

cha  
pter  
2

## William Perkins (1558–1602)

---

*Raymond A. Blacketer*

William Perkins defined theology as “the science of living blessedly forever.”<sup>1</sup> The phrase captures the intellectual rigor and heartfelt piety that come together in the writings of this eminent English theologian, preacher, and spiritual director. Often overlooked or underestimated by modern scholars, Perkins was a very significant and influential scholastic theologian and a pioneer in the field of Protestant practical theology. His writings, particularly in the area of practical piety, exerted substantial influence far beyond the borders of England. Perkins, of course, was not a “Pietist” in the sense that one would use the term to describe later seventeenth and eighteenth century Pietism; but the emphasis on practical piety that permeates all his works, regardless of genre, is the one of the most striking aspects of his thought. Heinrich Hepppe goes so far as to claim that if anyone could be designated the father of pietism, it would be William Perkins.<sup>2</sup>

### **Perkins’ Life and Ministry in the Context of the Elizabethan Settlement**

The surviving details of Perkins’ life are few. He was born in 1558 in the village of Marston Jabbett in Warwickshire, England. He came to Christ’s College, Cambridge, as a pensioner in 1577. His tutor there was the eminent Puritan preacher Laurence Chaderton. Perkins obtained the BA in 1581, and the MA in 1584; that same year he was elected fellow of Christ’s College and was ordained. Rather than becoming a parish priest, Perkins held a lectureship at Great St. Andrews, which allowed him to preach without the inconvenience of episcopal supervision or strict adherence to the *Book of Common Prayer*. His early death in 1602 cut short what was already a prolific and influential career as a theologian, preacher, and pastor of souls.<sup>3</sup>

Perkins was reputed to be wild and reckless in his early years as a student. There is the story, likely fictional, that Perkins’ public inebriation had become so legendary

that a woman once threatened to hand her naughty child over to “drunken Perkins,” and that in this manner Perkins was shamed into a dramatic conversion.<sup>4</sup> By his own account Perkins had delved into the astrological arts in his youth.<sup>5</sup> Some of his earliest works are directed against astrology, his former love. But by the early 1580s Perkins had experienced a spiritual change of direction. He focused his studies on theology and began preaching to the inmates in Cambridge’s prison, where he established a reputation as an effective and powerful preacher.

Dedicating his life to the Christian ministry, however, did not mean that Perkins would stay out of trouble. Christ’s College was known for its Puritan sympathies and for running afoul of University regulations. Perkins himself was brought before the Vice-Chancellor in 1587 after preaching a chapel sermon in which he criticized some of the prescribed liturgical practices. The record of the event comprises one of the few existing windows into Perkins’ personality and character. He was accused of claiming that it was a “corruption” that the presiding minister should take the elements of the sacrament himself, rather than receiving them from another minister; that the practice of kneeling to receive the sacramental elements was both “superstitious” and “antichristian;” and that facing east at various points in the liturgy was another corruption.

Perkins’ answer to these charges was somewhat evasive. He denied he had characterized the practice of the minister serving himself the elements of communion as either unlawful or a corruption. Instead, he suggested that it would be preferable, given that there were thirteen ministers present, to receive the eucharistic elements from another pastor, along with that fellow minister’s approbation. In other words, Perkins’ suggestion would be more conducive to mutual discipline and censure. He also denied that he had called kneeling either idolatrous or antichristian. Again, he claimed that he had simply said that of the two practices, sitting was preferable, given the fact that Jesus sat, while the Pope kneels. In his defense, Perkins cited the maxim that “in things indifferent, we must go as far as we can from Idolatry;” and added references to Calvin and Bucer to bolster his case. Finally, with regard to facing east, while Perkins considers the issue indifferent, he finds it rather strange that “while the cross standeth still in the window” the congregation nevertheless turns toward the eastern end of the chapel after the first and second lessons. He concluded his defense by admitting that while he did not seek to stir up conflict in the congregation, he could have addressed his concerns at a more “convenient” time and place.<sup>6</sup>

Both this episode and the cautious tone of Perkins’ writings in matters of church polity and ceremonies reflect the balancing act he was required to perform as a reform-minded divine in the Elizabethan Church of England.<sup>7</sup> Queen Elizabeth I had restored Protestantism in 1559; and many reform-minded clergy hoped that she would implement a thoroughgoing plan to revitalize the doctrine and practice of the Church of England. Instead, Elizabeth firmly resisted any such efforts at reform, choosing rather to chart out a *via media* for the English Church that asserted absolute royal authority in ecclesiastical matters and left the Church of England looking much too Roman Catholic for many convinced reformers. This development was particularly disheartening to churchmen whose theological orientation was

sympathetic to the Reformed or Calvinist branch of the continental Reformation. These frustrations would lead many to advocate the replacement of Episcopal church government with a Presbyterian system, or even separation from the Church of England.

