

DESIRE AND DUTY: THE SPIRITUALITY OF WILLIAM PERKINS

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The heart of spirituality, according to William Perkins, is the desire and duty of living for God's glory, and the delight which follows. Against those who caricature this Puritan as cold and calculating, this article details the warmth of this pastor's teaching.

William Perkins (1558–1602) is one of those people whose influence continues to be felt centuries after their death, but whose name is generally not remembered. Yet he has been hailed as “the most significant English theologian of the Elizabethan period,”¹ “the father of Puritanism,”² and even “the father of Pietism.”³ He was influential as a theologian, as a defender of the Established Church, and as a pastor. His writings were widely circulated in England, and on the continent, fifty editions of his works were published in Switzerland, nearly sixty in Germany, and over a hundred in the Netherlands. His works were also printed in France, Bohemia and Hungary.⁴ Such was his renown, that in 1611, the East India Company decreed that English agents working abroad were to receive copies of Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations of the English Nation*, John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, and William Perkins's *Works*.⁵

W. B. Patterson writes that Perkins “transmitted a vision of the Christian life that was long at the heart of English Protestantism.”⁶ I will argue that this “vision of the Christian life” can just as well be labelled a “Puritan Spirituality,” and, further, that there is much that we can learn from it today. However, is it sensible to talk of a “Puritan Spirituality,” when the former term is sometimes disputed in Perkins's case, and the

¹ Raymond A. Blacketer, “William Perkins,” in *The Pietist Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Carter Lindberg (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 41.

² Joel Beeke and J. Stephen Yuille, “William Perkins, the ‘Father of Puritanism,’” in *The Works of William Perkins, Volume 1*, ed. J. Stephen Yuille, (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), ix–x.

³ Blacketer, *William Perkins*, 38.

⁴ Ian Beward, “The Significance of William Perkins,” *JRH* 4.2 (1966): 113.

⁵ Joel Beeke & J. Stephen Yuille, *William Perkins* (Grand Rapids: EP Books, 2015), 109–110.

⁶ W. B. Patterson, *William Perkins and the Making of a Protestant England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 5.

latter he would not have recognised? What do we mean by “Puritan” and what do we mean by “Spirituality,” and how can we apply these terms to Perkins? We will begin by briefly considering these questions.

Perkins the Puritan

“Puritanism” is a notoriously difficult term to define, especially since its meaning has developed over time.⁷ Francis Bremer describes it as a movement originating within the Church of England which aimed for a more thoroughly reformed church than that which existed after the Elizabethan settlement.⁸ However, if Puritans were simply those who wanted all Romish hangovers in the Church of England’s liturgy, polity and discipline to be gone, and who might consider separation if these reforms were not made, then Perkins was not a Puritan. For instance: “We have the true doctrine of Christ preached among us by God’s blessing, and though there be corruptions in manners among us ... yet so long as we hold Christ, no man ought to sever himself from our church.”⁹

Would it then be right to conclude, as Patterson does, that Perkins was “not so much an Elizabethan Puritan as he was an apologist, perhaps the chief apologist, for the Church of England as it emerged in the late Elizabethan period”?¹⁰ I do not think so. The term “Puritan” was not simply about a group of clergy who did not want to wear surplices and sought further changes to the Prayer Book, not even in Perkins’s time. It is evident from his sermons that the term was often used simply for those who were serious about living a holy life, and, further, that Perkins *would* identify with such people. For instance, commenting on 2 Timothy 3:5, Perkins says:

the pure heart is so little regarded, that the seeking after it, is turned to a byword, and a matter of reproach. Who are so much branded with vile terms of Puritans and Precisians, as those that most endeavour to get and keep the purity of heart in a good conscience?¹¹

⁷ See discussion in John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, ed. John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1–16.

⁸ Francis J. Bremer, *Puritanism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7–8.

⁹ William Perkins, “A Godly and Learned Exposition of Christ’s Sermon on the Mount,” in *The Works of William Perkins, Volume 1*, 734.

¹⁰ Patterson, *William Perkins and the Making of a Protestant England*, 40.

¹¹ Perkins, “Christ’s Sermon on the Mount,” 205.

And on Matthew 7:1, Perkins writes that those called Puritans and Precisians are labelled such “for this cause only, that they make conscience of walking in obedience to God’s law.”¹² Though the term “Puritan” was in Perkins’s time intended as an insult, he clearly commends and identifies with those for whom it was used.

