

William Perkins



William Perkins (1558–1602)

Portrait by Caffy Whitney

“The Wholesome Doctrine of the Gospel”

Faith and Love in the Writings
of William Perkins

Introduced and Edited by
Andrew S. Ballitch and
J. Stephen Yuille



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“The Wholesome Doctrine of the Gospel”

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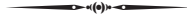
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Profiles in Reformed Spirituality



Charles Dickens's famous line in *A Tale of Two Cities*—"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times"—seems well suited to Western evangelicalism since the 1960s. On the one hand, these decades have seen much for which to praise God and to rejoice. In His goodness and grace, for instance, Reformed truth is no longer a house under siege. Growing numbers identify themselves theologically with what we hold to be biblical truth, namely, Reformed theology and piety. And yet, as an increasing number of Reformed authors have noted, there are many sectors of the surrounding western evangelicalism that are characterized by great shallowness and a trivialization of the weighty things of God. So much of evangelical worship seems barren. And when it comes to spirituality, there is little evidence of the riches of our heritage as Reformed evangelicals.

As it was at the time of the Reformation, when the watchword was *ad fontes*—"back to the sources"—so it is now: The way forward is backward. We need to go back to the spiritual heritage of Reformed evangelicalism to find the pathway forward. We cannot live in the past; to attempt to do so would be antiquarianism. But our Reformed forebearers in the faith can teach us much about Christianity, its doctrines, its passions, and its fruit.

And they can serve as our role models. As R. C. Sproul has noted of such giants as Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards: “These men all were conquered, overwhelmed, and spiritually intoxicated by their vision of the holiness of God. Their minds and imaginations were captured by the majesty of God the Father. Each of them possessed a profound affection for the sweetness and excellence of Christ. There was in each of them a singular and unswerving loyalty to Christ that spoke of a citizenship in heaven that was always more precious to them than the applause of men.”¹

To be sure, we would not dream of placing these men and their writings alongside the Word of God. John Jewel (1522–1571), the Anglican apologist, once stated: “What say we of the fathers, Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome, Cyprian?... They were learned men, and learned fathers; the instruments of the mercy of God, and vessels full of grace. We despise them not, we read them, we reverence them, and give thanks unto God for them. Yet...we may not make them the foundation and warrant of our conscience: we may not put our trust in them. Our trust is in the name of the Lord.”²

Seeking, then, both to honor the past and yet not idolize it, we are issuing these books in the series Profiles in Reformed Spirituality. The design is to introduce the spirituality and piety of the Reformed

1. R. C. Sproul, “An Invaluable Heritage,” *Tabletalk* 23, no. 10 (October 1999): 5–6.

2. Cited in Barrington R. White, “Why Bother with History?,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 4, no. 2 (July 1969): 85.

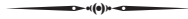
tradition by presenting descriptions of the lives of notable Christians with select passages from their works. This combination of biographical sketches and collected portions from primary sources gives a taste of the subjects' contributions to our spiritual heritage and some direction as to how the reader can find further edification through their works. It is the hope of the publisher that this series will provide riches for those areas where we are poor and light of day where we are stumbling in the deepening twilight.

—Joel R. Beeke
Michael A. G. Haykin



William Perkins

The Piety of William Perkins (1558–1602)



Coinciding with the years of Elizabeth I's illustrious reign (1558–1603) is the life of one of England's most influential theologians, William Perkins.¹ Scholars have described him as “the principal architect of Elizabethan Puritanism,” “the Puritan theologian of Tudor times,” “the most important Puritan writer,” “the prince of Puritan theologians,” “the most famous of all Puritan divines,” and “the father of Puritanism.” Some have gone so far as to include

