, Vermigli was renowned for his theological insight and knowledge and had tremendous influence upon the development and spread of Reformed doctrine.⁵ Once a prestigious theologian within the Church of Rome in his home country of Italy, Vermigli fled to Protestant territories under conviction of Reformed doctrine. He influenced many other prominent reformers, including Thomas Cranmer, Martin Bucer, and John Calvin, and had extensive influence upon the Reformation in various lands and cities, including England, Zurich, and Strasbourg. It was to Strasbourg that he first fled and where he wrote his *Sacred Prayers*.⁶

To properly interpret the theology contained in Vermigli's *Sacred Prayers*, it is necessary to understand the tumultuous state of Europe and the Reformation at the time of its composition, as this context strongly colors his appropriation of the Psalms.⁷ During this stay in Strasbourg, Charles V, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and staunch Roman Catholic, declared war upon Protestant territories, beginning the First Schmalkaldic War. The Protestant armies were severely

⁴ Emidio Campi, "The Preces Sacrae of Peter Martyr Vermigli," in *Peter Martyr Vermigli and the European Reformations: Semper Reformanda*, ed. Frank A. James (Boston: Brill, 2004), 252.

⁵ Philip M. J. McNair, "Biographical Introduction," in *Early Writings: Creed, Scripture, Church*, ed. Joseph C. McLelland, Peter Martyr Library (Kirksville: Thomas Jefferson University Press: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994), 1-14.

⁶ John Patrick Donnelly, "Prayers and Sermons," in *A Companion to Peter Martyr Vermigli*, ed. W.J. Torrance Kirby, Emidio Campi, and Frank A. James (Boston: Brill, 2009), 424.

⁷ Campi, "The Preces Sacrae," 251-258.

beaten down, and the prospects of reformation seemed dim. Vermigli's grief over the state of Protestantism pervades his prayers, and his continual attitude toward God is one of supplication for mercy and help for the church. It is also an attitude of penitence, believing that at root of much of this act of God's discipline was a lack of longing for God's Word. In the midst of such grief and many threats, the Psalter proved a source of comfort and confidence for Vermigli. As Selderhuis notes about the Psalter: "As this book reflects the feelings of joy and misery of believers and the situation of the people of God under siege and tribulation, many Protestants saw their situation as identical with that of David and the people of Israel."⁸ It is with this context in mind that we investigate the content of Vermigli's prayers.

The Effects of Sin and the Need for Divine Illumination

Integral to Vermigli's doctrine of revelation is his view of natural theology and the limitations of the natural and spiritual faculties of man to attain knowledge of God. His views on natural theology are well summarized in his commentary on the first chapter of Romans – a common place, or locus, for discussion of this topic.⁹ There, Vermigli is clear regarding the inability of man to know God without special revelation and the Holy Spirit:

Truth has the same nature on both sides [those being nature and faith]; the difference arises from the ways and means by which it is perceived. Natural strength is corrupt, weakened and defiled through sin, so that the truth which it grasps has no effect. But faith has joined with it the divine inspiration and power of the Holy Spirit so that it apprehends truth effectively.¹⁰

⁸ Herman Selderhuis, "Expounding Psalms: Preces Sacrae," in *A Companion to Peter Martyr Vermigli*, ed. W.J. Torrance Kirby, Emidio Campi, and Frank A. James (Boston: Brill, 2009), 249.

⁹ Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, *Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2003), 276-278.

¹⁰ Peter Martyr Vermigli, "Nature and Grace: Commentaries on Romans 1 and 1 Samuel 5," in *Philosophical Works: On the Relation of Philosophy to Theology*, ed. Joseph C. McLelland, trans. Joseph C.

