

William Perkins: ‘Apostle of Practical Divinity’

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Seeking to define and describe the essential goals and methods of the Christian ministry is not an easy thing to do. It is little wonder that some who enter the confusing swamp of conflicting advice flounder before reaching the solid ground of clarity! Methods and models abound, yet, the true heart of the Christian ministry can be lost. This article seeks to show how the life and work of William Perkins provides sage advice for any in the ministry today. Though distant in time and culture, the life of Perkins is a timely reminder of what is essential to a truly successful ministry. Perkins was largely responsible for re-igniting a belief in the centrality and importance of preaching in the ministry. This central emphasis upon plain, biblical and relevant preaching needs to be recaptured today. In many ways, a lack of confidence, a failure of nerve, characterizes much modern preaching—as much due to a lack of conviction about its importance as it is due to an ignorance of how to go about it!

It is from scattered fragments that details of Perkins’s life are collated. The sources are minimal and often unreliable. His life spanned almost exactly the reign of Elizabeth I, for he was born in Warwickshire in 1558 and died in 1602 only months before the Queen’s death. Yet, despite the fact that many details are shrouded in obscurity, the forty four years of his life effectively shaped Puritan theology and left a clear mark upon England and the New World. The importance of Perkins is today without doubt. At the height of his fame, Perkins’s books outsold those of Beza and Calvin, overseas editions entered double figures, surpassing even the literary endeavours of Jewel, Foxe and Cartwright. Fuller, who has written the best early narrative of Perkins’s life remarked that Perkins’s books ‘spoke more tongues than the maker ever understood’.¹ Perkins’s writings were amongst the first to be taken to New England. Possibly outstripping Hooker in fame, Perkins in his own day stood head and shoulders above his contemporaries in regard to influence and significance.

William Perkins matriculated as a pensioner of Christ’s College Cambridge in June 1557. He was granted the B.A. in 1580 and after being elected fellow in 1582, received the M.A. in 1584. It was at Cambridge that the course of his life was shaped and moulded.

Perkins was allegedly a profane and wicked young man, given to drunkenness and the study of black magic. Thomas Fuller recounts that:

When first a graduate, he was much addicted to the study of natural magic, digging so deep in nature’s mine, to know the hidden courses . . . of things that some conceive he bordered on hell itself in his curiosity.²

In the interests of edifying his readers, Fuller may have stretched the point a little, yet Perkins himself writes of his pre-conversion acquaintance with the occult. Details of his conversion are unknown. However, one well-known story, probably apocryphal, tells that Perkins was moved to conversion when in one of his drunken stupors, he heard a woman warn her disobedient child, ‘Hold your tongue, or I will give you to drunken Perkins yonder!’³ The influence of Laurence Chaderton and Richard Greenham upon Perkins’s early life at Cambridge cannot be overlooked as a possible explanation for his conversion. Both men

exercised a powerful ministry at Cambridge, Chaderton as fellow of Christ's College and later as first master of Emmanuel, and Greenham of Pembroke. These men were members of a group of moderate Puritans who formed an informal spiritual brotherhood at Cambridge. Chaderton, noted for his plain preaching style and Greenham for his practical doctrine, seem to have moulded Perkins into a typical member of the group of moderate Puritans at Cambridge. No firm date can be affixed to Perkins's conversion. Yet, by the time that he had been appointed lecturer at Great St. Andrew's in 1584, Perkins had acquired a reputation for fine preaching. Before this appointment he had acted as Chaplain, preaching to the prisoners in Cambridge Gaol. Until his death in 1602 he expounded the practical divinity which became synonymous with his name. So popular were his writings that they appeared in English, Latin, Dutch, Spanish, Welsh and Irish.

Throughout his life Perkins remained faithful to the Church of England. In his early days he had one brush with the University authorities over ceremonies, which was clearly not representative of the rest of his life: in 1586, he was summoned before the vice-chancellor and other heads of the college for speaking out against certain practices in the communion service. Amongst other things, Perkins believed it to be 'superstitious and antichristian' to kneel at the receipt of the sacrament. He objected to the manner of distribution in which the minister took the bread and wine himself and did not receive it at the hand of another minister.⁴ Perkins qualified his comments in a paper read in the college chapel and he admitted that he had spoken at an inopportune time. His reaction on this occasion epitomises his desire to avoid controversy over peripheral issues. Perkins's work shows no public interest in issues of church polity and the idealistic sketching of ecclesiastical blueprints. In the face of what he considered to be more pressing demands, Perkins appears happy to have left others to the liberty of their own conscience in this matter.

In 1595 Perkins married a young widow, Timothy Cradocke. Leaving seven children, Perkins died on October 22 1602 of an ailment called 'the stones'. He had apparently suffered from this complaint for some considerable part of his life. His funeral was attended by many and the sermon was preached by John Montague from the text, 'Moses my servant is dead'.

