

HERMENEUTICS AND PIETY IN WILLIAM PERKINS

Introduction

In the book of Acts the popularity of the Apostle Paul was growing in the city of Ephesus as “God was performing extraordinary miracles”¹ by his hands. His fame became so known that others sought to duplicate it. The seven sons of Sceva—Jewish exorcists—concluded that if Paul could cast out demons by the name of Jesus, they could too. Upon encountering a man possessed by an evil spirit, the demon answered the sons of Sceva, saying, “I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?” While the seven sons of Sceva were unbelievers, the reaction of the demon toward those men is often no different than the response of most modern evangelicals when they hear the name William Perkins. Many today say, “Calvin we know; Luther we know. Jonathan Edwards and even John Wesley we know, but who is William Perkins?” To most people’s surprise, Perkins rivaled the influence of John Calvin and Martin Luther on seventeenth century English Protestants and New England Colonial Puritans.²

Upon further examination of the life of Perkins, his significance can not be denied.

Robert M. Bartlett declares Perkins to be more influential in the English Reformation than that of

¹The account described above is recorded in Acts 19:11-20. The quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible, 1995.

²J. C. Alain, “William Perkins: Plain Preaching,” *Preaching* (1996): 42. Paul R. Schaefer, “The Art of Prophesying by William Perkins (1558-1602)” in *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics*, eds. Kelly M. Kopic and Randall C. Gleason (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 38, speaks of Perkins as one of the most widely read preachers of his day, and one of the most outstanding theologian thinkers of the Elizabethan era. He goes on to offer a couple of reasons for why the enormity of Perkins’ impact has not carried over to today. He posits that the scarcity of reprints of his works exist today and the brevity of his life both seem to contribute to the lack of his recognition among modern believers.

John Calvin.³ Jonathan Long states that the forty-four years of Perkins life “effectively shaped Puritan theology and left a clear mark upon England and the New World.”⁴ Still yet, William Hallers writes of Perkins mark on history: “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 What gave Perkins such acclaim in his day and beyond is best summarized by Long, saying, “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.”⁶

Perhaps Perkins’ most notable contribution to the applicational effect of theology upon the lives of believers is seen in his work *The Art of Prophecy*. In this work Perkins calls for the centrality of preaching in ministry, and offers thorough principles for hermeneutics and application of the biblical text, while also identifying the necessity of holiness of life among the preacher. Before exploring further the connection with Perkins’ hermeneutical practice and insistence upon personal piety, a few definitions are in order as they relate to the life and work of Perkins.

While definitions of hermeneutics abound, this paper will work from Perkins’ own

³Robert M. Bartlett, *The Faith of the Pilgrims: An American Heritage* (New York: United Church Press, 1978), 292.

⁴Jonathan Long, “William Perkins: ‘Apostle of Practical Divinity,’” *The Churchman* 103 (1989): 53. Long, *Ibid.*, 55-6, attributes Perkins staggering influence to three factors: “First, Perkins was able to simplify and popularize theology. Secondly, Perkins was not only popular, he was also profoundly relevant.” He sought to relate Scripture to his own day and age. The third area of influence came from Perkins combination of Reformed theology and Puritan piety. Above all, as Long describes him, Perkins was an apostle of practical divinity. Long further states, “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” (*Ibid.*, 57).

⁵Quoted by Long, *Ibid.*, 55.

⁶*Ibid.*, 57.

words, “Interpretation is the opening of the words and statements of Scripture in order to bring out its single, full and natural sense.”⁷ The single, full and natural sense of the biblical passage is an impetus of the Reformation.⁸ Hence, Perkins deprecates the Church of Rome’s practice of the fourfold sense of Scripture: literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical.⁹

Another definition as it relates to the life and work of Perkins is that of Puritanism.

Erwin R. Gane states, “The term ‘Puritanism’ as used in the latter half of the sixteenth century in England referred to the Protestant discontent with the official religion of the realm. It was an ultra-conservative attempt to render Protestantism more Protestant and less Roman Catholic.”¹⁰

J. I. Packer simply deduces that “Puritanism was at heart a spiritual movement, passionately concerned with God and godliness.”¹¹ Interestingly, Irvonwy Morgan advocates, “The essential

⁷William Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying*. Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002. For multiple definitions of hermeneutics, see Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 25. In short, Goldsworthy states, “The function of hermeneutics could be stated as the attempt to bridge the gap between the text inside its world and the readers/hearers inside their world. We attempt this bridging because we are engaging in the quest for the application of the significance of the biblical text to ourselves in this twenty-first century” (Ibid., 27). Simply put, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward An Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 44, defines hermeneutics as the science of interpretation. Furthermore, as Kaiser states, “The sole object of the expositor is to explain as clearly as possible what the writer meant when he wrote the text under examination. It is the interpreter’s job to *represent the text*” (Ibid., 45, italics original). Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 17, states of hermeneutics, “The word comes from the Greek term *hermēneuein*, which means to explain or interpret. . . . The term ‘hermeneutics’ . . . simply describes the practice or discipline of interpretation.”