Perkins, while firmly committed to the reform of the church's doctrine and life, endorsed neither of these options, and even condemned them. His brand of "Puritanism" must be classified as moderate and non-separatist. He was by no means satisfied with the state of doctrine, worship, and piety in the Church of England; but neither did he conclude that the English church was apostate or beyond reforming. He has harsh words for "sectaries," and particularly for that "schismatical and indiscreet company" who cry out for discipline, but who themselves exercise no self-discipline when it comes to patiently and peacefully working for reform from within the church. Those who separate from the church and refuse to attend authorized worship services Perkins condemns as prideful and contemptuous of God's benefits.<sup>8</sup> As for the term *Puritan*, Perkins uses it to describe the medieval heresy of the Cathars along with any others who might advocate moral perfectionism.<sup>9</sup> Thus he finds it offensive when those who seek purity of heart and a good conscience are "branded with the vile terms of Puritans and Precisians."<sup>10</sup>

Perkins explicitly condemns the attack on the set prayers of the *Book of Common Prayer* by the separatists Henry Barrow and John Greenwood. Perkins argues that set forms of prayer are "both profitable and necessary," since they provide for uniformity in worship and prevent ignorant pastors from neglecting the duty of pastoral prayer. The early church, while still in its more pristine state, had set forms for prayer. With perhaps questionable consistency, Perkins asserts that while sermons read out of a book suppress the gift of prophecy, written prayers are an aid to weak spiritual gifts. Perkins rejects criticism of the Church of England's use of set prayers in particular its prescribed liturgy in general.<sup>11</sup> He reveals a rather optimistic view of the magistrate's role in governing church affairs. He affirms that the magistrate has the right to reform or depose pastors who fail in their duties.<sup>12</sup> Those who seek reform ought to be patient, and wait for the civil authorities to take action in their time. If there are "Popish images" remaining in churches, pious persons should not go to the extreme of removing these images themselves, but must request that the magistrate have them removed, and then abide by whatever decision he should make.<sup>13</sup> For Perkins, the best way to effect change in the church was to focus on reforming the spiritual lives of its members, not by attacking the ecclesiastical establishment and its leaders.

### **Perkins: Theologian of Scholastic Piety**

The significance of William Perkins as a theologian consists in the marriage of practical piety and academic rigor in his theological works. While Perkins was no slavish imitator of continental Reformed theologians such as Theodore Beza and Jerome Zanchi, he certainly considered them theological allies. Along with them, Perkins emphasizes the sovereignty of God in effecting salvation through his decree

of predestination. Where Perkins distinguishes himself from his allies on the continent is not so much in the content of his theology, but rather in the pronounced emphasis that he places on the practical application of Reformed theology to the inner spiritual life of the believer and to the Christian's moral life. Perkins produced sophisticated doctrinal treatises that were saturated with practical applications to piety and morals, along with manuals of practical piety that reflect rigorous theological analysis.

Another area in which Perkins distinguishes himself, for example, from Beza is his use of the simplified method of logical analysis developed by Peter Ramus.<sup>14</sup> Ramism was particularly suited to the practical and pedagogical aims of English Reformed piety. Ramist method, which focused on careful analysis, often employing the bifurcations for which it is known, was also self-consciously practical and goal-oriented, and not only in the discipline of theology. But it must be emphasized that the use of this method has no bearing on the doctrinal content of Perkins' theology; James Arminius, who also made use of Ramist analysis and the scholastic method, came to rather different conclusions than Perkins on key matters such as predestination and human free will.<sup>15</sup>

While Perkins differed from Beza in his assessment of the value of Ramist method, he shares much in common with the Genevan theologian, including the view that theology is a purely practical discipline, and a supralapsarian perspective on the divine decrees. In fact, at the end of *A Golden Chaine*, his treatise on the "order and causes of salvation and damnation," Perkins appended an excerpt from Beza's response to the Lutheran Jacob Andreae, in which Beza offers guidelines for providing pastoral comfort to those who are concerned about their status before God.<sup>16</sup>

Perkins was arguably the most significant English theologian of the Elizabethan period. He produced an important apologetic and polemical treatise entitled *A Reformed Catholicke*, in which he argues that the Protestant churches embody the one holy catholic and apostolic church, rather than the Church of Rome.<sup>17</sup> He also produced the first English study of the Church Fathers, the purpose of which was to further the Protestant argument that the papacy had departed radically from the unadulterated form of the Christian religion embodied in the first several centuries of the church, and that the Protestant churches had recovered that ancient pristine form of faith and doctrine.<sup>18</sup>

While discussions of Perkins' theological method often center on *A Golden Chaine*, that work is neither a complete system of doctrine nor even his most detailed treatment of predestination. In fact, Perkins himself identifies his *Exposition of the Symbole or Creed of the Apostles* as his more comprehensive treatment of Christian doctrine.<sup>19</sup> The Creed contains the "very pith and substance of Christian religion," and thus provides a springboard for Perkins to treat a broad range of doctrinal topics; but one thing that stands out in this treatise is the extensive treatment that Perkins devotes to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Notably, Perkins begins his system not with the doctrine of God, as Calvin did in his *Institutes*, but with human faith. It would be quite mistaken to conclude from this that Perkins' has made a major inward and subjective turn; rather the real explanation is simply the structure of the Creed itself, which begins: "I believe. . . ."<sup>20</sup> Perkins' emphasis on piety and

religious affections never competes with, but rather is complementary to the theocentric and biblical foundation of his theology.

Perkins can treat the doctrine of predestination either in connection with the doctrine of God, as he does in *A Golden Chaine*, or in relation to the doctrine of the church, as he does in *An Exposition of the Symbole*; indicating that the placement of the doctrine of predestination has no bearing on its abstractness or rigidity, as is often alleged. Predestination, in fact, is the “ground and cause” of the church; it is integral to the very definition of the church as the “peculiar company of men predestinated to life everlasting, and made one in Christ.” Citing Bernard of Clairvaux, Perkins identifies the church with the elect.<sup>21</sup> Also integral to his definition of the church is that phrase “made one in Christ,” which represents a central and recurring theme in Perkins’ theology: union with Christ. While the efficient cause of the church is God’s predestination, the form that it takes is that of mystical union with Christ.