If, then, we understand Puritanism as a movement that aimed for reformation in a much deeper sense, that whole congregations would be blessed, in J. I. Packer’s words, with “enrichment of understanding of God’s truth, arousal of affections God-ward, increase of ardour in one’s devotions, and more love, joy, and firmness of Christian purpose in one’s calling and personal life,”¹³ then Perkins is rightly labelled a Puritan. What, then, of the term “spirituality”?

Perkins and Spirituality

“Spirituality” is a slippery term; define what you mean by it, and a number of people will disagree with you. There is probably not even a way to talk about *Christian Spirituality* which would obtain broad consensus. For instance, take the following working definition from Alister McGrath:

Christian spirituality concerns the quest for a fulfilled and authentic Christian existence, involving the bringing together of the fundamental ideas of Christianity and the whole experience of living on the basis of and within the scope of the Christian faith.¹⁴

This is a good start, but it hides a significant difference of approach; that is, in bringing together “fundamental ideas of Christianity” and “the whole experience of Christian living,” which is primary, the ideas or the experience? Is it about theology working itself out in living, or living which informs theology? One’s answer to this would lead to very different kinds of spirituality. Perhaps the first clause, “Christian spirituality concerns the quest for a fulfilled and authentic Christian existence,” might gain broad consensus, but then how do we go about this quest?

Don Carson questions whether all possible approaches to spirituality are really valid. We either worship God, or we worship an idol, so, “not

¹² Perkins, “Christ’s Sermon on the Mount,” 589.

¹³ J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 27.

¹⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 2.

every experience of the numinous... can be properly considered a 'spiritual' experience... *not all spirituality is spiritual.*"¹⁵ The key criterion is that it be biblical. Joel Beeke writes, "The problem with most spirituality today is that it is not closely moored in Scripture and too often degenerates into unbiblical mysticism."¹⁶ Perhaps Calvin's notion of "piety" as "that union of reverence and love of God which the knowledge of his benefits inspires" is a helpful step forward.¹⁷ Here we have something of McGrath's fulfilled and authentic Christian existence (reverence and love of God), but acknowledging Carson's concern to be biblical (*knowledge* of God's benefits). The final ingredient towards a definition of spirituality is that this piety is expressed practically, and works itself out across the whole of the Christian life. Spirituality is not by any means a private matter. Calvin's notion of piety, with an emphasis on its practical implications for the whole of life, then, is what I will mean by spirituality. We are back to Patterson's phrase, Perkins's "vision of the Christian life."¹⁸

Where should we look to find out what Perkins would say about spirituality? His works include commentaries based on his sermons, works on doctrine, works for catechetical use, and practical writings. I suggest the best place to start is his sermons. There we will learn what he is most concerned about for his people, what he wants his hearers to understand the Christian life to be, and the practices he would see them do. Within his preaching, I will focus on the commentary taken from his sermons on the Sermon on the Mount, though I will draw from Perkins's other works. Perkins wrote that these chapters of Scripture, "may not unfitly be called the *key of the whole Bible*, for here Christ opens the sum of the Old and New Testaments," and that the scope of this sermon is "to teach His disciples, with all that believe in Him, to lead a godly, a holy, and blessed life."¹⁹ And Perkins had a lot to say about this sermon: the newly published version of this commentary numbers some 560 pages. It seems like the obvious work, then, from which to distil what Perkins would say on spirituality.

Finally, before I describe the spirituality we uncover in Perkins's sermons: to whom was Perkins preaching? He preached for many years at

¹⁵ D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), 563.

¹⁶ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2006), vii.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 7.

¹⁸ Patterson, *William Perkins and the Making of a Protestant England*, 5.

¹⁹ Perkins, "Christ's Sermon on the Mount," 173.

St. Andrew the Great in Cambridge, and attracted people from both the town and the university.²⁰ A passage on Matthew 7:21–24 is particularly helpful here, because Perkins describes the make-up of his audience, as he understood it. There are those who profess to be Christians and who do the Father's will, but there are many who profess the name of Christ, "yet they shall never be saved." Of this category, there are several kinds. There were the "gross hypocrites": (1) the common atheist, "who only for fear of the magistrate's laws profess religion" (that is those who were there to avoid the fine for non-attendance); (2) "the Epicure," who "bears Christ's name for fashion's sake, and yet his belly and pleasure is his god," and; (3) "the worldling," who "spends the strength of body and mind and all he has on the world for earthly things." And there were the close hypocrites, "which profess the name of Christ in some truth, and have in them some good gifts of God ... yet for all this they are indeed but hypocrites which shall never be saved."²¹

This little passage, then, helps us to grasp how Perkins perceived his congregation as he rose to preach. It also gives us a clue as to a central concern of his spirituality. People "must not content themselves to profess religion outwardly, but therewith they must join true godliness and sincere obedience."²² The idea of a *faith that works* is key to his spirituality. The regeneration of the heart must be accompanied by a reformation of life. The newly found desire must express itself through duty.