⁸Kaiser, *Toward An Exegetical Theology*, 44.

⁹Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying*, 26. He states that this “pattern of the fourfold meaning of Scripture must be rejected and destroyed.”

¹⁰Erwin R. Gane, “The Exegetical Methods of Some Sixteenth-Century Puritan Preachers: Hooper, Cartwright, and Perkins- Part I,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 19 (1981): 21.

¹¹J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 28. In a more detailed manner, Packer says that “Puritanism was essentially a movement for church reform, pastoral renewal and evangelism, and spiritual revival; and in addition—indeed, as a direct expression of its zeal for God’s honour—it was a world-view, a total Christian philosophy, in intellectual terms a Protestantised and updated medievalism, and in terms of spirituality a reformed monasticism outside the cloister and away from monkish vows” (Ibid.). Though beyond the scope of this paper, Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson describe the Puritan way of life in *The Puritans*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965), 1-63.

thing in understanding the Puritans was that they were preachers before they were anything else.”¹² This Puritan combination of a passion for God and godliness along with a zeal for preaching leads to a final introductory definition on piety.

Concerning Puritan piety Jerald C. Brauer argues:

When Puritans used the term piety, they knew exactly to what they referred. They easily could have adopted the definition given in the Oxford English Dictionary: ‘the habitual reverence and obedience to God’ or ‘Godliness, devotedness, religiousness. . . . Piety as understood by the Puritans was a person’s essential religiousness which underlies all religious obedience, actions, and virtues. It was the source for the way one worshipped, for the style and content of one’s actions—both private and public. . . . Piety was the root of everything for the Puritan.’¹³

Obedience to God or devotedness was characteristic of Puritan piety and can be seen in Perkins’ approach to preaching.

While this paper may not revive the enormous influence of Perkins, it is desired that his impact on Puritan piety and hermeneutics as demonstrated through his advocacy of preaching will be valued once again by those who are exposed to this stalwart figure, perhaps for the first time. Therefore, this paper will examine the correlation between the significance of personal piety in William Perkins and his hermeneutical practice, as expressed through his theory of preaching. In order to accomplish this aim a brief biography of Perkins will be presented. Following this biographical section, his premise for hermeneutics will be explored, particularly

¹²Quoted by Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 37.

¹³Jerald C Brauer, “Types of Puritan Piety,” *Church History* 56 (1987): 39. Brauer recognizes four fundamental dimensions to Puritan piety: nomism, evangelicalism, rationalism, and mysticism. For a treatment of these four dimensions of Puritan piety, see *Ibid.*, 44-58. Michael A. G. Haykin in his book *The God Who Draws Near: An Introduction to Biblical Spirituality* explains the Christian basis for the term ‘spirituality’ and insists for its connection with the Holy Spirit and his work (xix). Tracing the term ‘spirituality’ from the Latin, *spiritualitas*, which is from the word *spiritus*, Latin for ‘spirit’, Haykin refers to an example where one ancient anonymous writer tells another to essentially “live in accordance with the Holy Spirit. . . . True spirituality,” Haykin continues to explain, “is intimately bound up with the Holy Spirit and his work.”

through his work *The Art of Prophesying*. Lastly, Perkins' emphasis upon personal piety in relation to hermeneutics (and preaching) will be explained.

The Life of William Perkins

Perkins was born in 1558 in Warwickshire and died in 1602. His life spanned nearly the entire reign of Elizabeth I; he died only months before her death. Perkins' youth was spent in "recklessness, profanity, and drunkenness."¹⁴ He entered Christ's College, Cambridge in 1577, but continued on a path of ungodliness for some time. While still at Cambridge Perkins had a dramatic conversion which is said to have begun when he overheard a woman say to her child that was misbehaving, "Hold your tongue, or I will give you to drunken Perkins, yonder."¹⁵ God used that incident to cause Perkins to flee to Christ for salvation. Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson summarize that the converted Perkins "gave up the study of mathematics and his fascination with black magic and the occult, and took up theology."¹⁶ Perkins, in time, would meet Laurence Chaderton who became his tutor and personal friend. As Beeke and Pederson note, Perkins and Chaderton met a group of men who formed a "spiritual brotherhood" at Cambridge that adopted Calvinistic and Puritan beliefs.¹⁷

As the Puritan center of the day, Cambridge would be the place where Perkins would not only be impacted by Puritan and Calvinist theology, it would be the place where he would

¹⁴Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans: With a Guide to Modern Reprints* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 469.

¹⁵Benjamin Brook, *The Lives of the Puritans*, vol 2 (1813; reprint, Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1996), 129.

