CHAPTER EIGHT

EXEGESIS AND THEOLOGICAL METHOD

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One of the best known works of Peter Martyr Vermigli is his *Loci Communes*, first published in 1576, some fourteen years after his death, and which would go on to become one of the more influential ‘systematic’ theologies of the later sixteenth century. It was a compendium of theological topics organized in an orderly pattern not unlike that of two earlier compendia, Philipp Melanchthon’s *Loci Communes* and the work of John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Given the chronological priority of Melanchthon’s effort, and the prestige of both it and Calvin’s work, it is not surprising that the method associated with the phrase *loci communes* is most commonly discussed in the context of theological formulation and its systematic expression. Yet one is led to ask whether this helps us to understand fully the method associated with the phrase. Was the manner in which Melanchthon employed *loci communes* the authoritative rule, and was his practice in the treatise of the same name the only way in which he himself used the method? Was Calvin’s *Institutes* the predominant pattern within a Reformed theological context? For that matter, was Vermigli’s *Loci Communes* a fair representation of his own thinking on the use of the method?

The aim of the present essay is to argue that there were in fact several approaches to the use of *loci communes* and that, however prominent Melanchthon and Calvin were as proponents of a usage that resulted in what can be termed systematic theological statement, this use was not the only one to which *loci communes* was put. What follows is intended to point to the need for a fuller examination of the concept within the context of the early sixteenth century, and the Reformation in particular. With respect to the use of *loci communes*, I wish especially to draw attention to the method in reference to biblical humanist approaches to the practice of theology within the context of and in service of exegesis. The present essay will look to the background of the practice in the Renaissance, and then highlight four representative Reformers in whose work *loci communes* played an important part in
its development within the context of the Reformation: Melanchthon, Calvin, Vermigli, and Martin Bucer. In these four individuals, we encounter approaches that were clearly related to one another and yet which displayed distinct differences that give us an indication of how varied the method could be. With respect to the latter two Reformers, the focus of the present essay will be on their work in the service of the English Reformation, where they were laboring in the universities of Oxford (Vermigli) and Cambridge (Bucer). In particular, the discussion will center on Bucer’s lectures on Ephesians and Vermigli’s lectures on Romans, given at very nearly the same time (Bucer’s lectures, 1550–51; Vermigli’s lectures, 1550–52)—not only because in both cases a letter of the Apostle Paul was in view, but also because both letters can be understood as the closest thing to an expression of a comprehensive theological statement as one will find in Paul, and thus naturally lend themselves to more extended considerations of theological issues. We will see that Vermigli and Bucer followed a method that had much in common, one which sets them apart from Melanchthon and Calvin, and which (given that both emerged as Reformers in Strasbourg) is suggestive of the existence of what has been described as a distinctive ‘Rhenish School’ of exegesis and theology—a use of loci that did not intentionally result in a separate systematic statement of theology, and which instead kept theology and exegesis closely bound together.

1 On the sojourn of the two Reformers and in particular their relationship with one another, see N. Scott Amos, ‘Strangers in a Strange Land: The English Correspondence of Martin Bucer and Peter Martyr Vermigli,’ in Frank A. James III, ed., Peter Martyr Vermigli and the European Reformations: Semper Reformanda (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2004), 26–46.


3 Peter Martyr Vermigli, In Epistolam S. Pauli Apostoli ad Romanos commentariij doctissimi (Basel: P. Perna, 1558). This is the first edition. For this essay, I have consulted the second and third editions, published respectively as: In Epistolam S. Pauli Apostoli Ad Rom. (Basel: P. Perna, 1560); In epistolam S. Pauli apostoli ad Romanos (Basel: P. Perna, 1568). I have also consulted In epistolam S. Pauli apostoli ad romanos (Zurich: A. Gesner, 1559). References below are to the 1568 Basel edition. I have consulted as well the English translation of Sir Henry Billingsley, Most Learned and Fruitfull Commentaries upon the Epistle of S. Paul to the Romanes (London: John Daye, 1568) [CER].

4 The works of Bernard Roussel and R. Gerald Hobbs are fundamental to the subject of this school. Unfortunately, little has been done to follow up on their work. See: Roussel and Hobbs, ‘Strasbourg et “l’école rhénane” d’exégèse (1525–1540),’ Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire du Protestantisme français 135 (1989): 36–53; Roussel, ‘De Strasbourg à Bâle et Zurich: Une “école rhénane” d’exégèse (ca. 1525–1540),’ Revue