Perkins's Spirituality: Desire and Duty

Perkins has sometimes been misunderstood as a cold sort of Puritan, who talks more about the fear of a transcendent God than he does about a love for God with whom we relate intimately. For instance, Belden C. Lane classes Perkins as one who fixated on a single strand of Calvin's theology, namely the eternal decrees of God in election, such that God's glory was perceived as "a matter of breath-taking *power* evoking a holy fear."²³ Little of the warm, affective side of Puritanism, such as a Sibbes, it might be said. However, this is unfair, and may only be informed by a reading of Perkins's theological works, such as *Golden Chain*, and *Manner and Order of Predestination* (the work to which Arminius wrote in response),

²⁰ Beeke & Yuille, *William Perkins*, 74.

²¹ Perkins, "Christ's Sermon on the Mount," 693–4.

²² Perkins, "Christ's Sermon on the Mount," 693.

²³ Belden C. Lane, *Ravished by Beauty: The Surprising Legacy of Reformed Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 26.

although it must be said, these are not cold either! Further, we need to remember that when Perkins writes to the academy he does so on the theological issues that were hotly debated in his day. Turn to his sermons, however, and predestination is barely mentioned: five page numbers are given in the indexes of the first two volumes recently published of Perkins's sermons. These matters were not of central concern for Perkins's preaching, so are not the basis from which to consider his spirituality.

Such caricatures—Puritans who focus on fear versus Puritans who focus on desire—do however force us to consider how a preaching that so strongly emphasises works, such as Perkins's, does not necessarily involve a view of God based predominantly on fear. Reading through Perkins's sermons, the answer, I think, is that wherever we see *duty* emphasised, *desire* is close by. In fact, the two are carefully held together. Rarely does Perkins talk about Christian duty without also talking about the desire that God be glorified. Perkins wants his hearers to orient their lives around *the desire for the glory of God, and the duties thereof*. I therefore side with Ian Breward rather than Lane: Perkins had a "tone of rationalism together with a growing interest in feeling and experience. In his writings the two strands remained united."²⁴

The passages on Matthew 6:1–18 illustrate this well. Here, Jesus talks about almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, with an emphasis on not practising our deeds of righteousness before others. Perkins makes it clear that God's glory should be the chief end of everything. Commenting on "hallowed be thy name," Perkins says: "God's glory is the absolute end of all things.... And therefore it must be preferred before all things, before life itself, yea before salvation which is life eternal." How are we to hallow his name? "We give our hearts to God, loving Him, fearing Him, trusting and delighting in Him above all, which we testify by all outward adoration prescribed in God's Word."²⁵ This is not cold! But notice that desire for God's glory is expressed through duty, the "outward adoration prescribed in God's Word." Again, commenting on the doxology to the Lord's prayer: "Hereby we must be moved to love God and to yield obedience unto Him in all good duties."²⁶ The desire for God's glory and the duties that follow are hand in hand. It would be all too easy to fill

²⁴ Breward, *The Significance of William Perkins*, 127.

²⁵ Perkins, "Christ's Sermon on the Mount," 436.

²⁶ Perkins, "Christ's Sermon on the Mount," 497.

up this essay with examples to make this same point: it prevails through Perkins's preaching.²⁷

The duties are twofold. First, the "outward adoration prescribed in God's Word," as above, by which I presume Perkins means various private and public acts of worship. And second, emphasised perhaps even more through Perkins's sermons, the love of our neighbour, practically expressed. For Perkins, this is not a point which is a few links down the chain from desiring God's glory, but is directly related. On Matthew 6:1–4, he says: "The right end of all is the glory of God in man's good, or the good of man in God's glory."²⁸ Or on Matthew 7:12, the golden rule, he states: "our love to God must be shown in the practice of the duties of love, justice and mercy towards men."²⁹

Any caricature of Perkins, then, which has him responding to God out of nothing but an awe-struck fear is simply wrong. Indeed, Perkins himself says that if our good deeds proceed from such a position of fear, then "commonly such repentance is unsound, and proceeds not from a single heart, but from fear, whereby, being under God's hand, they seek to avoid His judgement." Instead, all is to be done from a heart with one all-encompassing desire, "to honour and please God."³⁰