1. For a brief account of Perkins's life, see *The Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Sidney Lee (London: Smith, Elder, 1909). Also see Joel R. Beeke and Randall Pederson, *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 469–80; Ian Breward, ed., introduction to *The Works of William Perkins*, in *The Courtenay Library of Reformation Classics* (Appleford: Sutton Courtenay, 1970), 3:3–131; Benjamin Brook, *The Lives of the Puritans* (1813; repr., Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1996), 2:129–36; Charles Cooper and Thompson Cooper, *Athenae Cantabrigiensis 1586–1609* (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell, 1861), 2:335–41; Thomas Fuller, *Abel Redivivus: or, The Dead Yet Speaking: The Lives and Deaths of the Modern Divines* (London, 1651), 431–40; Thomas Fuller, *The Holy State* (Cambridge, 1642), 88–93; Samuel Clark, *The Marrow of Ecclesiastical History, Contained in the Lives of one hundred forty-eight Fathers, Schoolmen, First Reformers, and Modern Divines* (London, 1654), 850–53.

him—along with John Calvin and Theodore Beza—in “the trinity of the orthodox.”²

Perkins’s stature as an eminent theologian is noteworthy given his less than auspicious start in life.³ He was born to Thomas and Hannah Perkins in the village of Marston Jabbet (near Coventry) in Bulkington Parish of Warwickshire. Very little is known of him until, at nineteen years of age, he enrolled at Christ’s College, Cambridge. The university had been a major player in the English Reformation. From 1511 to 1514, Desiderius Erasmus lectured in Greek while preparing his translation of the New Testament. Within ten years, William Tyndale prepared his English translation from Erasmus’s text. By the 1520s, Martin Luther’s works were circulating among scholars. In 1534, Cambridge accepted Parliament’s Act of Supremacy, thus recognizing the king as the head of the Church of England. And, in 1549, the divinity chair was offered to Martin

2. John Eusden, *Puritans, Lawyers, and Politics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1958), 11; Paul Seaver, *The Puritan Lectureships: The Politics of Religious Dissent, 1560–1662* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1970), 114; Christopher Hill, *God’s Englishman: Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 38; J. I. Packer, *An Anglican to Remember: William Perkins: Puritan Populizer* (London: St. Antholin’s Lectureship Charity, 1996), 1.

3. This introduction is adapted from Joel R. Beeke and J. Stephen Yuille, “Biographical Preface: William Perkins, the ‘Father of Puritanism,’” in vol. 1 of *The Works of William Perkins* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), ix–xxxii.

Bucer, thereby demonstrating the success of the Cambridge reformers.⁴

It was at this decidedly *Protestant* institution where Perkins began his lifelong studies in 1577, entering Christ's College as a pensioner, suggesting that socially his family stood on the borderline of the gentry.⁵ Perkins soon made a name for himself, but not for the reasons we might expect. "Quickly the wild fire of his youth began to break out," notes one biographer.⁶ Another declares that he "was profane and prodigal, and addicted to drunkenness."⁷ But Perkins eventually came under the godly influence of Laurence Chaderton (his personal tutor),⁸ Richard Rogers, Richard Greenham, and others. More importantly, God began to work in Perkins's heart, producing deep conviction for sin. Benjamin Brook records a particularly noteworthy incident in which God brought Perkins face-to-face with his wretchedness: "As he was walking in the skirts of the town, he heard a woman say to a child that was forward

4. Harry Porter, *Reformation and Reaction in Tudor Cambridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 51.

5. A *pensioner* paid the commons—that is, the common expenses of the college. A *sizar* was unable to pay the commons and, therefore, worked during his college career. A *scholar* was not required to pay the commons because the college waved his expenses due to his exceptional academic potential.

6. Fuller, *Abel Redevivus*, 432.

7. Cooper, *Athenae Cantabrigiensis*, 2:335.

8. Joel R. Beeke, "Laurence Chaderton: An Early Puritan Vision for Church and School," in *Church and School in Early Modern Protestantism: Studies in Honor of Richard A. Muller on the Maturation of a Theological Tradition*, ed. Jordan J. Ballor, David S. Sytsma, Jason Zuidema (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 321–37.

and peevish, 'Hold your tongue, or I will give you to drunken Perkins yonder.'"⁹ The exact details of this story might be apocryphal, but the reality of Perkins's personal transformation was certainly real. Burdened with the weight of his sin, he turned to the Savior of sinners. Surrendering his wicked ways, he soon joined Chaderton, "the pope of Cambridge Puritanism,"¹⁰ along with Rogers, Greenham, and others, in a spiritual brotherhood.

