

Girolamo Zanchi – a Theologian of Peace and Comfort

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November 19, 1590, the Italian Reformer Girolamo Zanchi died while visiting the University of Heidelberg where he had once been professor of theology. He was buried with honors. His epitaph read, “Here lie the bones of the Italian Zanchi, exiled from his homeland for love of Christ.” The epitaph goes on to say that he will never be forgotten. Today, however, his name is rarely remembered.

Zanchi’s life was similar, in many ways, to that of Peter Martyr Vermigli. Born in a small town by Bergamo, Italy on February 2, 1516, Zanchi joined, like Vermigli, an Augustinian monastic order at age 15, became preacher, and moved to Lucca. There, his and Vermigli’s lives intersected. As prior of Lucca, Vermigli had opened an innovative school of biblical studies for the laity – young and old – and Zanchi joined him as teacher of theology. Together with other Italian theologians, they continued to study both the Church fathers and the works of Protestant Reformers.

The intensifying activity of the Roman inquisition forced both Vermigli and Zanchi to leave Italy – Vermigli in 1542, and Zanchi nine years later. After a short stay in Geneva, Zanchi moved to Strasbourg, where he taught Old Testament studies.

Like Vermigli, Zanchi found great spiritual joys and little earthly comfort outside of Italy. His stay at Strasbourg was marred by strong theological disagreement with the Lutheran university rector, Johannes Marbach. Not even Vermigli’s arrival from England eased the situation. Finally, Vermigli accepted a new teaching position in Zurich, and Zanchi was called to pastor a Reformed congregation in Chiavenna, an Alpine city which was then in a Protestant region of Switzerland.

Chiavenna was equally stressful for Zanchi, who suffered strong criticism from his assistant pastor over his lenient treatment of anti-trinitarians. In 1567, he gladly accepted the invitation by Prince Frederick III to teach theology at the University of Heidelberg. There, he enjoyed nine years of peace, until Frederick died and was succeeded by his son Ludwig VI who, being a Lutheran, cleansed the city of Reformed teachers and preachers.

The quietest time of Zanchi’s life probably started at this point, when he accepted the hospitality Frederick’s second son, Count Johann Casimir, granted to exiled Reformed theologians. In 1583, when Ludwig VI died, Casimir became regent for the young Frederick IV, and Heidelberg was once again a Reformed city. Zanchi was invited to occupy his previous teaching position, but his health prevented him from accepting. Casimir offered him a life-long pension, allowing Zanchi to complete his last theological work: *De religione christiana fides*.

What is left today of this quiet Reformer, and what can he teach us? I proposed these and similar questions to Dr. Giulio Orazio Bravi, founder of the Protestant Cultural Center in Bergamo, Italy, who has devoted much time to the study of Zanchi and other Italian Reformers. (The translation of the interview from the original Italian is mine, together with any imperfections in the English language).

1. The formulation of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints in the Canons of Dordt was partially credited to a disciple of Zanchi, Franciscus Gomar. Can you tell me how Zanchi’s teachings on this doctrine were influential in his day?

We can’t say that Zanchi’s teachings on the perseverance of the saints were original. They were present in other Reformers. Zanchi’s merit lies in the central place he insistently granted to this doctrine in almost all his works. “Perseverance of the saints” doesn’t mean that believers are the cause of their perseverance, by their own virtues and ability to sustain God’s election. Perseverance, like election, is an absolute, free gift of God, based on his faithfulness to his promises and on the unchangeable nature of his electing decree.

2. In his *Beyond Calvin: Union with Christ and Justification in Early Modern Reformed Theology*
¹J.V. Fesko writes that Zanchi, in his commentary to the Epistle to the Ephesians, gives more emphasis than Calvin to the doctrine of union with Christ. Do you agree?

It's true. When, still in Italy, Zanchi wrote a summary to Calvin's Institutes (1543 version), he went beyond Calvin's treatment of imputed righteousness. For Zanchi, in the gift of faith, Christ not only imputes his righteousness on us, but renews our inner will and intellect and strengthens our love. We truly live of his life, in this mysterious condition in which we do good works before God, not through our strength and by our merit, but exclusively by Christ's merit. Zanchi's comments on Ephesians 2:10 ("For we are [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them") and Ephesians 5:30 ("because we are members of his body") are the most theologically profound and spiritually lively of all his writings. In his 1585 Confession of Faith (De religione christiana fides), written for himself and his family, he wrote: "Just as the branch is not only nourished by the lymph that allows it to live, but also receives from the vine the ability to bear good fruit, we believe that the saints derive from Christ, in whom they are grafted, not only the life in which they live, but also the strength by which they produce fruits of good works to the glory of God and the edification of the Church."

3. Zanchi is rarely remembered today, but many think he should be. What do you think?

Zanchi's very systematic and scholarly writings, all in Latin and packed with theological and biblical reflections, can hardly be considered the most appealing texts for today's readers. His books are looking for demanding readers who still have time to devote to long and silent meditation and for a search for God's meaning in our life and our existence as Church of the elect.

4. Which of Zanchi's writings would you recommend to today's readers?

I would recommend the lectures he gave at the start of his university courses (Strasbourg, 1553, Heidelberg, 1567, and Neustadt, 1577), and some autobiographical writings, such as his 1562 letter to Cardinal Charles of Guise on the concord among churches. These are all included in his Opera Omnia, third volume, edited by his sons in 1619 in Geneva. I would also recommend some portions of his commentary to Ephesians and chapters 23 and 24 of his De Religione christiana fides (on the Church of Christ). But these are all in Latin. Someone should be so inclined as to translate them.

5. Zanchi's personality surfaces in some details on his life. We know he was extremely diligent and precise in his studies. His work on creation includes thoughts on astronomy, mathematics, geography, botany, etc. We also know that he was criticized for his leniency with both Lutherans and anti-trinitarians. What do these things tell us about him?

Zanchi was exceptionally knowledgeable. He first studied in Italy, where one could find the best schools in Europe. His education was mostly humanistic, philological, and biblical, but he also studied the natural sciences. In his teachings, he aimed for peace and never made his theology a reason for dispute. He showed this personality trait when the wars of religion broke out in France, with massacres on both sides. In the aforementioned letter to Cardinal Charles of Guise, he proposed a peaceful dialogue between the two parties. Even in Chiavenna, he tried to establish a dialogue with those who professed anti-trinitarian or Anabaptist views. This love for peace and dialogue, however, should be attributed to his theology rather than to a simple personality trait. Only God knows men's hearts. And faith must not be imposed by force or with the sword, or it becomes a human endeavor. Faith comes and lives purely by listening to God's Word.

¹Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012.