Might it be said that this desire for God to be glorified is all very good, but it is not quite as warm and intimate as a simple desire for God Himself? No, that would not be fair either. Perkins is not afraid to use language of intimacy. For instance, on Matthew 7:24, which speaks of building on Christ our rock, Perkins gives us this delightful passage:

We must set all the main affections of our heart on Christ, for hereby we must show forth our faith. We must so esteem and love Christ, as that in regard of Him "we count all things loss, and dung" with the apostle; yea, we must so delight in Christ that we desire Him wholly, and receive nothing into our hearts but Christ alone. Thomas desired but "to put his finger into his side," but we must go further, and desire to have our souls washed in the blood that issued thence, and to have our hearts possessed by His Spirit, whom He gives to His church.³¹

²⁷ Some more examples: Perkins, "Christ's Sermon on the Mount," 338 (on Matthew 5:34), 382–3 (on Matthew 5:45), 548 (on Matthew 6:24), 573–4 (on Matthew 6:32–33).

²⁸ Perkins, "Christ's Sermon on the Mount," 396.

²⁹ Perkins, "Christ's Sermon on the Mount," 654.

³⁰ Perkins, "Christ's Sermon on the Mount," 402.

³¹ Perkins, "Christ's Sermon on the Mount," 719.

It is not that Perkins does not desire God, it is that he does not want even this desire to be *selfish*. That is why God's glory comes first, to be preferred "before all things, before life itself, yea before salvation which is life eternal."³² Note, further, that here, as in previous quotations, we also have the word *delight*. This, in Perkins's spirituality, is the result of holding desire and duty together. How, though, are we to go about making this a reality in our lives? Perkins is not shy of giving lists of exercises for a life of desire and duty. We will turn to one example now, from Matthew 7:20, "store up for yourselves treasures in heaven."

Puritan Spiritual Exercises: Treasuring Christ Crucified

The treasure in Matthew 7:20, says Perkins, is "the true God.... In Him alone is all goodness and happiness to be found ... for this end we must conceive of God as He has revealed Himself unto us in Christ, for out of Christ He is not our God," and specifically, we must consider *Christ crucified* as our treasure, because only through His atoning death for us is he "the fountain and storehouse of all true blessings conveyed from God to man."³³ (Note, this language of Christ as a fountain of blessing is redolent of that well used by Calvin, and may well demonstrate an influence on how Perkins expresses this point.)³⁴ If we are ever to have true comfort we must treasure Christ crucified, because only through His death are we able to know God.

But in order that we might treasure Christ crucified, Perkins gives us five *duties*, drawing now from the parable of the hidden treasure in Matthew 13. We might even refer to these as "spiritual exercises." Similar exercises appear often in Perkins's sermons as "The Use" for a particular part of Scripture. They vary in form according to the Scripture being expounded, but cover common ideas again and again. The exercises here are a good representation of what a hearer of Perkins would have thought he wanted him or her to do, so we will spend some time here dwelling in what Perkins would teach us.

First, a person must *find the treasure*, they must come to realise that *Christ crucified* is treasure indeed. This can only be done through God's revealing it, through His Word applied in a person's conscience (of which more in a moment). When it is revealed, a person will realise his or her

³² Perkins, "Christ's Sermon on the Mount," 436.

³³ Perkins, "Christ's Sermon on the Mount," 529.

³⁴ Lee Gatiss, "The Inexhaustible Fountain of All Good Things: Union with Christ in Calvin on Ephesians," *Them* 34.2 (2009): 194–206.

miserable state without Christ and the desperate need for Him. Although this is something that God does in a person, Perkins still urges his hearers to *labour* for this knowledge, to delve into themselves and see if they do not perceive their need for Christ. This is no contradiction for Perkins. God's sovereignty works through our own labouring. As he says in the section just before, "It is usual with God in Scripture to ascribe the work of the principal efficient cause to the instrument thereof."³⁵

Second, we must *highly prize this treasure*. Again, there is an emphasis on *labouring* for this. "We must so endeavour ourselves hereunto, and labour so to frame our whole conversation in speeches and in action that they may testify at how high a rate we value Christ." In particular, this involves treasuring the Scriptures, for "they alone discover unto us this heavenly treasure."³⁶ This spirituality is assuredly biblical.

