

Peter Viret – The Smile of the Reformation

In his infinite wisdom God prepares and makes use of many different kinds of men to accomplish the salvation of his beloved church. God qualifies each one and gives to each the necessary spiritual gifts to perform the work he has prepared for them. Sovereignly he shapes his servants, molding their experiences to form them into fit instruments. The history of the Reformation plainly illustrates this fact. We look upon the diversity of saints whom God used: how many different people with such different personalities, strengths, and weaknesses! For the task of reforming of his wayward church, God raised up such men as the bold and fearless Luther, to confront and smash the edifice of error with the hammer of the word of God. God equipped the scholarly Calvin with a brilliant mind and organizational talent in order to build the doctrinal and structural foundation of the Reformed church. God raises up giants, saints whose exploits dominate the pages of church history, who loom large in the church's memory. But God also raises up less prominent servants who are no less important, quiet and compassionate preachers who minister to their flocks and build up the church through their faithful labors. Such men are often overlooked when we pass our gaze over church history.

The Swiss reformer Peter Viret is one such man of God. Although his name is not forgotten among us, he is overshadowed by his great peers. The result is that the significance of his life and work is often forgotten. For many of us his name may sound familiar but beyond that we can say little. That was true for me until I was given a biography of Viret.¹ Peter Viret deserves to be numbered among our great Reformed fathers. His work was formative. He contributed much to our precious heritage of the Reformed faith. The history of Viret's life and work is worth remembering. Why? Not simply for the man's sake, but for Christ's sake. To remember the lives and deeds of the saints of old, our forefathers in the faith, is to remember the work of God himself, by whose strength and grace alone the saints did what they did. That, young people, is one reason that we study, learn, and delight in church history. Church history is the story of God's covenant faithfulness to us, the story of his ever-constant gathering, defending, and preserving his people throughout the ages. It is the story of how God has brought us to where we are now. In Psalm 78 the psalmist calls our attention to this. He calls us to contemplate the "wonderful works that he hath done." For what reason? "That the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children: that

¹ R. A. Sheats, *Pierre Viret: the Angel of the Reformation* (Tallahassee: Zurich publishing, 2012). Sheats' book is the only full biography of Peter Viret in the English language. I have relied on her fine work for much of the historical information about Viret's life.

they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments” (Ps. 78:4–7). Of course, the psalmist has in mind the mighty works God performed for the people of Israel. But God’s mighty works are not limited to his works in the Old Testament. God’s mighty works are found throughout all of church history. We too are called to ponder God’s mighty works in history, to the end that we fix our hope the more firmly on the God of our salvation. By knowing God’s works through the saints of the past, we not only learn from history’s light, but we are also comforted. God’s faithfulness in the past assures us of his faithfulness into the future.

The story of Peter Viret’s life and work on behalf of the church is a concrete example of God’s faithfulness to his people. When his people dwelt in darkness, God raised up lights to guide them. God brought Peter Viret into the world in 1511 at the very dawn of the Reformation, the movement that would become his life’s work. Viret was born in Orbe, a small town situated in the pristine countryside of the Pays de Vaud, the area that today roughly corresponds to French-speaking Switzerland. Planted at the foot of the snowcapped Jura Mountains and surrounded by the Orbe River, its namesake, Orbe, would soon have its quiet life stirred up by the coming of the Reformation. And in God’s providence, that would happen through the work of one of their own, the yet-young Peter Viret.

As a boy Viret’s intellectual gifts were noted by his father, the town tailor. Since his family was of moderate means, Viret enrolled in the town school where he learned his letters and studied the Latin language, a necessity for the pursuit of any higher learning. Very soon Viret’s gifts were noted by his teachers too. He was a quiet young man gifted with a keen mind and with understanding and perceptiveness beyond his years. Above all, Viret’s spirituality was noted. He seemed a prime candidate for the priesthood. At age 16 Viret moved to Paris to study at the Montaigu, a college located in the staunchly Roman Catholic French capital. Here Viret, immersed in his studies, discovered the emerging Protestant faith of the yet-young Reformation. His heart was grasped by the power of the word of God. He embraced the Reformation whole-heartedly. Paris being no place for one sympathetic to the Reformation, Viret was forced to flee. But this was all in God’s plan. God brought Viret back to Orbe, the place where God would have him begin his ministry to a gospel-starved people.