¹⁶Beeke and Pederson, *Meet the Puritans*, 469.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

carry out his own life ministry.¹⁸ As far as training, Perkins' Calvinism was persuaded by a modified scholasticism influenced by French philosopher-logician Peter Ramus (1515-1572). Donald K. McKim acknowledges the pervasive influence of Ramist philosophy as important for its attempt to reorganize dialectic or logic.¹⁹ Ramus sought to simplify Aristotelian "categories" into "arguments" or "concepts." "Method," therefore, was Ramus' term for the orderly presentation of a subject. Perkins and other Puritans, argues McKim, benefited from Ramus' philosophy and saw it as "an important tool for their various theological endeavors."²⁰ Applying Ramus' method to his work *The Art of Prophesying*, Beeke and Pederson suggest that "Perkins' training in Ramus's method oriented him toward practical application rather than speculative theory, and gave him the skills for becoming a popular preacher and theologian."²¹ Being aware of Perkins' training offers significant insight into the emphasis that he places upon the transforming work of Scripture in the individual's life. The persuasion of Perkins' Cambridge preparation lends to his own influential ministry in the same town.

Perkins earned his B. A. in 1580 and at the age of twenty-four, in 1582, Perkins was chosen as fellow of the college, receiving his M. A. in 1584. He began his preaching ministry at the local prison. He met every Sabbath at the prison to preach to the inmates. By God's grace, Perkins' preaching led many to Christ and his work soon became know throughout the town. Many were coming to hear Perkins preach. His fame as a preacher spread throughout the area

¹⁸Long, "William Perkins," 53, affirms that it was at Cambridge that the course of his life was shaped and molded.

¹⁹Donald K. McKim, "The Functions of Ramism in William Perkins' Theology," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 16 (1985): 508.

²⁰Ibid. For an example of Perkins' method of presenting material in an orderly manner, see his Golden Chain, a complete diagram explaining his position on predestination, <http://www.apuritansmind.com/images/charts/WilliamPerkin'sChartCompleteSample.jpg> .

²¹Beeke and Pederson, *Meet the Puritans*, 471.

churches and the whole university. In time, Perkins was selected as the preacher at St. Andrew's church, where he served until the time of his death.²² His sermons are described as "all law and all gospel. He was a rare instance of those opposite gifts meeting in so eminent a degree in the same preacher."²³ Perkins had the exceptional ability through his preaching to drive sinners away from imminent judgment and to the hope found in Christ alone.

Though only a brief glimpse of Perkins' life has been offered due to the limits of this paper, there are a few pertinent factors gleaned from this biographical attempt that will enhance one's comprehension of the correlation between his personal piety and hermeneutics. First, conversion, as Perkins understands it, brings about change in the individual's life. Perkins places great emphasis upon the transformation of saved sinners. While his own personal conversion experience allows him patience and grace with others who are yet converted, he nonetheless affirms that lives are changed by the gospel. Second, because lives are changed by the gospel, the preaching of the gospel is primary for bringing about that change. He asserts that preaching has a twofold value of gathering the elect and driving away wolves.²⁴ Third, his Calvinist theology was wed to an experiential living. Beeke and Pederson describe, "He refused to see the relationship between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility as antagonistic but treated them as 'friends' who need no reconciliation."²⁵ God is sovereign and, yet, man is responsible for his actions. Lastly, all of these factors led to heavy application or "use" of the word in the preaching

²²Brook, *The Lives of the Puritans*, 129-30 (the information about Perkins' preaching and ministry is summarized from these pages).

²³*Ibid.*, 130.

²⁴Perkins, *The Art of Prophecy*, 3. See D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors: Addresses Delivered at the Puritan and Westminster Conference 1959-1978* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 381, who recognizes this twofold purpose of preaching as characteristic of Puritan preaching as a whole.

²⁵Beeke and Pederson, *Meet the Puritans*, 473.

of Perkins. His desire for his congregation was that they live out the truths of Scripture. With a brief observation of Perkins' life and its implications presented, this paper will now turn toward an investigation of his hermeneutics, particularly seen through his work *The Art of Prophesying*.

William Perkins on Hermeneutics and Homiletics

In this section Perkins' hermeneutical theory will be explored. Perkins' hermeneutical and homiletical practice can not be separated. The proximity of these two disciplines is best seen in his classic work *The Art of Prophesying*. It was first published in 1592 in Latin and in English in 1606, after his death. Paul R. Schaefer describes the book's Puritan title, saying, "Prophesying was the Elizabethan term for penetrating preaching, preaching that expressed correct doctrine but also convicted of sin and gloried in God's sovereign grace."²⁶ As previously referenced, the prophesying or preaching of Scripture has a twofold value according to Perkins: (1) "It is instrumental in gathering the church and bringing together all of the elect; (2) It drives away the wolves from the folds of the Lord." He continues to explain, "Preaching is the *flexanima*, the allurer of the soul, by which our self-willed minds are subdued and changed from an ungodly and pagan life-style to a life of Christian faith and repentance."²⁷ Thus, essential to proper interpretation is proclamation that brings about the transformation of pagan lives into that of godly lives.