The third duty is to *seek out the treasure, and make it our own*. To do this, we must "conscionably use such means as God has appointed for this purpose."³⁷ These means, which Perkins frequently highlights are:

(1) *To hear the Bible preached*: we are to "hear the Word of God preached ... labouring [note the word again] to mix it with faith in our hearts."³⁸ Perkins wrote one of the classic manuals for preachers, now published as *The Art of Prophesying*. Perkins believed that as the preacher worked to expound and apply the Scriptures, the elect discerned the voice of Christ, received His Word, and were sealed with the Holy Spirit.³⁹ "The heart of the matter is this: Preach one Christ, by Christ, to the praise of Christ."⁴⁰

(2) *To receive the Sacraments*: Perkins saw the Sacraments, along with the Word, as one of the ways in which God reached out to people. Believers were to respond by receiving them with faith. Sacraments, he wrote, are "as it were a visible Gospel, in which Christ with all his benefits is offered and applied to the particular persons of men."⁴¹ So, the Lord's Supper shows Christ offering himself to individuals,

³⁵ Perkins, "Christ's Sermon on the Mount," 528.

³⁶ Perkins, "Christ's Sermon on the Mount," 531.

³⁷ Perkins, "Christ's Sermon on the Mount," 531.

³⁸ Perkins, "Christ's Sermon on the Mount," 531.

³⁹ William Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2011), 18.

⁴⁰ Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, 75.

⁴¹ William Perkins, *A Discourse on Conscience: Wherein is set down the nature, properties, and differences thereof: as also the way to Get and keep a good Conscience* (Cambridge: John Legat, 1600), Early English Books Online, 842.

and individuals can respond by receiving him, and feeding on him, “that the feeling of his true union and communion with Christ may daily be increased.”⁴² And for Perkins, baptism, though administered only once, continued to have a use in battling sin. In the moment of temptation, Perkins counselled meditation upon the promises made in baptism. It is, he said, “the Sacrament of repentance ... a board to swim upon, when a man shall fear the shipwreck of his soul.”⁴³

(3) *To pray*: We are to pray “in faith earnestly and constantly for the pardon of our sins, and fruition of this treasure.”⁴⁴ His emphasis is that what we pray for, we are to strive after. Duty again goes alongside desire. Yet, as before, this is not at all cold. Reflecting on “Our Father, which art in heaven,” Perkins says that as children desire to be on their mother’s lap or in their father’s arms, “we must testify ourselves to be the sons and daughters of God, by our unfeigned desire to be in heaven where our Father is,” a desire we express through prayer, as we “creep into our Father’s bosom.”⁴⁵

The fourth duty is to labour to make the treasure sure unto ourselves. This is to labour for assurance in our conscience that this treasure truly is ours, that we really have received Christ crucified. This assurance chiefly comes through our works. Perkins is very much in line with James, that faith without works is dead (James 2:17): “The most infallible mark of grace is the practice of love of God in works of love and mercy to our brethren.”⁴⁶ Perkins often draws attention to those practices in society which he considers inconsistent with such fruit. This is not simply a reaction to the problem of nominalism in a congregation which would be fined for not being there; if no such law were in place, I still think it would have been the key to assurance in Perkins’s thought. In an ingenious work based on 1 John, in which Perkins renders the epistle as a conversation between John and his readers, he makes this point time and again; but note the title of the work: *A Case of Conscience—The Greatest that ever was: How a man may know, whether he be the child of God or no. Resolved by the word*

⁴² William Perkins, *A Golden Chain: Or, the Description of Theology: containing the order of the causes of Salvation and Damnation, according to God’s word*, Early English Books Online (Cambridge: John Legat, 1600), 112.

⁴³ Perkins, *Golden Chain*, 111.

⁴⁴ Perkins, “Christ’s Sermon on the Mount,” 531–532.

⁴⁵ Perkins, “Christ’s Sermon on the Mount,” 434.

⁴⁶ Perkins, “Christ’s Sermon on the Mount,” 477.

of God.⁴⁷ The importance of works for assurance is paramount, and this is a point I think Perkins would still make today.

The fifth duty is to *use our treasure*, and this we do in three ways. We are to “have our conversation in heaven,” that “our hearts be on Christ in desire, in joy, and delight.” Then, we must “turn our earthly goods into heavenly treasures,” for if we use our goods for works of mercy, we have the Lord as a debtor. Third, we must be prepared to part, if necessary, with anything rather than Christ: “friends, goods, country, liberty, nay our own life, and dearest heart’s blood must all go for this treasure’s sake.”⁴⁸ Perkins often evokes the memory of those who were killed during Queen Mary’s reign (1553–1558), and reminds his hearers, subtly or more directly, that such times could come again.