With renewed enthusiasm, Perkins devoted himself to his studies, receiving his bachelor's degree in 1581 and his master's degree in 1584. He was an industrious student. According to Thomas Fuller, "[Perkins] had a rare felicity in speedy reading of books, and as it were but turning them over would give an exact account of all considerables therein.... He took strict notice of all passages, as if he had dwelt on them particularly; perusing books so speedily, one would think he read nothing; so accurately, one would think he read all."¹¹

Perkins's Ministry

At some point during his studies, Perkins began to preach on Sundays to the prisoners at Cambridge castle. Apparently, he pronounced "the word *damn* with such an emphasis as left a doleful echo in his

9. As found in Brook, *Lives of the Puritans*, 2:129; and Cooper, *Atheneae Cantabrigiensis*, 2:335.

10. Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 125. See also Peter Lake, *Moderate Puritans and the Elizabethan Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

11. Fuller, *Holy State*, 91.

auditors' ears a good while after."¹² Moreover, he applied "the terrors of the law so directly to the consciences of his hearers that their hearts would often sink under conviction."¹³ His preaching was instrumental in delivering many from spiritual bondage. Samuel Clark tells of an occasion when Perkins confronted a condemned prisoner who was climbing the gallows, looking "half-dead."¹⁴ Perkins said to the man: "What is the matter with you? Are you afraid of death?" The prisoner confessed that he was less afraid of death than of what would follow. Perkins responded, "Come down again, man, and you will see what God's grace will do to strengthen you." The prisoner complied. Kneeling together, Perkins offered "such an effectual prayer in confession of sins...as made the poor prisoner burst out into abundance of tears." Convinced the prisoner was brought "low enough, even to hell's gates," Perkins showed him the freeness of the gospel. Clark comments that the prisoner's eyes were opened "to see how the black lines of all his sins were crossed and cancelled with the red lines of his crucified Savior's precious blood; so graciously applying it to his wounded conscience, as made him break out into new showers of tears for joy of the inward consolation which he found." The prisoner climbed cheerfully up the ladder, testified of salvation in Christ's blood, and bore his death with patience, "as if he actually saw himself delivered from the hell which he feared before, and heaven

12. Clark, *Marrow of Ecclesiastical History*, 851.

13. Brook, *Lives of the Puritans*, 2:130.

14. Clark, *Marrow of Ecclesiastical History*, 852–53.

opened for the receiving of his soul, to the great rejoicing of the beholders.”

Perkins’s preaching soon attracted people from the town and university. As Fuller observes, “His sermons were not so plain but that the piously learned did admire them, nor so learned but that the plain did understand them.”¹⁵ Given his growing popularity as a preacher, Perkins was appointed in 1584 as lecturer at Great St. Andrew’s Church, located across from Christ’s College. From this pulpit, he reached people from all social classes, being “systematic, scholarly, solid, and simple.”¹⁶ The effectiveness of his preaching was due in large part to his penchant for casuistry—the art of dealing with “cases of conscience” through self-examination and scriptural application.¹⁷ Each of his sermons “seemed all law and all gospel, all cordials and all corrosives, as the different necessities of people apprehended it.”¹⁸ Equally important, Perkins’s personal godliness was a powerful example to all: “he lived his sermons, and as his preaching was a comment on his text, so his practice was a comment on his preaching.”¹⁹

Around the time of his appointment to Great St. Andrew’s, Perkins was also elected to a fellowship

15. Fuller, *Holy State*, 89–90.

16. Packer, *Anglican to Remember*, 3.

17. Ian Breward, “William Perkins and the Origins of Puritan Casuistry,” *The Evangelist Quarterly* 40 (1968): 16–22; and George L. Mosse, *The Holy Pretence: A Study in Christianity and Reason of State from William Perkins to John Winthrop* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957), 48–67.