While continental reformed leaders debated whether there were two or three marks of the church, Perkins maintains that there is really only one “infallible mark” of a true church, and that is the preaching of the gospel. The correct administration of the sacraments and the exercise of biblical discipline are necessary for the well-being of the church, but a true church can still exist where these are lacking. The “substance” of the church is the preaching of the gospel; it is the necessary and sufficient condition for her existence.<sup>22</sup> Perkins’ claim is consistent with his preaching-based agenda for reform from within the established church. By making the proper use of the sacraments and discipline relatively dispensable, he derails the argument for schism and separation based on defects in Anglican worship and discipline, while at the same time he puts the onus on pastors to effect reform of their parishioners’ lives through preaching, rather than agitating for structural changes in worship or polity.

With regard to other ecclesiastical bodies, Perkins asserts that the institution that is headed by the Pope and that subscribes to the teachings of the Council of Trent is no true church, because they have razed the “very foundation of religion” by including human works in the process of justification, by re-sacrificing Christ daily in the mass, and by worshipping images and their “Breaden god” (the transubstantiated bread of the mass). The Roman church has become nothing more than a mixture of Judaism and paganism; and thus Protestants have justly separated themselves from this church, and are not liable to the charge of schism.<sup>23</sup>

The Lutherans, however, are a true church, despite the fact that the Augsburg Confession has “not satisfied the expectation of other Reformed Churches.” Their understanding of the Lord’s Supper is certainly defective, and the Lutheran doctrine of the ubiquity of Christ’s body even revives “the condemned heresies of Eutyches and Nestorius.” But such “consubstantiation,” as Perkins identifies it, is only the opinion of certain individuals like Johann Brenz.<sup>24</sup> While this may sound like naïve wishful thinking on Perkins’ part, he may have Melancthon’s sacramental teachings in mind, which Reformed thinkers chose to interpret as basically in line with their own perspective on the sacrament. In any case, Perkins’ desire to make common cause with the Lutherans is another reason for excluding the administration of the sacraments from the marks of the church. Perkins’ numerous citations of Luther in his writings demonstrate his admiration and respect for the Reformer.

With good reason, Perkins is known for both piety and predestination. He would not, however, consider these to be two separate issues. The doctrine of predestination is essential in that it provides the comfort and assurance required to live the Christian life with confidence. Perkins own view of the doctrine was of the supralapsarian variety, in which the divine decree of election and reprobation is logically prior to the decree to permit the fall of humanity into sin.

Perkins preferred the supralapsarian position not because he was more speculative or rationalistic, as is often charged, but because this perspective was more practical and goal-oriented. In Perkins view, it had the benefit of giving God the most glory and the believer the most comfort.<sup>25</sup> The case can be made “for supralapsarianism being both independent of traditional scholastic metaphysics and faithful to the early Reformers.”<sup>26</sup> The Reformed emphasis on predestination did not imply a fatalistic or mechanistic understanding of the universe; rather, it was an attempt to balance the biblical themes of divine sovereignty in the salvation of sinners with the culpability of sinners for their misery and the responsibility of those same persons to respond to the claims of the gospel. Perkins’ emphasis on predestination guards God’s grace and provides the foundation for the believer’s assurance of salvation, while his emphasis on making steady progress in the cultivation of Christian virtue demonstrates that his understanding of predestination did not vitiate human responsibility.

Perkins viewed attacks on predestination by such figures as the anti-Calvinist Peter Baro not merely as a threat to a particular conception of theology, but as a challenge to the fundamental Protestant doctrines of grace and justification.<sup>27</sup> The doctrine of predestination was the only basis, moreover, for a believer’s assurance of salvation and for the confidence required to make spiritual and moral progress in life. Because of his estimation of the importance of God’s sovereignty in salvation, Perkins sought to demonstrate the practical uses and consolations that flow from a proper understanding of predestination.

In his most famous work on the subject, *Armillæ Auræ, or A Golden Chaine*, Perkins has much more to say about how the divine decree of predestination works itself out in history and in a person’s life, than about the doctrine of predestination itself. It is really a treatise on the order of salvation as laid out by the apostle Paul in Romans 8:29–30; this *ordo salutis* was traditionally referred to as the “golden chain of salvation.”<sup>28</sup> The title page indicates that the work is really an elucidation of the “order of the causes of salvation and damnation” as derived from Scripture; in subsequent printings the alternative title “The Description of Theologie” was also supplied.

It is in this work that Perkins presents his very practical, goal-oriented definition of theology as the “science of living blessedly forever.” Mirroring the opening words of Calvin’s *Institutes*, he says that a blessed life arises from the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves, since we also know God “by looking into our selves.”<sup>29</sup> Perkins then proceeds to cover a huge range of doctrinal territory that one might not initially connect with the doctrine of predestination: the doctrines of God, creation of humanity and angels, the fall into sin, Christology, and even an exposition of the Decalogue and the uses of the law, as well as an extended treatment of the sacraments! All of these subjects, particularly as Perkins treats them in

this treatise, are the external means by which God executes the decree of election in history and in the lives of believers.