Other lists of exercises could have been taken from elsewhere. Indeed, a list of nineteen ways to ensure growth of grace is given in *A Grain of Mustard Seed*,⁴⁹ a passage for which Packer claims “classic status in the literature of Western spirituality.”⁵⁰ But these five here are a good representation of what Perkins would have his hearers do. They highlight in particular, that if Perkins had written a “Spiritual Exercises,” *Christ crucified* would be at their heart, and *faith to lay hold of this treasure* would be the goal of the training. We would have a “Spiritual Exercises” consciously compatible with the doctrine of justification by faith, and little need to look for exercises in another tradition in which that doctrine is refuted.

What is the result of putting these exercises into practice? Lest our modern sensibilities associate *duties* with *dreariness*, Perkins writes that if we do these exercises and make Christ our treasure, then “we shall find in our hearts such sweet content therein that neither prosperity shall lift us up too high, nor adversity cast us down too low.”⁵¹ These spiritual exercises cultivate a desire for the glory of God, alongside which will go the duties which follow. The overall result is *delight*.

⁴⁷ William Perkins, *A Case of Conscience: The Greatest that ever was. How a man may know, whether he be the child of God or no. Resolved by the Word of God*. Early English Books Online (Edinburgh: Robert Walde-grave, 1592), 3–27.

⁴⁸ Perkins, “Christ’s Sermon on the Mount,” 532–3.

⁴⁹ William Perkins, *A Grain of Mustard Seed: Or, The least measure of grace that is or can be effectual to salvation*, Early English Books Online (London: John Legate, 1611), 48–67.

⁵⁰ J. I. Packer, “An Anglican to Remember: William Perkins, Puritan Popularizer,” in *Pilgrims, Warriors, and Servants: Puritan Wisdom for Today’s Church*, ed. Lee Gatiss (Oxford: Latimer, 2010), 156.

⁵¹ Perkins, “Christ’s Sermon on the Mount,” 533.

Is this, then, the end point of Perkins's spirituality: desire and duty, leading to delight? No, for that would leave us still in the present age. Perkins's concern is that men and women are safely led to heaven. To understand this more, we need to consider what he has to say about the conscience.

Conscience: Maintaining a Seaworthy Ship to Port

Perkins has not just been called the father of Puritanism, but also "the founder of Puritan Casuistry."⁵² For Perkins, the idea of conscience was of central importance. See where he places it in this description of the Christian life:

Now we all are as passengers; the world is an huge sea through which we must pass: our ship is the conscience of every man.... Therefore it stands us in hand to be always at the helm, and to carry our ship with as even a course as possibly we can, to the intended port of happiness, which is the salvation of our souls.⁵³

To use Perkins's analogy, whether or not one docks safely in the port of happiness depends upon whether the conscience is first seaworthy, and second, heading in the right direction. If we have a good conscience, we will know we are saved, says Perkins, and by maintaining this good conscience we are guided to port. Conscience, to switch metaphors briefly, is the key battleground of spirituality, and if the battle is won there, victory in the war for the whole person follows.

What did Perkins mean by the conscience? Conscience is "of a divine nature, and is a thing placed of God in the midst between him and man, as an arbitrator to give sentence and to pronounce either with man or against man unto God."⁵⁴ It is like "a little God sitting in the middle of men's hearts, arraigning them in this life as they shall be arraigned for their offences at the tribunal seat of the everliving God in the day of judgement."⁵⁵ The conscience is a part of our practical understanding.⁵⁶ When a soul operates as it should, it is the understanding which determines

⁵² George Mosse, "William Perkins: Founder of Puritan Casuistry," *Salmagundi* 29 (1975): 95–110.

⁵³ Perkins, *A Discourse on Conscience*, 906.

⁵⁴ Perkins, *A Discourse on Conscience*, 832.

⁵⁵ Perkins, *A Discourse on Conscience*, 834.

⁵⁶ Perkins, *A Discourse on Conscience*, 831.

what we will to do, and how we will train our affections. A regenerate conscience means a renewed understanding, which in turn leads to a will which follows our maker's, and affections which are godly.