18. Fuller, *Abel Redevivus*, 434.

19. Fuller, *Abel Redevivus*, 436.

at Christ's College. He held this position from 1584 to 1595, serving as dean from 1590 to 1591. Fellows were responsible for preaching, lecturing, and tutoring students, acting as "guides to learning as well as guardians of finances, morals, and manners."²⁰ Perkins served the university in several additional capacities. He catechized students at Corpus Christi College on Thursday afternoons, lecturing on the Ten Commandments in a manner that deeply affected them.²¹ He also worked as an adviser on Sunday afternoons, counseling the spiritually distressed. In these roles, Perkins influenced a generation of young students, including Richard Sibbes, John Cotton, John Preston, and William Ames. In the preface to one of his own works, Ames remarks, "I gladly call to mind the time, when being young, I heard worthy Master Perkins, so preach in a great assembly of students, that he instructed them soundly in the truth, stirred them up effectually to seek after godliness, made them fit for the kingdom of God; and by his own example showed them, what things they should chiefly intend, that they might promote true religion, in the power of it, unto God's glory, and others' salvation."²²

While at Cambridge, Perkins engaged in several controversies. When Elizabeth ascended the throne

20. Mark Curtis, *Oxford and Cambridge in Transition 1558–1642* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 80.

21. Gerald R. Bragg, *Freedom and Authority: A Study of English Thought in the Early Seventeenth Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 138.

22. William Ames, "To the Reader," in *Conscience with the Power and Cases thereof* (London, 1643), n.p.

in 1558, most of the English Protestants who had fled to the Continent during the reign of Mary returned to England. Some were discouraged with the state of the church, desiring to remove all remnants of Roman Catholicism. Some of them also desired to reform the church's government on the basis of Presbyterianism.²³ These men encompassed a broad spectrum of opinion, yet all shared one common denominator—dissatisfaction with the extent of the Reformation in England. As Neil Keeble notes, “The term ‘Puritan’ became current during the 1560s as a nickname for Protestants who, dissatisfied with the Elizabethan Settlement of the church by the Act of Uniformity of 1559, would have subscribed to the contention of the Admonition to Parliament of 1572 that ‘we in England are so far off, from having a church rightly reformed, according to the prescript of God’s Word, that as yet we are not come to the outward face of the same.’”²⁴

Perkins never openly allied himself with the likes of Thomas Cartwright, an outspoken proponent of Presbyterianism. In 1591, he was called before the Star Chamber as a witness against the defendants Thomas Cartwright and Edmund Snape. Two years earlier, these three men, along with Laurence Chaderton, had been present at St. John’s College for a

23. For an overview of the Admonition to Parliament in 1572, see Peter Lake, *Anglicans and Puritans? Presbyterianism and English Conformist Thought from Whitgift to Hooker* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988).

24. Neil Keeble, “Puritan Spirituality,” in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. G. S. Wakefield (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 323.

discussion concerning the Presbyterian Book of Discipline. While confirming the defendants' presence, Perkins testified that this was an isolated meeting, and that he was unaware of any talk of the actual implementation of presbyteries.²⁵ Perkins had even less sympathy for the separatist movement, commenting, "No man ought to sever himself from the Church of England, for some wants that be therein. We have the true doctrine of Christ preached among us by God's blessing, and though there be corruptions in manners among us, yea, and though they could justly find fault with our doctrine, yet so long as we hold Christ, no man ought to sever himself from our Church."²⁶ Like his mentor, Chaderton, Perkins worked to purify the established church rather than joining those who advocated separation. Instead of focusing his attention on church polity, he was primarily concerned with addressing pastoral inadequacies, spiritual deficiencies, and widespread ignorance within the church. That being said, Perkins occasionally expressed his dissatisfaction over the condition of the Church of England. On January 19, 1587, he was called before the vice-chancellor at Cambridge to give an account for a sermon in which he allegedly railed against "superstitious" and "antichristian" practices.²⁷ Among other things, he

25. W. B. Patterson, *William Perkins and the Making of Protestant England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 46–48.