He also treats the process of conversion at length. It is clear that Perkins views faith as both a gift from God and a truly human act. Faith is first of all knowledge, not a feeling or experience, created by the illumination of God's Spirit. But this knowledge engenders affections, such as a profound sense of one's spiritual poverty and need for Christ. This knowledge has the potential of developing into a "full assurance of understanding" (Col. 2:2); but the lack of such full assurance does not indicate the absence of true faith. Faith also includes "a special persuasion imprinted on the heart by the holy Ghost" in which one personally appropriates the promises of the gospel. Perkins specifically states that this persuasion is prior and prerequisite to "any experience of God's mercies." While philosophy proceeds empirically from experience to assent, faith proceeds from intellectual acceptance of God's truth, after which "will and experience and feeling of comfort follow." As a result, it is a mistake for those who do not yet feel the "especial motions of God's Spirit" to doubt their salvation because of the lack of these feelings.<sup>30</sup> Here the contrast between Perkins and later Pietists is quite evident: knowledge precedes feeling, and doctrine is essential to religious affections.

For Perkins, God is the author of both salvation and the assurance of salvation. Thus it is not the case, as has sometimes been alleged, that according to Perkins a person can virtually will one's way into salvation, any more than his stress on the Christian moral life or the outward signs of election make him liable to the charge of works righteousness. Rather, in accord with New Testament teaching, he takes seriously the idea that God's grace not only justifies sinners, but also transforms them. Perkins theology is without exception centered on the work of God in Christ and through the Holy Spirit; divine work that nonetheless manifests itself in piety and Christian virtue. Perkins never tires of repeating that even the lowest degree of faith is saving faith; this mustard seed sized faith, which itself is evidence of God's work in the sinner's heart, is grounds enough for assurance of salvation.<sup>31</sup>

Perkins' *Golden Chain* contains numerous links that read more like a manual of piety than a doctrinal treatise. He speaks at length about the believer's struggle with doubts, spiritual warfare, recovering from major sins, controlling one's anger, bearing the cross with patience, and consolations in the face of death. Finally, in chapter 51, Perkins returns to the doctrine of predestination in order to critique the teachings of the Church of Rome. He proceeds to speak of the decree of reprobation, taking care to emphasize that "all the fault and desert of condemnation" remains in those who are rejected.<sup>32</sup> He then takes on an alternative predestinarian scheme devised by certain "German divines" who taught a universal election of all persons (in the sense of universal atonement), that the fall of humanity occurred outside the sphere of God's active permission, that reprobation is based on foreseen unbelief, and that God's call to salvation is universal in the sense that by it God intends to save every individual.<sup>33</sup>

Perkins concludes his Golden Chain of salvation with a note of assurance. The doctrine of God's free, gracious, and sovereign election is a balm for troubled consciences, and a comfort for those who doubt. The elect not only can be, but are



in fact assured of their salvation. The effects of sanctification, including a feeling of spiritual need and poverty, a repentant striving against sin, and an earnest desire for God, grace, and the merit of Christ, are evidences that one is elect. Yet such assurance is not based on human works or effort, for “the holy Ghost draweth not reasons from the works, or worthiness of man, but from God’s favour and love.”<sup>34</sup>

That requisite feeling of spiritual poverty and need explains the “fire and brimstone” aspect of Perkins’ preaching reported by Thomas Fuller. He recounts that Perkins used to pronounce the word “damn” so ominously that his listeners would be left with a “doleful echo” for a long while afterward. And while he was a catechist at Christ College expounding the Ten Commandments, he brought the conviction of sin so close to his students’ hearts that their hair nearly stood on end, and they nearly fainted from their sense of unworthiness. Fuller recounts that as Perkins grew older, he softened his tone from the pulpit because he came to believe that the proclamation of God’s mercy was the proper office of the minister of the Word.<sup>35</sup> But in fact, Perkins considered this despairing of one’s own merit and ability to be a necessary step in the process of conversion.

Perkins focused more exclusively on the doctrine of predestination in a Latin work of 1598, translated as *A Christian and Plaine Treatise of the Manner and Order of Predestination, and of the largeness of Gods Grace*.<sup>36</sup> This treatise was destined to have international impact, if only because James Arminius used it as a foil in his rejection the Reformed understanding of predestination and his proposal of a synergistic understanding of salvation. Perkins’ treatise played an important role in the controversy over predestination that led to the great Synod of Dort in 1618–19, which determined that the views of Arminius and his followers fell outside the boundaries of the Reformed faith. The *Canons* of the Synod of Dort, while demonstrating a preference for the infralapsarian ordering of the divine decrees, represent the vindication of the Reformed and Augustinian understanding of predestination as developed by Perkins and his fellows on the continent.

While there may be endless debate on what kind of “Puritan” or “Pietist” Perkins was, there is no doubt that he was a scholastic. He applied a rigorous academic method of interpreting Scripture and analyzing doctrine that included the use of precise definitions, careful distinctions, and the answering of objections. But like most scholastic theologians of the post-reformation period, the goal of theology was always practical. The scholastic theologian sought to prepare and equip preachers and teachers to provide practical spiritual guidance to their parishioners and students. Even Perkins’ preaching bore the stamp of the scholastic method; and this was an aspect of his preaching that a later generation remembered and appreciated. Fuller says “our Perkins brought the schools into the pulpit.” Far from delivering classroom lectures under the cover of sermons, however, Perkins had the ability to translate the complexities of academic theology into clear and practical teaching for the people in the pews. Fuller relates that Perkins transformed the “hard school-terms” into “plain and wholesome meat for his people.”<sup>37</sup>