In his prayers, Vermigli frequently uses the imagery of a veil or clouds of darkness to describe this debilitating effect of our sinful nature upon our spiritual understanding of God and His Word. Vermigli laments to God that “our mind has been clouded by dense darkness because of our inherited disaster, O great and good God, lest it be able to understand your commandments clearly.”¹¹

Given the weakness of our natural strength and our desperate need for the Holy Spirit’s intervention, our response must be prayer. In an exemplary prayer from Psalm 7, Vermigli confesses to God that living in obedience to His commandments,

cannot in the least happen to those from whose eyes you do not withdraw the veil of darkness, or otherwise, the secrets of your law are completely invisible to the eyes of those gripped by blindness. We therefore beg help and light from you for our weakness and ignorance so that while we spend this life as pilgrims you do not hide from us the pure and rightful understanding of your commandments.¹²

Similarly, in a prayer drawn from Psalm 119, Vermigli follows David’s plea and asks that God “open the eyes of our mind with your healing light...that while we are on pilgrimage in this world, your commandments may not be hidden from us.”¹³

Vermigli acknowledges that, given our utter inability to remove this veil ourselves, God’s revelation of Himself and His Word is therefore entirely of grace. He asserts that the “gift” of “understanding your statements in their right meaning” is the thing which Christians hope for more earnestly than anything.¹⁴ In his prayer from Psalm 76, he invokes God’s grace, recalling:

McLelland, Peter Martyr Library (Kirkville: Thomas Jefferson University Press : Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1996), 27.

¹¹ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers Drawn from the Psalms of David*, ed. John Patrick Donnelly (Kirkville: Thomas Jefferson University Press : Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1996), 126.

¹² Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 10.

¹³ Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 119.

“It pleased your goodness, O almighty God, and was not required because of our merits that your word became known to us and the Holy Gospel of your Son was preached in our midst.”¹⁵

When a believer is converted, the spiritual blindness of our natural state is diminished, yet not entirely. Furthermore, sin and lust can again intrude upon the believer, thereby reviving some remnant of this cloud of darkness. Thus, we will constantly experience a need to pray that God remove the remnants of this veil throughout this life.¹⁶ In an exemplary prayer drawn from Psalm 119, Vermigli asks that God “remove from our eyes the curtain that evil desires keep putting between us and sound teaching.”¹⁷

The Perspicuity of Scripture and the Spiritual Work of Interpretation

In contrast to the natural darkness that pervades our mind and the world around us, Scripture is, in itself, perspicuous and clear, for it is pure light and truth. Indeed, Vermigli believed that the use in Scripture of the imagery of light to describe itself was a sufficiently forceful argument for its perspicuity.¹⁸ To Vermigli, Scripture’s description of itself as “light” directly contrasted with his characterization of the view of his theological adversaries, who accuse Scripture “of obscurity and the darkness of some eternal night in which nothing can be known or determined with certainty.”¹⁹ Following the language of Psalm 119, Vermigli

¹⁴ Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 122.

¹⁵ Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 71.

¹⁶ Vermigli, “Commentary on 1 Corinthians,” 61-62.

¹⁷ Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 120.

¹⁸ Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 2nd ed., vol. 2, *Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2003), 322.

¹⁹ Vermigli, “Commentary on 1 Corinthians,” 62.

frequently employs the imagery of light in his prayers to acknowledge and emphasize Scripture's perspicuity. In a prayer based on Psalm 119, Vermigli is explicit in his confidence in the believer's ability to apprehend God's Word: "Because this life of ours is surrounded on all sides with blinding darkness, we cannot possess any better lantern than your pronouncements to give light to our minds."²⁰ Similarly, in a prayer from Psalm 105, Vermigli implores God: "Never deprive us, good Father, of the light of your scriptures and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, otherwise we will both wander in misery through the desert of this life and perish wretchedly."²¹

Vermigli believed that affirming the perspicuity, or clarity, of Scripture was vital to proper doctrine. Indeed, it was from this difference of conviction between Protestants and Roman Catholics that many subsequent doctrinal disagreements arose.²² In contrast to the Protestant claim of Scripture's perspicuity, Roman Catholics argued that Scripture cannot be understood without the assistance of the church's infallible teaching. As evidence, they pointed to the seeming confusion among Protestants on substantive doctrine. If Scripture is as clear as Protestants claimed, why then could Protestants not come to consensus?