26. William Perkins, *A Godly and Learned Exposition Upon Christ's Sermon in the Mount*, in *The Works of William Perkins* (London, 1631), 3:264.

27. Cooper, *Athenae Cantabrigiensis*, 2:335; and Brooks, *Lives of the Puritans*, 2:131.

objected to kneeling and facing east while receiving the Lord's Supper. Perkins denied some of the charges while modifying several of his comments. After this brush with the authorities, it appears he intentionally steered clear of such controversies.

In the 1590s, ecclesiastical concerns were overshadowed by more important theological questions regarding the nature of grace.²⁸ Peter Baro (Lady Margaret's professor of divinity) argued that God's work of predestination is based upon His foreknowledge of an individual's faith and works. Perkins responded with *A Golden Chain (Armillæ Aureæ)*, in which he openly challenged Baro's position. "God's decree," writes Perkins, "in as much as it concerns man, is called predestination, which is the decree of God, by which He has ordained all men to a certain and everlasting estate, that is, either to salvation or condemnation, for His own glory."²⁹ For Perkins, God executes His decree through four "degrees": effectual calling, whereby "a sinner, being severed from the world, is entertained into God's family"; justification, whereby "such as believe, are accounted just before God through the obedience of Christ Jesus"; sanctification, whereby "such as believe, being delivered from the tyranny of sin,

28. For more on this controversy, see Mark Shaw, "William Perkins and the New Pelagians: Another Look at the Cambridge Predestination Controversy of the 1590s," *Westminster Theological Journal* 58 (1996): 267–301.

29. 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*, in *The Works of William Perkins* (London, 1608), 1:16.

are by little and little renewed in holiness and righteousness"; and glorification, whereby the saints are perfectly transformed "into the image of the Son of God."³⁰ This "golden chain" constituted, for Perkins, the definitive word on God's grace.

During his time at Cambridge, Perkins earned an unrivaled reputation as a teacher and writer. John Cotton considered Perkins's ministry the "one good reason why there came so many excellent preachers out of Cambridge in England, more than out of Oxford."³¹ When Thomas Goodwin enrolled at Cambridge in 1613, a full ten years after Perkins's death, he could write, "The town was then filled with the discourse of the power of Master Perkins's ministry, still fresh in most men's memories."³²

In 1595, Perkins resigned his fellowship at Christ's College to marry a young widow, Timothee Cradock. During their seven years of marriage, they conceived seven children—three of whom died in infancy. He continued to preach at Great St. Andrew's Church until his death (caused by complications arising from kidney stones) in 1602 at age forty-four.³³ Expressing the sentiment of many throughout England, Perkins's closest friend, James Montagu, later bishop

30. Perkins, *Golden Chain*, 1:78–93.

31. Louis B. Wright, "William Perkins: Elizabethan Apostle of 'Practical Divinity,'" *Huntington Library Quarterly* 3 (1940): 194.

32. Thomas Goodwin as quoted in Breward, *Works of William Perkins*, 3:9.

33. Perkins was buried in the churchyard of Great St. Andrew's. Everett Emerson, *English Puritanism from John Hooper to John Milton* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1968), 159.



Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680)

A Puritan Congregationalist and member of the Westminster Assembly. Having enrolled at Cambridge ten years after Perkins's death, Goodwin remarked, "The town was then filled with the discourse of the power of Master Perkins's ministry, still fresh in most men's memories."

of Winchester, preached the funeral sermon from Joshua 1:2, saying, "Moses my servant is dead."