Since Perkins saw the conversion and spiritual renovation of the people in the pews as the primary means of reform in the church, he was particularly concerned with the training of preachers who could be effective in fostering piety in their



congregations. To this end he wrote his celebrated manual on the proper method of preaching, *The Arte of Propeying*.<sup>38</sup> Drawing on a number of continental sources, Perkins pioneered the “plain style” of preaching that generations of Reformed preachers would follow both in England and New England.<sup>39</sup>

Just as *A Golden Chaine* is much more than a treatise on predestination, so the *Arte of Propeying* is much more than a preaching manual. It is an introduction to the study of theology and Scripture (in that order), a guide to the use of logical and rhetorical analysis of the Bible, and a commendation of the studies of the early church fathers. The patristic element is important for identifying and refuting the ancient heresies that continue to be revived throughout history, as occurs among the “schismatics that separate themselves from Evangelical churches” – a shot directed against separatists in England. In order to keep track of the gems discovered in the mines of Scripture, the fathers, and “orthodoxall writings,” Perkins advises the use of commonplace books: notebooks in which one would accumulate quotations, illustrations, and arguments under topical headings, or *loci communes*. Perkins recommends that these places (topics) be indexed, committed to memory, and collated with each other!<sup>40</sup>

In the midst of this discussion of commonplaces, Perkins argues that the traditional fourfold interpretation of Scripture (the literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical senses) really boil down to the literal sense. While Perkins says that this fourfold scheme must be “exploded and rejected,” he in fact preserves these senses by condensing them into the literal sense, and allowing for their use as means of making practical application of a text.<sup>41</sup> Even allegory is an appropriate tool, as long as its use is infrequent and sober, without far-fetched analogies, and as long as they are “quickly dispatched;” nor may allegories be used to establish any point of doctrine, but only to edify the believer.<sup>42</sup>

Perkins continues at length with guidelines for logical and rhetorical analyses of biblical texts, as well as instructions on how to determine the practical use and application of texts. But while the preacher must use the arts to get at the meaning and application of the biblical text, they must be concealed in the delivery of the sermon, so that the only thing on display is the Spirit of God, and not the eloquence of the preacher. Greek and Latin terms should be absent from the sermon. Thus this plain style of preaching required the use, but not the display, of learning. Perkins cites the dictum: *artis etiam celare artem*.<sup>43</sup>

The preacher himself must also have an inward conviction and “feeling” of the doctrine that he is preaching, if he would kindle such pious affections in others. Perkins frequently speaks of the pastor as a physician or surgeon of the soul; thus the pastor himself must be in good spiritual health, and even hide his own weaknesses from the people. Among other spiritual qualities, the preacher must possess a love for people, and even be worthy of veneration.<sup>44</sup>

The pattern that emerges is an exposition of the meaning of the text, followed by an explication of the doctrines derived from the text, concluded by the all-important practical application or “use” of the passage at hand. The “plainness” consists in the clarity of doctrine and the avoidance of rhetorical ostentation. Perkins says, “It is a by-word among us: *It was a very plain sermon*. And I say again, *the plainer, the*

*better.*"<sup>45</sup> By no means was the sermon to be simplistic or intellectually watered-down. As Fuller reports of Perkins' own preaching, he "did distill and soak so much scholarship into his preaching, yet so insensibly [i.e. imperceptibly] as nothing but familiar expressions did appear. In a word, his church consisting of the university and town, the scholar could hear no learned, the townsmen plainer sermons."<sup>46</sup>

Another work of practical theology, and one of Perkins' most famous writings, is his *Cases of Conscience*. This work, along with *A Discourse of Conscience*, is a major contribution to Protestant moral and pastoral theology.<sup>47</sup> Perkins' moral theology represents a Protestant appropriation of medieval precedents, and particularly the Dominican moral tradition, in distinction from the Franciscan and Jesuit traditions. Like Aquinas, Perkins associates conscience with the practical intellect, rather than with the will or moral affection.<sup>48</sup> In *A Discourse of Conscience*, Perkins discusses what conscience is, namely, the divinely implanted human faculty whereby a person discerns right from wrong, and applies that judgment to one's actions. Perkins' *Cases of Conscience*, which remained unfinished at his death, delves into specific moral quandaries. The purpose of this type of literature was to provide moral guidance and spiritual solace through the application of general principles to specific cases. These works provided pastors with a guide for diagnosing moral and spiritual dilemmas in their parishioners, particularly with regard to matters of assurance, as the title of one of Perkins' devotional works reveals: *A Case of Conscience, the greatest that ever was: How a Man may know whether he be the childe of God, or no.*<sup>49</sup>

Similarly, his *Salve for a Sicke Man* is an important Protestant contribution to the *ars moriendi* tradition. Here Perkins provides remarkably sensitive and practical counsel for both the dying person and the minister who would offer pastoral care at the time of death.<sup>50</sup> Many of Perkins "practical" treatises deal with themes that figure prominently in his "theological" works, such as his treatise *A Graine of Musterd-Seed*, in which Perkins attempts to console those with even the weakest faith.<sup>51</sup> His focus on the believer's union with Christ is reflected in his poignant exposition of how a believer ought to know, love, and imitate Christ.<sup>52</sup>

Perkins' biblical commentaries have occasionally received criticism for their lack of originality, grammatical-historical sophistication, and use of original biblical languages. But Perkins would never consider originality or novelty to be desirable in biblical exegesis. Moreover, his biblical expositions were not written as commentaries, but delivered as sermons, in which Perkins, following his own advice, often "concealed the arts" that lay behind his exposition. His commentaries are long on practical application for the life of the believer, and short on philological detail. He designed his copious exposition of Hebrews 11 to complement his *Exposition of the Symbole*. Perkins explains that his work on the creed deals with the doctrine of faith, while his commentary on Hebrews 11 lays out the practice of faith.<sup>53</sup>

## Trajectories of Influence

It is certainly the case that "history has been unjust to William Perkins."<sup>54</sup> His theology has often been misinterpreted and misrepresented; and his skills as an

academic theologian and as a pioneer of protestant practical theology have often been overlooked.