It all started when William Farel came to town. The Protestant canton of Bern had recently gained sovereignty over the Pays de Vaud, and Bern was interested in bringing its holdings into the Protestant fold as well. To that end, preachers were sent out. With Bern’s backing, Farel came to preach in Orbe’s pulpits. Few people in devoutly Catholic Orbe were interested in what Farel had to say. His fiery sermons were unwelcome. But a few faithful congregants never missed Farel’s sermons. Viret was

one of them. Farel's sharp eyes soon took note of the quiet and thoughtful young Viret, as he sat listening in the sparsely populated pews. Viret's entrance into the ministry bears resemblance to Calvin's. Farel had a knack for recognizing men with gifts for the ministry; and he was determined not to let this one escape. Like Calvin, Viret was terrified by the prospect of the ministry, with all its heavy responsibilities. But Farel was relentless and soon got his way. Viret agreed to enter the ministry.

On May 6, 1531 the quiet young Viret found himself standing in the elevated pulpit of one of Orbe's beautiful churches. The pews that were once vacant now were full. The air was still with anticipation. What would this twenty year-old say? What word would this son of the tailor bring? What followed was a sermon of profound depth and clarity, delivered gently, compassionately, yet firmly and without compromise. The people were stunned. The people were gripped. Viret's preaching turned the tide for the cause of Protestantism in Orbe. God's hand is evident here. God provided a man fit and suited to the work in Orbe, whose gifts were precisely what was needed to reach the hearts of the people. Despite his youth and inexperience God caused Viret's work to bear fruit. His peace-loving and compassionate spirit won many of his neighbors and friends to the light of the Reformed Faith. Although opposition was at times fierce, a vibrant Reformed congregation soon sprang up in Orbe. To his joy, Viret's own devout Catholic parents joined his congregation. Such was the humble beginning of Viret's long and fruitful ministry.

But God did not plan for Viret to remain the pastor in Orbe, content as he was to do so. His gifts were needed elsewhere. God's call came to Viret in the form of a Bernese deputation. Bern was concerned that the cause of the Reformation in Geneva, their ally, was falling apart. The Dominican, Guy Furbity, had appeared in Geneva and fiercely opposed the Reformation at every turn. An uproar ensued. Farel returned to Geneva to strengthen the Protestant cause, but more help was needed. The Bernese left Viret little choice. Though he was loath to leave his beloved congregation, he did what he understood to be the Lord's will, forsaking the comparative peace of his homeland for the battleground of Geneva. And battle he found. In 1534–35 Viret fought alongside Farel in an effort to win the Genevan populace for the Reformation. Things escalated before they settled down. On March 6, 1535, the Roman Catholic party succeeded in poisoning one of Viret's meals. The poison laid the Reformer low, bringing him nearly to death. But in God's providence, he survived. God used the work of wicked men for good. Appalled by such an unchristian act, the city council shifted its favor to the Reformers. In August of that year, Geneva joined the Reformed cause. Viret's labor was instrumental in winning the city for the Reformation. He was dearly loved by the Genevan church as one of her founding pastors.

The flower of Viret's years and ministry would be spent in Lausanne. Lausanne had no Reformed pastor of its own. Upon his arrival Viret found a city steeped in superstition and bereft of the light of the gospel, so he devoted himself to the reformation of yet another city. Lausanne was won through public debate, culminating with the great week-long Lausanne Disputation in which Farel and Viret, assisted by Calvin, expounded the Scriptures and refuted the errors of the Roman Church. Viret's charity and skill in the holy scriptures were recognized by all, even his opponents. The disputation was a mighty victory for the Reformers. A great multitude of people, monks and priests, commoners and magistrates, were gathered into the Reformed fold. Lausanne soon declared itself a Reformed city with a Reformed church. Viret passed many good years as the beloved pastor of the Reformed church in Lausanne. Under his pastoral care the church of Lausanne grew and flourished. He oversaw the establishment of the Lausanne academy to fill one the most pressing needs the Reformers faced: the need for trained ministers. As more people flocked to the Reformed faith, congregations formed that had no minister of their own. During the early years of the school's existence Viret served as its only professor. But he served with vigor. Quickly the school grew. Lausanne would remain the foremost Reformed school until Calvin's Genevan Academy was built. Many a Reformed missionary was dispatched abroad after being prepared in Viret's school. Viret's time in Lausanne was also a joyful time, for it is here that he married Elizabeth Turtaz, a woman from his hometown of Orbe. Theirs was a happy and loving marriage. In Lausanne Viret bore a crushing work load. But all of these responsibilities Viret bore with gladness: preaching, pastoring, teaching, and being a good husband and father. The love of God and his truth was his sole motivation. As Paul before him, he joyfully expended himself on behalf of Christ and his church.