Of Perkins' preaching, Long asserts, "Perkins was largely responsible for re-igniting a belief in the centrality and importance of preaching in the ministry."²⁸ Sinclair B. Ferguson

²⁶Schaefer, "The Art of Prophesying by William Perkins (1558-1602)," in *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics*, eds. Kelly M. Kopic and Randall C. Gleason (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 39.

²⁷Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying*, 3.

²⁸Long, "William Perkins," 53.

remarks, “Perkins stands out in the post-Reformation history of the church in England because of the enormous impact his preaching made on generations of preachers of the gospel.”²⁹

According to Perkins, there are two parts to impactful prophecy: preaching the Word and public prayer. These are, as Perkins maintains, the two duties of the minister.³⁰ Perkins spends the vast majority of his book on the first duty of the minister—preaching. While hermeneutics is ultimately for the purpose of proclamation, Perkins’ method of interpretation will now be addressed.

Perkins’ Hermeneutics

Perkins lists five keys for preparation in interpretation. The last one he states is the most important of all: “We must earnestly ask God in prayer to open our blind eyes to the meaning of the Scriptures.”³¹ As previously stated, Perkins defines interpretation as “the opening up of the words and statements of Scripture in order to bring out its single, full and natural sense.”³² He says that the “principal interpreter of Scripture is the Holy Spirit. The one who makes the law is the best and the highest interpreter of it.”³³ With dependence upon the Holy Spirit and seeking the single, full and natural sense of the passage, Perkins clarifies that preparation for interpretation has two parts: “interpretation of the meaning of the passage, and the appropriate division of it for orderly exposition.”³⁴

²⁹Quote from Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Art of Prophesying*, ix. He wrote the forward to Perkins’ addition of *The Art of Prophesying* used in this paper.

³⁰Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying*, 7.

³¹Ibid., 25.

³²Ibid., 26.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid., 25.

In interpreting the meaning of the passage, there are three subordinate means to help the preacher understand a passage of Scripture: the analogy of faith, the circumstances of the particular passage, and comparison with other passages.³⁵ Schaefer succinctly summarizes Perkins' understanding of interpretation, saying, "Perkins contented that not only should the rule of faith give boundaries for clear interpretation, but also those seeking to bring forth true meaning need to view the passage within its own literary and historical circumstances, within the Christian ethic of love and with an eye toward other passages of comparison that might elucidate the meaning."³⁶ Having outlined the necessary means for interpretation, Perkins turns toward what he calls principles for expounding Scripture. The author is concerned with the text of Scripture being handled according to the nature of the passage. He classifies such natural divisions as either analogical and plain or cryptic and dark. For the former division Perkins states, "If the natural meaning of the words agrees with the circumstances of the passage, then the natural meaning is the proper meaning."³⁷

Having laid out the necessary means for interpreting the one sense of the passage, Perkins addresses the issue of connecting the text to the lives of people of God. Perkins distinguishes between interpretation and the right "cutting" or dividing of it. He describes, "Right cutting is the way in which the Word is enabled to edify the people of God."³⁸ He maintains that there are two elements in rightly cutting: resolution or partition and application.

³⁵Perkins, *Ibid.*, 27, briefly explains these three subordinate means to aid in interpretation. The analogy of faith is a summary of the Scriptures by way of two elements: related to faith and concerns love. The circumstances of a passage are clarified by certain questions: Who is speaking? To whom? On what occasion? At what time? In what place? The last means mentioned is a comparison of different passages. Here, passages are compared with one another in order to shed light on more obscure texts.

³⁶Schaefer, "The Art of Prophesying," 46.

³⁷Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying*, 30.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 48.

“Resolution,” he explains, “is the unfolding of the passage into its various doctrines, like the untwisting and loosening of a weaver’s web.”³⁹ A doctrine need not be explicitly stated in the text, but can be drawn out by implication.⁴⁰ As a way of caution, Perkins wisely argues “that doctrines ought to be deduced from passages only when it is proper and valid to do so. They must be derived from the genuine meaning of the Scripture. Otherwise we will end up drawing any doctrine from any place in the Bible.”⁴¹ The “cutting” of Scripture not only involves resolution or partition, but also application.