Perkins' writings were best sellers in his native land; he was the first theologian of any provenance to surpass both Calvin and Beza in terms of published editions in England.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, his works enjoyed considerable readership on the continent as well, making him the first English theologian "to achieve an international reputation on the basis of editions published outside Britain." Far more influential in his own day than Richard Hooker, Perkins' works went through fifty editions in Switzerland, almost sixty in Germany, and over one hundred in Holland, as well as appearing in lesser numbers in France, Hungary, and Bohemia.<sup>56</sup> His writings were translated into Welsh, Irish, Dutch, German, French, and even Spanish and Hungarian.<sup>57</sup>

Perkins' theological writings were very significant in the development of Reformed thinking on matters of predestination and the extent of the atonement, as evidenced at the Synod of Dordt. His reflections on the covenant of grace also represent an important stage in the development of federal theology. But his fame was really established in his more practical works, which were very influential on the Continent and in New England. He was truly a pioneer in the area of English practical theology.

In his own country, Perkins was the "patriarch" of a line of Cambridge men who sought "a visible reformation" of the heart, in the hopes that such internal reformation would have broader transformative effects on the Church of England. This "spiritual brotherhood" included Perkins' successor at Great St Andrews, Paul Baynes, as well as Richard Sibbes and John Preston.<sup>58</sup> Beyond England, Perkins, along with his famous student William Ames, made quite an impact on Dutch piety in particular, contributing to the rise of the Dutch Second Reformation, associated with theologians such as Gisbert Voetius.<sup>59</sup> Perkins' fame, which extended well into the seventeenth century, arose from his capacity to blend academically rigorous scholastic theology with down-to-earth counsel for putting the Christian faith into practice: a successful blend of scholasticism and piety.

## Notes

- 1 *A Golden Chaine, in The Whole Works of . . . M. William Perkins*, 3 vols (London: John Legatt, 1631), I: 11. Citations from Perkins' collected works are from this edition, hereafter cited as *Works*. Spelling has been modernized, except for titles of Perkins' writings.
- 2 Heinrich Heppe, *Geschichte des Pietismus und der Mystik in der reformierten Kirche, namentlich der Niederlande* (Leiden: Brill, 1879), 24.
- 3 For biographical details of his life, the *Dictionary of National Biography* entry on Perkins is still valuable; because it is the only

general introduction to Perkins' thought published in the last century: J.J. van Baarsel, *William Perkins: Eene bijdrage tot de kennis der religieuse ontwikkeling in Engeland, ten tijde van Koningin Elisabeth* (The Hague: H.P. de Swart, [1912]). Ian Breward's 129-page introduction to *The Work of William Perkins* (Appleford: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1970), is a virtual monograph and quite useful despite its theological biases and misrepresentations of Perkins' doctrine of predestination. See also his unpublished dissertation: "The Life and Theology of William Perkins, 1558–1602"