In years to come numerous Puritan divines were to look back to Perkins with warm acclaim. William Haller says of him:

No books, it is fair to say, were more often to be found on the shelves of succeeding generations of preachers and the name of no preacher recurs more often in Puritan literature.⁵

Christopher Hill is bold enough to suggest that along with Calvin and Beza, Perkins is frequently cited as one of the trinity of the orthodox!⁶ Why Perkins assumed a position of such decisive importance and influence can be traced to three main factors.

First, Perkins was able to simplify and popularize theology. Thomas Fuller, a near contemporary of Perkins, wrote this of his ability:

His sermons were not so plain but that the piously learned did admire them, nor so learned but that the plain did understand them . . . Perkins brought the schools into the pulpit, and unshelling their controversies out of their hard school terms, made thereof plain and wholesome meat for the people.⁷

Perkins wrote in a plain, natural style that could be readily understood and assimilated by the simplest of minds. His written page comes to life with similes and illustrations, freely drawn from his readers' daily experience. It was this unique capacity to popularize vital theological concepts that made Perkins a voice whose words fell on eager ears. The great influence which Perkins was able to exert over undergraduates entering the ministry was no doubt to a large extent due to his clear style and ability to summarize and popularize sound scholarship.

Simple, yet not simplistic, his books brought theology from the lecture room to the market place. In his quest for simplicity, Perkins did not despise learning:

If any man think that . . . barbarism should be brought into the pulpits, he must understand that the minister may, yea and must, privately use at his liberty the arts, philosophy and variety of reading while he is framing his sermons, but he ought in public to conceal all these from the pulpit and not make the least ostentation.⁸

In sermon preparation, Perkins encouraged his readers to draw upon the Fathers, Schoolmen and Reformers if they could assist the exegete.

In Perkins's day students for the ministry received no formal instruction in homiletics, with the result that preaching tended to be over-oratorical and sophisticated. Instruction in rhetoric was the most for which the prospective minister could hope. Since the Reformation, Perkins became the first Englishman to give any real treatment to the subject of homiletics. He saw a desperate need for ministerial renewal through a plain preaching style. Perkins's work on preaching, *The Art of Prophesying*, became the homiletical tool with which new life was infused into the church and it was certainly as a preacher that Perkins exercised his greatest influence. Perkins claimed no originality in this endeavour; writing in the introduction to *The Art of Prophesying*, he informs his readers:

I perused the writings of divines; and having gathered some rules out of them, I have couched them in that method which I have deemed most commodious, that they might be better for use and fitter for the memory.⁹

Secondly, Perkins was not only popular, he was also profoundly relevant. He sought to relate the teaching of the Scriptures to what was happening in his own day and age. The great variety of topics that he wrote about in his treatises is a clear indication of his desire to be relevant. For example, he tackled subjects as diverse as witchcraft, salvation, eschatology, family life, astrology and preaching! Perkins was not amongst those who continually engaged in ecclesiastical mud-slinging through a doctrinaire opposition to episcopacy; instead, he saw the need to meet the pressing challenge of more urgent needs:

All contention laid aside, we must set ourselves to build the church. And the rather ministers of God's Word in England must remember this: because we are striving among ourselves in sundry points of differences, the papist . . . gets ground.¹⁰

For Perkins, preaching was bridge building—forging a link between the Word and the World. Perkins's consuming passion to relate doctrinal teaching to the needs of his contemporaries led to the production of the most extensive statement of the relation of Christianity to everyday affairs that Englishmen had ever seen. Perkins refused to wrench theology from life through the pursuit of merely academic theology.

Ian Breward has written of Perkins's combination of 'Reformed theology and Puritan piety'¹¹ This was a third factor which fostered his popularity. Above all, Perkins was an apostle of *practical divinity*. From the outset his ministry was a success, his contribution to Reformed casuistry and practical theology guaranteed it. His aim in preaching and writing was to cultivate a godliness and devotion in the hearts of his hearers. Perkins wished to instruct the simple ploughman as much as the Cambridge academic in how to live for God. To him the fundamental question to be asked and answered was 'whether a man was a child of God or not'. This was the ultimate question, for the answer determined a man's eternal future. Clarity, popular appeal, pertinency and practical godliness were the ingredients of Perkins's success. Sharpened by sound theological scholarship, his work had an irresistible attraction about it. Perkins does not win the accolade for striking theological originality, nor does he demand attention, like some of his contemporaries, for throwing stones in the pond of ecclesiastical polity. The genius of Perkins is to be found in his ability to apply with striking effect the theology of the Reformation to the exigencies of Elizabethan England in the language of the average man.

Perkins is best known for his contribution towards the formation of a reformed casuistry. His reputation as a doctor of conscience soon brought him a stream of visitors eager to have their knotty problems unravelled by his deft mind. Perkins worked under the assumption that a biblical casuistry would replace the spent authority of an improperly reformed Church. It would also ensure the maintenance of discipline so crucial to the welfare of the believer and provide an effective weapon against the moral theology of Rome.