“Application,” the author clarifies, “is the skill by which the doctrine which has been properly drawn from Scripture is handled in ways which are appropriate to the circumstances of the place and time and to the people in the congregation.”⁴² In other words, Perkins saw the necessity not only to extrapolate appropriate doctrine from the text, but to ensure its impact upon the lives of the listeners. He continues:

The basic principle in application is to know whether the passage is a statement of the law or of the gospel. For when the Word is preached, the law and the gospel operate differently. The law exposes the disease of sin, and as a side-effect stimulates and stirs it up. But it provides no remedy for it. However the gospel not only teaches us what is to be done, it also has the power of the Holy Spirit joined to it. When we are regenerated by him we receive the strength we need both to believe the gospel and to do what it commands. The law is, therefore, first in order of teaching; then comes the gospel.⁴³

As passages are discerned based upon the law and the gospel, the power of the Holy Spirit works in the hearer’s life not only for the purpose of believing the message spoken, but also in order to obey its truth. Thus, belief and obedience to the word are the necessary outworkings of the

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid., 49.

⁴¹Ibid., 51.

⁴²Ibid., 54.

⁴³Ibid.

message, but are acted upon only through the control of the Holy Spirit. As Perkins maintains, the word can be rightly preached, but unless the Holy Spirit works in power to affect the hearer, no belief in the message or obedience to the message will occur.

In keeping with the work of the Holy Spirit in the application of the passage, Perkins shifts to seven ways application should be made based upon what he sees as seven different spiritual conditions.⁴⁴ The first condition noted by Perkins is those who are unbelievers and are both ignorant and unteachable. Those who are ignorant and unteachable must be prepared to receive the word. The second spiritual condition involves those who are teachable, but ignorant. Perkins urges that catechism is the best means to instruct such people. Thirdly, there are those who have knowledge, but have never been humbled. Perkins states, “Godly sorrow is grief for sin simply because it is sin.”⁴⁵ To stir up the affection of godly sorrow, Perkins insists that the law is to be expounded. Then, when the law has exposed the individual’s sin, the gospel is to be “preached in such a way that the Holy Spirit effectually works salvation. For in renewing men so that they may begin to will and do what is pleasing to God, the Spirit really and truly produces in them godly sorrow and repentance to salvation.”⁴⁶ Again, as law and gospel sounds forth, the Spirit must do his effectual work in bringing sinners to salvation.

The fourth spiritual condition is those who have already been humbled. Important in this condition is discerning whether there has been a partial or full humbling. Fifth, those who already believe must be taught the gospel and the law. Since sanctification is progressive, and, so as not to abuse the mercy of God, believers should meditate on the curse of the law frequently.

⁴⁴The seven different conditions are summarized from *The Art of Prophesying*, 56-63, unless noted by quotation.

⁴⁵Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying*, 58.

⁴⁶Ibid.

The sixth spiritual condition is of those who have fallen back. Here, according to Perkins, failure can be in the form of knowledge of doctrine or in apprehending Christ. Lastly, the typical situation in congregations is that of unbelievers and believers. Again, the law and gospel are to be expounded with the understanding that they will affect unbelievers and believers differently. These are the spiritual conditions and the people to whom interpreters seek to teach. Before offering a cursory of Perkins' preaching, one last aspect of application within hermeneutics will be presented.

Perkins delineates between mental and practical application. On the one hand, "mental application," he writes, "is concerned with the mind and involves either doctrine or reproof."⁴⁷ On the other hand, "practical application has to do with life-style and behavior and involves instruction and correction."⁴⁸ Thus, for Perkins, application either deals with content for the mind or life-style to be practiced. Perkins does offer a caveat with his approach to application, "We should not try to expound every doctrine on every occasion; but only those which can be applied appropriately to the present experiences and condition of the church. These must be carefully chosen, and limited to a few, *lest those who hear God's Word expounded are overwhelmed by the sheer number of applications.*"⁴⁹ While intent on application, Perkins cautioned against overwhelming his congregation with too much 'use' to digest. Perkins' careful and diligent handling of the scriptures led to his powerful and penetrating preaching.

⁴⁷Ibid., 64.

⁴⁸Ibid., 65.

⁴⁹Ibid., 68 (italics added).

Perkins' Homiletics

Perkins summarized preaching as: “(1) Reading the text clearly from the canonical Scriptures; (2) Explaining the meaning of it, once it has been read, in the light of Scriptures themselves; (3) Gathering a few profitable points of doctrine from the natural sense of the passage; and (4) If the preacher is suitably gifted, applying the doctrines thus explained to the life and practice of the congregation in straightforward, plain speech.”⁵⁰ Thomas F. Merrill attributes Perkins' bent toward communicating the word in a plain manner so that everyone can understand as possibly his greatest quality in preaching. He states of Perkins, “As a preacher, he saw his task to deliver the word of God in its purest form.”⁵¹

Perkins' preaching is known as plain style.⁵² Perkins discusses plain style and three important factors for effective preaching in his *Commentary on Galatians*: (1) the true and proper interpretation of the Scripture, and that by itself for Scripture is both the glosse and the text; (2) “wholesome doctrine” is to be gathered and expounded from the Scriptures; and (3) application of the doctrine, “either to the information of the judgement, or to the reformation of the life. This is the preaching that is of power.”⁵³ Plain style preaching was intended to be the

⁵⁰Ibid., 79.