- (University of Manchester, 1963), hereafter cited as *LTWP*; and idem., “The Significance of William Perkins,” *Journal of Religious History* 4/2 (1966), 113–28.
- 4 Benjamin Brook relates the story of “drunken Perkins,” in *The Lives of the Puritans*, 3 vols (Pittsburgh: Soli Deo Gloria, [1813] 1994), II: 129–36; but it does not appear in significant earlier sources, such as Thomas Fuller et al., *Abel redevivus* (S.l.: 1652), 431–40; idem., *The Holy State* (4th edn, London: 1663), 80–84; and Samuel Clark, *The Marrow of Ecclesiastical History* (London: 1654), 850–53.
  - 5 Fuller attempts to minimize Perkins’ early interest in astrology; cf. *The Holy State*, ibid., 81.
  - 6 The record of this inquiry is reproduced in van Baarsel, *William Perkins*, 313–16.
  - 7 For a concise and useful overview of Elizabeth’s role in the English church, see the entries by Norman Jones, “Elizabeth I of England” and “Elizabethan Settlement,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), II: 33–8.
  - 8 *A Treatise Tending unto a Declaration . . .*, in *Works* I, 409.
  - 9 *An Exposition Upon the Lord’s Prayer*, in *Works* I, 342.
  - 10 *An Exposition upon Christ’s Sermon in the Mount*, in *Works* III, 15.
  - 11 *An Exposition upon Christ’s Sermon in the Mount*, in *Works* III, 119–20.
  - 12 *An Exposition upon the Whole Epistle of Jude*, in *Works* III, 538.
  - 13 *Cases of Conscience*, III.ii.1, in *Works* II, 116.
  - 14 On Perkins’ use of Ramus, see Donald K. McKim, “The Function of Ramism in William Perkins’ Theology,” *SCJ* 16/4 (1985), 503–17; idem., *Ramism in William Perkins’ Theology* (New York: P. Lang, 1987). On Ramus, see James Veazie Skalnik, *Ramus and Reform. University and Church at the End of the Renaissance* (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2002).
  - 15 On Arminius’ theological method, see Richard A. Muller, *God, Creation, and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991).
  - 16 Certainly Beza’s table of the divine decrees in his *Tabula prædestinationis*, in addition to the schematizing tendency of Ramist method, provides some of the inspiration for Perkins’ *Golden Chaine*. The Beza excerpt is found in *Works* I, 114–16. Beza’s chart, along with his explanatory remarks, are found in his *Tractationes theologicae* (Geneva: J. Crispin, 1570), I, 170–91.
  - 17 *A Reformed Catholicke . . .*, in *Works* I, 555–624.
  - 18 *The Problem of the Forged Catholicism . . .*, in *Works* II, 485–602.
  - 19 See his commentary on Hebrews 11, *A Cloude of Faithfull Witnesses: Leading to the Heavenly Canaan*, in *Works* III, 1 (some of the works in this third volume have their own independent pagination). See also Richard A. Muller, “Perkins’ *A Golden Chaine*: Predestinarian System or Schematized *Ordo Salutis*?” *SCJ* 9/1 (1978), 69–81; idem., *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1986), 132; and idem., “William Perkins and the Protestant Exegetical Tradition: Interpretation, Style, and Method,” in the modern facsimile edition, John H. Augustine (ed.), *A Commentary on Hebrews 11 (1609 Edition)*, The Pilgrim Classic Commentaries (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1991), 79.
  - 20 *An Exposition of the Symbole . . .*, in *Works* I, 121–8; Perkins begins with the doctrine of God in *A Golden Chaine*, *Works* I, 11–16.
  - 21 *An Exposition of the Symbole . . .*, in *Works* I, 277.
  - 22 *An Exposition of the Symbole . . .*, in *Works* I, 304.
  - 23 *An Exposition of the Symbole . . .*, in *Works* I, 305–6.
  - 24 *An Exposition of the Symbole . . .*, in *Works* I, 306 (misnumbered as 206).
  - 25 As Mark R. Shaw argues in “Drama in the Meeting House: The Concept of Conversion in the Theology of William Perkins,” *WTJ* 45 (1983), 41–72, see esp. p. 50.
  - 26 As Lynne Courter Boughton does: “Supralapsarianism and the Role of Metaphysics in Sixteenth-Century Reformed Theology,” *WTJ* 48/1 (1986), 63–96.
  - 27 See Mark R. Shaw, “William Perkins and the New Pelagians: Another Look at the Cambridge Predestination Controversy of the 1590’s,” *WTJ* 58/2 (1996), 267–301.
  - 28 See Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, 132; idem., “Perkins’ *A Golden Chaine*,” *passim*.
  - 29 *A Golden Chaine*, in *Works* I, 11.

- 30 *A Golden Chaine*, in *Works I*, 80. See Mark R. Shaw, "Drama in the Meeting House: The Concept of Conversion in the Theology of William Perkins," *WTJ* 45/1 (1983), 41–72.
- 31 *A Golden Chaine*, in *Works I*, 80; cf. *A Graine of Musterd-Seedē . . .*, in *Works I*, 635–44.
- 32 *A Golden Chaine*, in *Works I*, 105.
- 33 *A Golden Chaine*, in *Works I*, 107–11.
- 34 *A Golden Chaine*, in *Works I*, 113.
- 35 Fuller, *The Holy State*, 82.
- 36 *De praedestinationis modo et ordine: et de amplitudine gratiae diuinae Christiana & perspicua disceptatio* (Cambridge: John Legatt, 1598); translation in *Works II*, 603–41.
- 37 Fuller, *The Holy State*, 81–2.
- 38 *Prophetica sive de sacra et unica ratione Concionandi tractatus* (Cambridge: John Legatt, 1592); translated in *Works II*, 646–73.
- 39 Perkins lists his sources at end of the treatise: Augustine, N. Hemmingsen, A. Hyperius, Erasmus, M. Flacius, J. Wigandus, J. Matthias, T. Beza, and F. Junius.
- 40 *The Arte of Prophecyng*, IV, in *Works II*, 651–4.
- 41 *The Arte of Prophecyng*, IV, in *Works II*, 651.
- 42 *The Arte of Prophecyng*, VI, in *Works II*, 663–4.
- 43 *The Arte of Prophecyng*, X, in *Works II*, 670–71.
- 44 *The Arte of Prophecyng*, X, in *Works II*, 671–2.
- 45 *Commentary on Galatians*, in *Works II*, 222.
- 46 Fuller, *Abel Redeivus*, 434.
- 47 *The Whole Treatise of Cases of Conscience*, in *Works II*, 1–152; *A Discourse of Conscience*, in *Works I*, 515–54.
- 48 See Thomas F. Merrill's introduction to his edition of Perkins' casuistic works *William Perkins 1558–1602* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1966), xiii; cf. Ian Breward, "William Perkins and the Origins of Reformed Casuistry," *Evangelical Quarterly* 40/1 (1968), 3–20.
- 49 In *Works I*, 421–38.
- 50 *A Salve for a Sicke Man . . .*, in *Works I*, 487–513.
- 51 *A Graine of Musterd-Seedē . . .*, in *Works I*, 637–44.
- 52 *A Declaration of the True Manner of Knowing Christ Crucified*, in *Works I*, 625–34.
- 53 *A Cloude of Faithfull Witnesses*, in *Works III*, 1 (paginated separately, appears after Perkins' exposition of the Sermon on the Mount). On the significance of Perkins' exegesis, see Muller, "Perkins and the Protestant Exegetical Tradition," *passim*.
- 54 Thomas F. Merrill, *William Perkins*, ix.
- 55 Muller, "Perkins and the Protestant Exegetical Tradition," 72.
- 56 Breward, *The Significance of William Perkins*, 113.
- 57 See Breward, *LTWP*, appendices 1–2.
- 58 See Paul R. Schaefer, "The Spiritual Brotherhood on the Habits of the Heart: Cambridge Protestants and the Doctrine of Sanctification from William Perkins to Thomas Shepard," PhD dissertation, Keble College, University of Oxford, 1994.
- 59 van Baarsel includes an appendix listing citations of Perkins in Voetius' writings, as well as the volumes of Perkins' works in Voetius' library: *William Perkins*, 317–21.