Casuistry had remained firmly within the domain of Roman Catholicism and was the exclusive franchise of mediaeval moral theology and pastoral care. Mediaeval casuistry had been written to assist the priest assess guilt in the confessional and direct conscience in the arena of decision-making. The methods and presuppositions of Roman pastoral care were firmly rejected by the Reformers. With the demise of the confessional, Protestant theologians turned in another direction in order to loose the consciences of the saints. A good, informed conscience was hailed as the biblical alternative for the discipline and assurance meted out by the Roman Catholic priest through the administration of sacramental grace. It was in pursuit of informing the consciences of the godly that a reformed casuistry developed. It filled the role once taken by the confession box and was to exercise a pedagogical role for the benefit of those new to the freedom of the doctrines of grace—a liberty which could easily be misunderstood.

With keen insight, Perkins rose to the challenge and succeeded in banishing the Roman Catholic manuals of moral theology from the shelves of Protestant theologians. Perkins's practical theology, once collected, provided a Protestant forge upon which their weapons could be sharpened without compromising their doctrinal integrity. In his numerous treatises, Perkins answered a plethora of practical questions. Even doctrinal discussion was followed by an analysis of practical problems. His careful application of sound doctrine embraced a host of topics from the desire and possession of riches to the use of eating and drinking to God's glory. Dress, recreation, sport and almsgiving were examined and a bridge was formed between Reformed theology and the challenge of Tudor England. There is no doubt that this devotional and pastoral priority fostered Perkins's popularity and success.

The hindsight of future generations is rarely the friend of great men and it would be easy to dismiss Perkins's work as being no more than an historical event of no abiding significance. Yet, in pioneering the recovery of true, biblical, contemporary preaching, the life and work of

Perkins continues to instruct and guide. There are several lessons to be learnt from Perkins's life as a preacher.

First, Perkins rightly insisted that ministerial renewal must begin in the pulpit. Perkins realized that the Church's greatest need was for preachers, not abstract theologians! The Church needs to capture afresh the biblical conviction that God quickens, feeds and guides his people by his Word. A decline in preaching has always run hand in hand with a decline of spiritual life and activity in the Church. If the Church is to flourish there must be a recovery of true biblical preaching from theological college to pulpit.

Secondly, though different in time and culture, we nevertheless share remarkably similar challenges with Perkins. He demonstrated that the greatest need in an uncertain and threatening world is the courageous proclamation of the unchanging realities of the Gospel, in such a way, that they effectively engage the contingencies and demands of society. Perkins showed that the preaching which truly achieves this is at the same time biblical and relevant. Though these qualities may be found in preaching today, they are rarely found together. Bishop Stephen Neill wrote thus of preaching:

Preaching is like weaving. There are the two factors of the warp and the woof. There is the fixed, unalterable element, which for us is the Word of God, and there is the variable element, which enables the weaver to change and vary the pattern at will. For us that variable element is the constantly changing pattern of people and situations.¹²

If our preaching today is to be effective it must introduce the unchanging Word of God into the changing world of people. It is not enough to be an able biblical scholar, the preacher must also be able to feel accurately the pulse of the people to whom he preaches. Perkins always strove to aim his preaching at the real world.

Thirdly, not only does preaching need to be restored to a position of centrality in our understanding of the ministry, but once there, it needs to be done properly. Perkins insisted that effective preaching is plain and simple—the Bible must be allowed to speak for itself. Preaching, in Perkins's view, was never to be a display of academic prowess nor a superficial discourse. Expository preaching is hard work and requires painstaking preparation. Yet, in delivery and presentation, all the analysis, preparation and scholarship is to be crystallized into something straightforward, almost deceptively simple.

If there is to be a renewal of true spiritual life within the Church today there must be a radical reassessment of what takes place in the pulpit. The welfare of the Church is vitally linked to the preaching of the Word. If the Church is to flourish then there must be a recovery of faithful, relevant, biblical preaching. Four hundred years ago, William Perkins's immeasurable influence revolutionized preaching in England. Through his clear, practical and powerful preaching, God's Word was set free in the pulpit and spiritual life blazed in the Churches of England. If we wish to see the dawn of revival in the Church we dare not ignore the evidence of Scripture and the lesson of history, that preaching is the primary task of the Church.

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Endnotes:

- 1) Fuller, T. *The Holy State: The Profane State*. 1841, p. 831.
- 2) Fuller, T. *Abel Redivivus*, London, Wm. Tegg. 1640, p.146.
- 3) Brook. B. *The Lives of the Puritans*, 3 vols., London, 1813, vol. 2 p. 129.
- 4) Cooper, T. and C. *Athenae Cantabrigienses*, vol. 2 p.335.
- 5) Haller, W. *The Rise of Puritanism*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1957. p.65.
- 6) Hill, C. *Puritanism and Revolution*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1965, p.216.
- 7) Fuller, T. *op. cit.*
- 8) Perkins. W. *Works (The Workes of that famous and worthy minister of Christ in the University of Cambridge)*. London, Legatt , 1613-1653, vol. 3 p.345.
- 9) Perkins, W. *op. cit.*
- 10) *Ibid.*, p.573.
- 11) Breward, I. (ed.) *The Works of William Perkins*, Berkshire, England. Sutton-Courtney Press, 1970, p. xi.
- 12) Neill, S. *On the Ministry*, London. S.C.M., 1952, p.74.