⁵¹Thomas F. Merrill introduction to William Perkins, *William Perkins: 1558-1602: English Puritanist: His Pinooer Works on Casuistry: 'A Discourse of Conscience' and 'The Whole Treatise of Cases of Conscience,'* ed. Thomas F. Merrill (Netherlands: B. De Graff, Nieuwkoop, 1966), xvi.

⁵²Long, “William Perkins,” 56, claims, “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.” Gane, “The Exegetical Methods of Some Sixteenth-Century Puritan Preachers: Hooper, Cartwright, and Perkins” Part II, 107, states that Perkins' most common form of preaching was expository. For Perkins, the aim of expository preaching “was to interpret a passage phrase by phrase on the basis of the immediate context, in a manner consistent with the overall teaching of Scripture and relevant to the problems of sixteenth-century Englishmen.” This is not a contradiction to plain style, but simply another way to express the purpose of discerning the single sense of the text and explicating it to modern listeners.

⁵³William Perkins, *A Commentary on Galatians*, ed. Gerald T. Sheppard (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 140-41.

plain explanation of Scripture. J. C. Alain, commenting on Perkin's own plain style and his suggestions for effective preaching, remarks:

Perkins plain and practical preaching style was defined by what it lacked as well as by what it contained. What plain preaching avoided was the heaping up of citations by the church fathers, and repeating words in Latin and Greek. Perkins said that to preach using languages of the unlearned which divert attention to the preacher instead of the content of the sermon 'is a sin to unbelievers—1 Cor. 14:22. And this kind of preaching we do not paint Christ, but . . . our ourselves.⁵⁴

Perkins' desire to paint Christ and not himself is seen in the centrality of preaching during the corporate worship.

Robert M. Bartlett characterized the importance of preaching for Puritans, saying:

The Pilgrim's reverence for the Bible led to a similar respect for the teaching of the scriptures. Therefore, the sermon evolved as the paramount aspect of worship. Teaching content was more important than ritual. The word of God was central, and listening to its exposition was the climax of the service. . . . The sermon was not to be a homily, as in the Church of England, but a well-prepared exegesis of scripture that people could understand and that was related to their daily living.⁵⁵

Expounding the Scriptures and applying them to the lives of the hearers was central to the goal of Perkins' preaching. Therefore, discerning the single, natural sense of the passage; extrapolating a doctrine from it; and considering the 'use' of that doctrine for the lives of the listeners was the aim of Perkins every time he stepped into the pulpit.

Decrying the liturgical aspect of the established Church, Bartlett summarizes, "The aim of the Pilgrim was to keep service and action in view and to find guidance for the duties of life. This ethical emphasis gave strength to preaching and made the Puritan sermons outstanding. . . . The sermon had a strong ethical emphasis, stressing in prayers and preaching

⁵⁴J. C. Alain, "William Perkins: Plain Preaching," *Preaching* (1996): 43.

⁵⁵Bartlett, *The Faith of the Pilgrims*, 251. Horton Davies, "The Puritan and Pietist Traditions of Protestant Spirituality," *Worship* 39 (1965): 601, describing the prominence of preaching in Puritan worship, said that "preaching was raised to a sacramental level with the exhibition of Christ incarnate, crucified, risen and exalted for the criticism and comfort of the elect."

that the Christian Way was one of discipline. . . . Moral obedience was demanded of all who came into the church.”⁵⁶ The emphasis upon ethical or moral application gave Puritan sermons not only substance of content, but concrete examples for living. Demanding moral obedience meant that sermons were delivered in plain or understandable English, not the verbiage of academia.⁵⁷

Long suggests that several lessons are to be learned from Perkins the preacher. “First, Perkins rightly insisted that ministerial renewal must begin in the pulpit.”⁵⁸ God feeds his people by his word. The church’s greatest need is for preachers, not abstract theologians. Long correctly analyzes, “A decline in preaching has always run hand in hand with a decline of spiritual life and activity in the Church.”⁵⁹ “Secondly, though different in time and culture, we nevertheless share remarkably similar challenges with Perkins.”⁶⁰ Long continues, “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.”⁶¹ “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.”⁶² For Perkins, preaching is to be plain and simple—the Bible must be allowed to

⁵⁶Bartlett, *The Faith of the Pilgrims*, 252-53.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 254.

⁵⁸Long, “William Perkins,” 58.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

⁶¹*Ibid.*

⁶²*Ibid.*

speak for itself.

This section has examined the hermeneutics and homiletics of Perkins. He was methodical in his attempt to understand the meaning of Scripture, but plain or simple in his desire to communicate that meaning to his modern hearers. While there was a certain careful method of interpretation taught by Perkins, he was no less concerned with communicating the truths of Scripture to his congregation. Appreciating Perkins' painstaking method for hermeneutics and his subsequent emphasis upon personal 'use' aids the student of this iconic Puritan figure in discerning their correlation with his significance upon personal piety. This paper will now attempt to correlate Perkins' hermeneutic (and preaching) with the importance of his piety.