What, then, will make our consciences seaworthy, so that we make it to port? Perkins distinguishes between a good conscience and a bad conscience. It is the getting and maintaining of a good conscience which will see one safe to port, whereas if a conscience remains bad, one will finally be dragged to the depths. We need to be careful to understand Perkins's meaning here. The principal property of a good conscience is not that it helps us to make right moral decisions, rather its principal property is that it does not accuse us before God.⁵⁷ It is what we would mean by a *clean* conscience. If we were to ask of it, "How is it between me and God?" the answer would come back, "It is well." A bad conscience, by contrast, will cause us to hide from God, as it did for Adam and Eve in the garden. Only when our consciences are good, that is *cleansed*, do we confidently turn towards him. Only through the getting and maintenance of a good conscience, therefore, will we ever sail home.

We get a good conscience through treasuring Christ crucified, using such spiritual exercises as given above. The result is a spirituality based on a desire for the glory of God and the duties thereof, "a certain kind of righteousness,... an unfeigned, earnest, and constant purpose with endeavour answerable thereto not to sin in anything, but in all things whatsoever to please God and do his will."⁵⁸ This is not dreary, it is a delight. "A good conscience is a continual feast."⁵⁹

A sceptic, however, might look at Perkins's works on conscience and ask whether there is shown an unhealthy introspection. In typical Perkins style, the possible states of conscience are carefully divided up and delineated, until one is potentially bewildered by several ways of having a bad conscience, versus the few ways one might manifest a good conscience. But I do not think this is unhealthy introspection. What Perkins's interest in the conscience shows is the careful pastoral work of a preacher, whose concern is to properly apply the Word of God to his hearers, so that in bringing comforts and challenges from God's Word, no-one would be overlooked. Read through Perkins's preaching, and one does not find carefully argued cases of conscience, but one does find "The Use" of each point of Scripture, carefully applied to the range of his hearers. Perkins's work on conscience, in short, bears the mark of a pastor who knew his

⁵⁷ Perkins, *A Discourse on Conscience*, 867.

⁵⁸ Perkins, *A Discourse on Conscience*, 885.

⁵⁹ Perkins, *A Discourse on Conscience*, 865.

sheep. This point made, might it still be the case that the spirituality I have thus far described is *individualistic*, or even *isolationist*? Not so! Perkins's spirituality of desire and duty speaks to all spheres of life: individual, family, and society. We briefly turn to this now as we close.

Living Blessedly: Desire, Duty, and Delight in All of Life

"Theology," writes Perkins, "is the science of living blessedly forever."⁶⁰ Perkins's preaching makes clear that this blessed living is very practical, and pervades the whole of our life. One example of this is his repeated emphasis on our *general* and *particular* callings. The idea is simple: "every man should have not only a general calling of a Christian, but a particular calling also, wherein he must employ himself for the common good."⁶¹ Thus, one's work in society, provided it is compatible with being a child of God, and is done for the common good, is part of one's *calling*. Whatever one's work, then, is what one has been called to by God. And this is not a crude means by which to admonish people or to be subservient to the state, rather this links all our working lives to the basic desire at the heart of Perkins's spirituality: "everyone that lives in the church of God ... should have a *particular calling to live in*, wherein he must seek the glory of God in the good of others."⁶² Thus, our work becomes one of the duties that flows from our desire for God's glory. And if it is true blessedness to orient our lives round this desire, then joy can even be found in drudgery. One need not become a member of a religious order to find true blessedness. Rather, the ordinary, indeed the lowliest, person in society is given a sense of Christian esteem.

The idea that God has actually *called* each of us to our roles within society might, to modern sensibilities, seem oddly quaint, but perhaps it is one that we can learn from. The work that we do, whether it qualify for that modern appellation of "career" or not, is part of the way we work for our neighbour's good, and therefore how we glorify God. I wonder today whether we neglect this *societal* focus in our Christian worldviews. Perhaps, instead, we too often focus on the individual, and talk too much about fulfilment: glorify God by finding fulfilment in the exercising of your gifts! This is easily applied for Olympic medallists or concert pianists, but perhaps less useful for those who might, by this approach, be made to feel ordinary. I think Perkins's emphasis on *calling* rightly acknowledges that

⁶⁰ Perkins, *Golden Chain*, 1.

⁶¹ Perkins, "Christ's Sermon on the Mount," 366.

⁶² Perkins, "Christ's Sermon on the Mount," 452–453.

work is hard, whilst also giving it a sense of esteem: it is to glorify God (c.f. 1 Cor 10:31). In today's terms, this is a spirituality which is not just for the ambitious middle class, but for those for whom life is a hard slog.