Vermigli's belief in the lingering hindering effects of our sinful nature provide a partial answer, but even if this veil were removed, not all passages of Scripture would be immediately understandable because not all passages are equally clear. As Vermigli affirms, essential truths that must be believed about God are clear to the average person,²³ but Scripture itself

²⁰ Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 124.

²¹ Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 102.

²² Peter Martyr Vermigli, "Commentary on Kings," in *Early Writings: Creed, Scripture, Church*, ed. Joseph C. McLelland, trans. Mariano Di Gangi, Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies v. 30 (Kirksville: Thomas Jefferson University Press: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994), 181.

²³ "Let them take this as their answer: on the subjects which are considered necessary for people's salvation, the divine letters are neither convoluted nor covered over with fog." Peter Martyr Vermigli, "Strasbourg

acknowledges that some passages are difficult to interpret and are liable to being twisted (2 Peter 3:15-16). Vermigli, following Augustine, held that such difficult passages could be interpreted in light of clearer passages,²⁴ but in light of Peter's warning, we should not expect them to be readily interpreted without some effort and contemplation.

Such effort required continual prayer for God's assistance and blessing of our labors by the illumination of his Spirit, and the blame for a lack of understanding should be attributed to our own spiritual sloth, not any deficiency or darkness in God's Word. In his preface to his lectures on 1 Corinthians, Vermigli is explicit: "those who fall into error in their interpretation of Scripture strive against their own sin, because they have not prayed enough, nor have they sufficiently delved into the study of them."²⁵ In his *Sacred Prayers*, Vermigli laments that this state has befallen the church and even includes himself among the guilty. He confesses to God that "... we have listened to the Holy Scripture and the Gospel of your Son with cold hearts and with no effect at all."²⁶ Again, Vermigli lays the blame upon the church's failings: "It is through our own fault that we have so far been too little educated in that understanding; we therefore have fallen into these reproaches, into this contempt, and into these distractions."²⁷

The response of the believer, upon recognition of the coldness of his heart toward God's Word, should be confession and repentance, along with fervent prayer for God to warm our hearts and cause us to seek Him. In fact, God, in His wisdom, even intends the difficulty and

Oration," in *The Peter Martyr Reader*, ed. John Patrick Donnelly, Frank A. James, and Joseph C. McLelland (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 1999), 63.

²⁴ Vermigli, "Commentary on 1 Corinthians," 73.

²⁵ Vermigli, "Commentary on 1 Corinthians," 76.

²⁶ Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 21.

²⁷ Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 10-11.

labor of interpretation as a means of growing our faith and increasing our dependence upon Him.²⁸ Vermigli's prayer from Psalm 122 recognizes God's disciplinary purpose in withholding understanding of His Word:

There is nothing we have hoped for longer and more eagerly, O great and good God, than to obtain from you the gift of understanding your statements in their right meaning. We desire it so much that we are also prepared to pay any amount of trouble for it. So if it seems right to you to bring your elect back to that conviction by a stroke of hard luck or misfortunes when they have fallen short, take the measures which seem best so that we may devote ourselves wholeheartedly to your law. Since you deigned to fashion us in our mother's womb with your hands, may you again so favor and enlighten us that we be not blind to your words of truth.²⁹

Elsewhere, Vermigli prays: "may your words be for us sweeter, not just than honey, but than any human pleasure."³⁰

The Sufficiency of Scripture for Doctrine and Worship

Vermigli's belief in the sufficiency of Scripture is intimated especially clearly in his prayer from Psalm 1. The fundamental cause of the blessed man's walking in the ways of God, in contrast to the wicked, is his meditation upon God's law day and night. Vermigli believes the simplicity of this distinction of the habits of the righteous and the wicked argues clearly for Scripture's sufficiency. In his prayer for Psalm 1, he asks for God's assistance to imitate the blessed man in his devotion to Scripture, for, "[t]hen we will not, like the wicked, be carried about by every wind of impulse and doctrine as are light flakes of dust and worthless rubbish."³¹

²⁸ "As you know, gold and jewels shine brighter the more our hands rub them. You are not unaware that the Word of God surpasses gold, topaz, and all precious stones in brightness. We are taught that the words of God are similar to those living waters which not only fully quench our thirst but spring up to eternal life and that the well water becomes more pure and tasty the more it is stirred and hauled up." Vermigli, "Strasbourg Oration," 57-58.