William Perkins and Piety

Foundational to Perkins' own hermeneutics, proclamation and personal piety was his view of God. Explicating from Isaiah 6 on the necessity for fear and amazement of God in the minister, Perkins states, "The more afraid they [ministers] are and the more they shrink under the contemplation of God's majesty and their own weakness, the more likely it is that they are truly called of God and appointed for worthy purposes in his church."⁶³ A biblically healthy view of God is instrumental for personal piety. His life reflected this robust view of God both in his preaching and living. Brook compliments, "Mr. Perkins was so pious and exemplary in his life, that malice itself was unable to reproach his character. As his preaching was a just comment upon his text; so his practice was a just comment upon his preaching."⁶⁴ For Perkins, separating

⁶³Perkins, *The Calling of the Ministry in The Art of Propheysing* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 128.

⁶⁴Brook, *The Lives of the Puritans*, 134.

what one preached from how one lived was unthinkable.

While Perkins was rightly concerned with proper interpretation of Scripture, he was equally concerned with the proper lifestyle of the preacher of Scripture. Perkins, in *A Commentary on Hebrews 11*, stresses the gravity of a minister's life as well as his doctrine. Perkins insists, "For there is a double teaching, namely, in word, or deede."⁶⁵ In other words, the preacher teaches both from the Bible and his life. He further comments, "It sufficeth not for him to teach by *vocall Sermons*, that is, by good doctrine; but withal by *reall Sermons*, that is, by good life: His faith, his zeale, his patience, his mercy, and all other his vertues must speake, and cry, and call to other men to be like unto him: which if he practise carefully in his life as *Abel* did, then shall his vertues speak for him to all posterities when he is dead."⁶⁶ Thus, Perkins believed that the preacher's life must first be in priority before he may call others to godliness. "Real" sermons are sermons that are lived by the preacher, not just spoken by the preacher.

Having established the primacy of the preacher's life, Alain notes that Perkins' preaching was the application of the Bible to everyday life.⁶⁷ Alain is correct in assessing that Perkins' goal, therefore, in preaching "was nothing less than 'holy reformation' of character and action."⁶⁸ Long describes Perkins' relevant preaching as "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. . . . His aim in

⁶⁵Perkins, *A Commentary on Hebrews 11*, ed. John H. Augustine (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1991), 22.

⁶⁶Ibid., 22 (italics original, original spelling has been maintained except that "f" has been changed to "s" where appropriate).

⁶⁷Alain, "William Perkins: Plain Preaching," 44

⁶⁸Ibid.

preaching and writing was to cultivate a godliness and devotion in the hearts of his hearers.”⁶⁹

To cultivate this godliness and devotion in others, Perkins notes two essentials in preaching: the hiding of human wisdom and the demonstration of the Spirit.⁷⁰ While the preacher should be well-rounded in his study, the content of his sermon and the language used must not be an exercise of flaunting his knowledge. Further, the demonstration of the Spirit is evident (1 Cor 2:4), Perkins claims, when “the minister of the Word conducts himself in such a way that everyone—even those who are ignorant of the gospel and are unbelievers—recognise that it is not so much the preacher who is speaking, but the Spirit of God in him and by him.”⁷¹ Perkins maintains that this demonstration of the Spirit will come to expression either in speech or in gesture. Perkins insists that “Gracious speech expresses the grace of the heart (Luke 4:22; John 7:46).”⁷² Elaborating, Perkins states, “The grace of the person is the holiness of the heart and of an unblameable life.”⁷³ Holiness of heart and an unblameable life are essential for preaching, according to Perkins, for many reasons.⁷⁴ Holiness in the preacher involves many elements: a good conscience; an inward sense of the doctrine preached; the fear of God; a love for people; worthy of respect for his constancy, integrity, seriousness, and truthfulness; and

⁶⁹Long, “William Perkins: ‘Apostle of Practical Divinity,’” 56

⁷⁰Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying*, 71.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 72.

⁷²*Ibid.*

⁷³*Ibid.*

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 72-3. In summary, holiness in the preacher involves: (1) doctrine of the word is hard to understand and practice, so the preacher must express what he teaches by his own life; (2) godliness is not assured by simply understanding the word, there must be in the preacher’s heart an inward sense and experience; (3) God abhors godly speech that is not accompanied with a godly life; (4) the minister’s words and life must not contradict; and (5) a minister who is wicked, openly or privately, is not worthy to stand before a holy God.

temperate.⁷⁵ Even if the preacher is able to understand the biblical passage, if his life does not portray its practice, he is an unworthy minister, and will face God's judgment.