At this point it is fitting to dwell for a moment on Viret's character, his God-given compassionate and peace-loving spirit. His character set the tone for his entire ministry. He was a peacemaker and a mediator. He fulfilled this role on many occasions throughout his ministry, mediating between the church and the magistrates of the various Swiss cities. In this way God used him to hold together the fragile Reformed churches in the Swiss cities. His was a stabilizing influence. In a time of such tremendous upheaval, it is hard to appreciate how important Viret's influence was for the young Reformed churches. Viret's kindness extended to friend and foe alike. Viret embodied the virtues that Paul in 2 Timothy 2:24–25 says must mark the minister of the gospel: "gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth." Just as Paul had once viewed his Jewish opponents, Viret did not look upon his Catholic opponents simply as enemies to be vanquished; he looked upon them with eyes of compassion, as blind men grasping in the dark. Compassion for the lost motivated his

preaching. It did not cause him to compromise the truth or to shy away from sharply refuting the error. Rather, because of love he preached the truth all the more ardently, but always with gentleness and meekness. We all, not only preachers, can learn much from Viret's example. Love and compassion must always accompany the gospel. The church is built and defended not only by warriors but also by peacemakers. God uses both. Both are needed.

By 1538 Geneva was a mess again. The city had expelled Calvin and other faithful ministers for their refusal to administer communion to unworthy partakers at the magistrate's bidding. Robbed of their best pastors, the Genevan church was in dire need. They appealed to their old minister, Viret, to come and help them. So it was in 1541 that Viret came to minister in Geneva for a second time. That same year Calvin was recalled to Geneva, in large part due to Viret's mediation. Viret remained in Geneva for little over a year. Lausanne desperately needed their pastor back. But during the short time that they worked together in the Genevan church, Viret and Calvin developed an abiding friendship, forged in the shared struggles and sorrows of ministering to the saints in a day of tremendous upheaval. Their warm friendship was life-long. Viret returned to Lausanne to minister to the church there for many more years. During this time he was touched by the bitter sorrow of death, losing his beloved wife to illness in 1546. The loss was so hard on Viret that he retreated for a time to Geneva to find some solace. Calvin was an ever constant friend. Despite sorrow, Viret continued to labor in Lausanne until his fruitful ministry was unjustly ended by the tyranny of the Bernese magistrates. In 1559 the Bernese officials expelled Viret and other ministers from their congregations because they refused to comply with the magistrates' attempt to exert control over church discipline. For his faithfulness Viret was exiled.

Viret spent his final years in exile ministering to the persecuted Reformed believers in France. He spent a year serving the beleaguered church in Nimes before moving to Lyon. There he ministered for four years, preaching the gospel and quelling conflict. Lyon was a battle-torn city. The conflict between Catholic and Protestant was fierce and at times bloody. Viret brought stability and peace to the city, such that even some Catholics wished to keep him in their city. However, Viret's opponents obtained a royal decree banishing Viret from France. He lived his final days in Navarre. At last in 1571 he was taken to glory. The story of Peter Viret's life and work is strewn with difficulties and sorrows. He bore the heavy burden of pastoring multiple congregations of new Reformed believers. He suffered the persecution of Roman Catholic opponents and of wolves within the Protestant fold. He suffered ills from the poison he ingested in Geneva his whole life long. He was unjustly banished from his home and church. Yet Viret was known among his contemporaries as a man of constant joy and inner peace. This

joy and peace came from his deep knowledge and love for Jesus Christ, for whom he cheerfully bore all these things. "The smile of the Reformation." That is what Calvin once called his friend and fellow laborer in the gospel. How fitting a title indeed! For Peter Viret, the word of the apostle surely applies: for him to live was Christ and for him death was gain.