## Bibliography

### Primary sources

*The Whole Works of . . . M. William Perkins*, 3 vols (London: John Legatt, 1631).

*William Perkins 1558–1602. English Puritanist. His Pioneer Works on Casuistry: "A Discourse on Conscience" and "The Whole Treatise of Cases of Conscience"*, ed. Thomas F. Merrill (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1966).

*The Work of William Perkins*, introduced and edited by Ian Breward (Courtenay Library Reformation

Classics, 3) (Appleford: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1970). Note: Because of arbitrary deletions of substantial portions of the works included, this edition should not be used for serious study of Perkins' thought.

*A Commentary on Galatians*, ed. Gerald T. Sheppard (Pilgrim Classic Commentaries) (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989).

*A Commentary on Hebrews 11 (1609 Edition)*, ed. John H. Augustine (Pilgrim Classic Commentaries) (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1991).

Secondary sources

- Breward, Ian, "The Life and Theology of William Perkins, 1558–1602," PhD dissertation, University of Manchester, 1963.
- Breward, Ian, "The Significance of William Perkins," *Journal of Religious History* 4/2 (1966), 113–128.
- Breward, Ian, "William Perkins and the Origins of Reformed Casuistry," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 40/1 (1968), 3–20.
- Collinson, Patrick, *The Religion of Protestants* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982).
- Heppe, Heinrich, *Geschichte des Pietismus und der Mystik in der reformierten Kirche, namentlich der Niederlande* (Leiden: Brill, 1879).
- Keddie, Gordon J., "'Unfallible Certenty of the Pardon of Sinne and Life Everlasting' The Doctrine of Assurance in the Theology of William Perkins (1558–1602)," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 48/4 (1976), 230–244.
- Keenan, James F., "William Perkins (1558–1602) and the Birth of British Casuistry," in James F. Keenan and Thomas A. Shannon (eds), *The Context of Casuistry* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1995), 105–130.
- McGiffert, Michael, "The Perkinsian Moment of Federal Theology," *Calvin Theological Journal* 29/1 (1994), 117–148.
- McKim, Donald K., "The Function of Ramism in William Perkins' Theology," *SCJ* 16/4 (1985), 503–517.
- McKim, Donald K., "William Perkins and the Christian Life: The Place of the Moral Law and Sanctification in Perkins' Theology," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 59/2 (1987), 125–137.
- McKim, Donald K., *Ramism in William Perkins' Theology* (New York: P. Lang, 1987).
- Muller, Richard A., "Perkins' *A Golden Chaine*: Predestinarian System or Schematized *Ordo Salutis*?" *SCJ* 9/1 (1978), 69–81.
- Muller, Richard A., *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1986).
- Muller, Richard A., "William Perkins and the Protestant Exegetical Tradition: Interpretation, Style, and Method," in John H. Augustine (ed.), *William Perkins, A Commentary on Hebrews 11 (1609 Edition)* (The Pilgrim Classic Commentaries) (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1991), 71–94.
- Muller, Richard A., "Protestant 'Scholasticism' at Elizabethan Cambridge: William Perkins and a Reformed Theology of the Heart," in Carl R. Trueman and R. Scott Clark (eds), *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), 147–164.
- Seats, David, "'Precious in the Sight of the Lord . . .': The Theme of Death in Puritan Pastoral Theology," *Churchman* 95/4 (1981), 326–339.
- Schaefer, Paul R., "The Spiritual Brotherhood on the Habits of the Heart: Cambridge Protestants and the Doctrine of Sanctification from William Perkins to Thomas Shepard," PhD dissertation, Keble College, University of Oxford, 1994.
- Shaw, Mark R., "Drama in the Meeting House: The Concept of Conversion in the Theology of William Perkins," *WTJ* 45/1 (1983), 41–72.
- Shaw, Mark R., "William Perkins and the New Pelagians: Another Look at the Cambridge Predestination Controversy of the 1590's," *WTJ* 58/2 (1996), 267–301.
- Spinks, Bryan D., *Two Faces of Elizabethan Anglican Theology: Sacraments and Salvation in the Thought of William Perkins and Richard Hooker* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1999).
- van Baarsel, Jan Jacobus, *William Perkins: Eene bijdrage tot de kennis der religieuse ontwikkeling in Engeland, ten tijde van Koningin Elisabeth* (The Hague: H.P. de Swart, [1912]).