Important in understanding the influence of Puritan piety in Perkins' hermeneutics is the function of Ramism for Perkins. For example, on theology and ethics, Perkins insisted on a dynamic unity between theology and ethics. McKim demonstrates the similarities between Ramus' and Perkins' view of theology and ethics by quoting from both authors. Ramus wrote that theology was "the art of living well" (*bene vivendi*). Perkins, parallel to Ramus, said that "theologie, is the science of liuing blessedly for euer."⁷⁶ The Puritan concern for an essential oneness of theology and ethics is clear in Perkins' thought. As McKim states, "For Perkins proper teaching led to proper action. Conversely, one could not act ethically unless one's acts were informed by right belief. Throughout his works Perkins spelled out the ethical applications or 'uses' of his theological doctrines. Without these Perkins believed theology was of no lasting value."⁷⁷ In other words, for Perkins, right doctrine translates into right living. One's theology must impact one's ethics or living. Right theology does the believer no good if that theology does not transform the way of life.

Beeke maintains that Ramus' influence on Perkins was one of practicality. Beeke explains, "The task of the logician was to classify concepts to make them understandable and memorable. That was done by method, the orderly presentation of a subject."⁷⁸ Ramus' method

⁷⁵Ibid., 74.

⁷⁶McKim, "The Functions of Ramism in William Perkins' Theology," 508.

⁷⁷Ibid., 508-09.

⁷⁸Beeke, "William Perkins on Predestination and Preaching, retrieved 7 May 2010 from www.apuritansmind.com/WilliamPerkins/BeekeJoelPerkinsPredestinationPreaching.htm. The wedding of theology and personal piety in Perkins is seen in his understanding of God's sovereign grace in Predestination. Beeke, Ibid.,

of organization for comprehension and memory carried over into Perkins' hermeneutics and preaching and, thus, his piety. Perkins' concern for "method" was not ultimately for knowledge sake, but for easier retention that results in life application.

Another Ramist influence in Perkins is seen in his plain style preaching. Characteristic of Puritan plain style sermons is doctrine, reason, and use.⁷⁹ McKim summarizes, "Theological doctrines were 'collected' out of the 'places' of scripture, expounded, and then 'application' of the doctrine was to be made by the preacher."⁸⁰ The importance of personal application, or living out the teachings of Scripture, is seen in Ramist fashion as Perkins dichotomized application into mental and practical.⁸¹ By way of reminder, Perkins states, "Mental application is concerned with the mind and involves either doctrine or reproof (2 Tim. 3:16, 17)."⁸² Second, Perkins says practical application "has to do with life-style and behavior and involves instruction and correction."⁸³ Thompson correctly notes, "The importance of Perkins' use of Ramist method here was that it provided clergy with the theoretical framework by which they could stress in their sermons the need for changes in the lives and behavior of a congregation. Doctrinal truths could be moved from 'general truth' derived from Scripture texts

adds, "Primarily concerned with the conversion of souls and subsequent growth in godliness, Perkins believed that a biblical realization of God's sovereign grace in predestination was vital for spiritual comfort and assurance. He believed that predestination worked out experimentally in the souls of believers was inseparable from sovereign predestination in Christ. Far from being harsh and cold, sovereign predestination was the foundation upon which experimental faith could be built."

⁷⁹See Brad Thompson, "Directory for the Publique Worship of God Throughout the Three Kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland" in *Liturgies of the Western Church* (1961; reprint Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1988), 363-66, for a summary of the adopted ecclesiastically sanctioned form of preaching by the Westminster Assembly in 1644.

⁸⁰McKim, "The Functions of Ramism," 511.

⁸¹Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying*, 64.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid., 65.

and made immediate with ‘specific’ applications to hearers’ experiences.’⁸⁴ Central to the preaching of Perkins was not only the communication of theological truth, but specific ways in which that truth impacts daily living. While interpretation is for proclamation, the teaching of theological truth is meant for transformation.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to explore the relationship between the hermeneutical practice and personal piety of Perkins, particularly as they both relate to his theory of homiletics. His life was heavily influenced by Puritan Calvinism and Ramist philosophy. Each of these factors contributed to the man that Perkins became and the influence that he established. As a Ramist, Perkins found the benefit of “methods” for not only aiding in retention of the material studied, but in ways to apply what was learned. As a Puritan Calvinist, Perkins was determined to find the single, full sense of the passage. Further, he was concerned with a robust doctrine leading to vigorous living of that doctrine. For Perkins, hermeneutics, homiletics, and piety are three necessary parts of faithful Christian living. Understanding the intended sense of the passage, proclaiming the text with an emphasis upon its ‘use’, and ensuring that obedience was carried out faithfully was for Perkins inseparable. While modern Evangelicals may know of Calvin, Luther, and Edwards, William Perkins is one such figure that that modern believers would do well in getting to know.

⁸⁴Thompson, “Directory for the Publique Worship of God,” 511.