²⁹ Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 122-123.

³⁰ Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 21.

³¹ Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 5.

Notably, Vermigli is making an allusion between the fruitful righteous man and the man who has grown into the full stature of Christ, described by Paul in Ephesians 4:11-14. In effect, Vermigli is claiming that underlying both the believer's personal devotion and the teaching through church offices is the diligent study of the Word. Further emphasizing Scripture's sufficiency, Vermigli prays in another prayer derived from Psalm 1 that "we may ponder in our hearts day and night nothing except the words of your Holy Scriptures."³²

In several of his prayers, Vermigli connects the "undiluted word" and the ability to read it free from hindrances with proper, pure worship, intimating his belief in the sufficiency of Scripture for instructing God's people in worship. He complains to God that his enemies "want nothing else than to take away from your Church her sacred scriptures, her ceremonies, and all pure worship."³³ He cries for deliverance from these enemies, who have striven to "turn us aside from your undiluted word, from sacred worship, and from your pure ceremonies."³⁴ Presumably, being turned aside from the undiluted word refers to the addition of tradition and other authorities. In the face of these threats, Vermigli cries to God in a prayer that powerfully acknowledges the sufficiency of the Word to lead God's people in worship: "Send forth the mighty power of your word so that by it the worship of your name in the Church may be set free from error and darkness, and because the right worship of you is the beginning and pillar of all wisdom, may it at length be our happy lot to attain it."³⁵

³² Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 6.

³³ Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 122.

³⁴ Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 119.

³⁵ Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 112.

Conclusion

This work has explored the connection between the theology and practice of Peter Martyr Vermigli regarding Scripture and revelation, through his *Sacred Prayers*. Through his penitential prayers, Vermigli expressed the deep darkness in which our spiritual minds are entangled by sin. Through his praise of God's Word, Vermigli affirmed the perspicuous light of Scripture, which we can see clearly through the exercise of faith and reliance upon God's gracious illumination by His Spirit. In invoking God's blessings upon obedience, Vermigli prayed for the desire to study no guide other than Scripture.

Despite the temporal distance between Vermigli's day and ours, the church today would do well to consider his example of doctrinal rigor and spiritual devotion to Scripture. Few believers could be as devoted to the pursuit of truth as was Vermigli, who abandoned country and prestige and braved persecution, all for the sake of knowing God aright. Yet even this erudite scholar recognized Scripture still had more to teach him. Furthermore, even in the face of great turmoil within the church, a state which grieved him deeply, Vermigli held to his convictions of Scripture's qualities. His response was to acknowledge his own shortcomings and pray for God's mercy. If we would learn from this great reformer, let us strive with similar zeal through prayer to know God's Word more deeply and for the church to be united in doctrine. May our prayer today be the same as Vermigli's:

Since you have made [the church] completely perfect, this alone remains: that by our prayers you grant that she have her members united with one another in perpetual concord. May her meetings contribute to your pure worship, may they therein reach pure and sincere decisions about the Scriptures, and may your kingdom day by day expand her boundaries, and may all these things be consolidated in your peace and in the tranquility of the Spirit.³⁶

³⁶ Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 132.

Honor Code

I, Benjamin Chidester have written this paper exclusively for ST-510. If this paper, in part or full, was submitted previously in another context, I have received permission from the course professor to use it for this assignment. While I may have received editing or proofreading advice, I made all corrections myself. I have cited each paraphrase, quotation, and borrowed idea that I included in this paper.

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