We must not leave this section having only talked about work, however. It would be a poor defence against the cold caricatures made of Perkins if his view was that life only comprised church and work! Indeed, the modern misunderstanding of figures like Perkins, that they were people who were opposed to the enjoyment of life, was evidently around in Perkins's day also, as witnessed by this comment: "Some would gather that our doctrine permits not a man to laugh, or be merry, or to do anything for his own delight."⁶³ But this is not so: for instance, on Psalm 104:15, Perkins comments:

God hath put into his creatures infinite varieties of colours, savours, tastes, and forms, to this end that men might take delight in them. Hence it follows, that Recreation is lawful, and a part of Christian liberty, if it be well used.⁶⁴

The key is the last phrase, "if it be well used." The joy we take from God's creatures and delight in leisure must simply be compatible with the deep desire that God be glorified. Might Perkins have over-reacted against some of the leisure activities of his society (such as dancing and dicing) because he had excessively indulged in these before his conversion? I do not think so. Indeed, questions might be asked of Christian ministries today, whether we shy away from exhorting believers to review their leisure activities and to ask whether they are compatible with God's glory, whether we are too quick to assume that all leisure must be good leisure, and whether in fact we are denying people the fullness of joy they might otherwise know.

Perkins's spirituality, then, spoke to work and leisure. It also spoke to the family. Here, Perkins is clear that there are serious duties. For instance, commenting on "Thy kingdom come," Perkins says that "masters of families especially must look to this duty, and labour to bring God's kingdom into their families."⁶⁵ They are to do this by: seeing that there be no manifest sins in the family, by instructing one's family in the way of the Lord, and by setting up and maintaining the private worship

⁶³ Perkins, "Christ's Sermon on the Mount," 305.

⁶⁴ Perkins, *Discourse on Conscience*, 869.

⁶⁵ Perkins, "Christ's Sermon on the Mount," 448.

of God in the family.⁶⁶ God is to be glorified in the family, and those that have this desire will see to these duties. Again, the sceptic might label this as rather austere. However, this spirituality of desire and duty leads also here to delight. As Perkins comments in a beautiful phrase, families which live this way “are, as it were, little Churches, yea even a kind of paradise upon earth.”⁶⁷

Conclusion

The reader may have noticed that I have described Perkins’s spirituality and not explicitly talked about battling sin. Nor have I mentioned the assaults of the devil. Nor suffering. These topics Perkins does not ignore; they are mentioned frequently. Under the exercises for treasuring Christ crucified, we could add in various pointers Perkins gives to battle and mortify sin. There is a whole work commenting on the temptations of Christ, *The Combat between Christ and the Devil Displayed*, in which Perkins argues that as the devil assaulted Christ our Head with temptations, so too will he assault us, and we must be ready: “All who endeavour either to get or keep a good conscience, are most of all subject to temptations,”⁶⁸ he says. As for suffering, Perkins was not ignorant of the real struggles of life in his day. Indeed, he goes further than most modern preachers would dare in seeing God at work for our good in the ills that befall us. A fuller work on Perkins’s spirituality would have to unpack these areas in a lot more detail. However—and this might be surprising to those who buy into the modern Puritan caricature—these things are not at the heart of Perkins’s spirituality. They are important, for it is from mortifying sin, battling the devil and enduring suffering that the believer’s desire for God’s glory is proved. Yet the absolute core is getting this desire, cultivating it and living it out. Perkins’s spirituality is not a false spirituality of battling through sin and winning our soul from the outside in (which of course we cannot do, and which might be how Puritanism is sometimes perceived). This is a spirituality of the regenerate, our centre, as it were, has already been claimed by God, the desire for his glory has been planted, and we labour,

⁶⁶ Perkins, “Christ’s Sermon on the Mount,” 448–9.

⁶⁷ William Perkins, *Christian Economy: Or, a Short Survey of the Right Manner of erecting and ordering a Family, according to the Scriptures*, Early English Books Online (London: Felix Kyngston, 1609), 7–8.

⁶⁸ William Perkins, “The Combat between Christ and the Devil Displayed: or a Commentary upon the Temptations of Christ,” in *The Works of William Perkins, Volume 1*, 88.

with all the power of God working in us, to nurture this desire and finally expel all that is not of our Saviour. Battling sin and the devil and living through suffering would be Part 2 in a guide to Perkins's spirituality. The heart of it is a desire for God's glory, the duties thereof, and the delight which follows.

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