Perkins's influence as a theologian continued unabated after his death. This was due in large part to the widespread popularity of his writings. They include discourses on various cases of conscience; treatises on worship, preaching, assurance, predestination, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the errors of Roman Catholicism; and expositions of Galatians 1–5, Matthew 5–7, Hebrews 11, Jude, and Revelation 1–3. Eleven posthumous editions, containing nearly fifty books, were printed by 1635.³⁴ At least fifty editions of his works were printed in Germany and Switzerland. There were 185 seventeenth-century printings of his individual or collected works in Dutch,³⁵ twice as many as any other Puritan.³⁶ Perkins and his most influential student, William Ames, impacted numerous *Nadere Reformatie* (Dutch Further Reformation) theologians. His writings were also translated into Spanish, Welsh, Irish, French, Italian, Hungarian, and Czech.³⁷

34. Harry Porter claims that Perkins wrote more than fifty of the 210 books printed in Cambridge between 1585 and 1618. *Reformation and Reaction*, 260–64.

35. J. Van der Haar, *From Abbadie to Young: A Bibliography of English, mostly Puritan Works, Translated i/o Dutch Language* (Veenendaal: Kool, 1980), 1:96–108.

36. Cornelis W. Schoneveld, *Intertraffic of the Mind: Studies in Seventeenth-Century Anglo-Dutch Translation with a Checklist of Books Translated from English into Dutch, 1600–1700* (Leiden: Brill, 1983), 220–26.

37. Munson, "William Perkins: Theologian of Transition," 56–59; and Wright, "William Perkins," 171.

In New England, close to one hundred Cambridge men, including William Brewster of Plymouth, Thomas Hooker of Connecticut, John Winthrop of Massachusetts Bay, and Roger Williams of Rhode Island, lived in Perkins's shadow. Richard Mather was converted while reading from Perkins, and—more than a century later—Jonathan Edwards was gleaning insights from Perkins's writings.³⁸ According to Samuel Morison, “a typical Plymouth Colony library comprised a large and a small Bible, [Henry] Ainsworth's translation of the Psalms, and the works of William Perkins, a favorite theologian.”³⁹ Perry Miller observes, “Anyone who reads the writings of early New England learns that Perkins was indeed a towering figure in their eyes.”⁴⁰

Perkins's Theology

Perkins embraced what he described as Scripture's “infallible certainty,” meaning “the testimony of Scripture is the testimony of God Himself.”⁴¹ Because Scripture is the very Word of God, Perkins viewed it as the means by which God reveals Himself and imparts grace to His people; and this necessarily implied that Scripture must stand alone at the center of the life of the Christian and the church.

Owing to his concept of Scripture's “infallible certainty,” Perkins adopted the Bible as the axiom

38. Porter, *Reformation and Reaction*, 258–60.

39. Samuel Morison, *The Intellectual Life of Colonial New England*, 2nd ed. (New York: University Press, 1956), 134.

40. Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1956), 57–59.

41. Perkins, *Christ's Sermon in the Mount*, 3:219–26.

of all his thinking and the focus of all his teaching. To that end, he devised a very simple structure in preaching and writing: exposition, doctrines, reasons, and uses.⁴² He was committed to this structure because he believed it was the best way to convince the judgment and embrace the affections, thereby bringing the mind into vital contact with the meaning of Scripture.

When it comes to his actual exposition of Scripture, Perkins practiced Christ-centered exegesis. This approach stemmed from his great desire and design to proclaim Christ above all else. As recorded in Luke 6:48, Christ describes the wise man as one who “built an house, and digged deep, and laid the foundation on a rock.” Perkins viewed this statement as the archetype of true wisdom. To begin with, true wisdom consists of *digging deep*. For Perkins, this is the cultivation of conviction for sin. Without a “ransacking of the heart,” we cannot lay a good foundation.⁴³ Second, true wisdom consists of *choosing a rock*. Our works of righteousness cannot provide any protection against God’s judgment. We need to stand upon a secure rock, meaning we must look away from ourselves to Christ for salvation. Third, true wisdom consists of *laying a foundation*. According to

42. William Perkins, *Art of Prophesying; or, A treatise concerning the sacred and only true manner and method of preaching*, in *The Works of William Perkins* (London, 1631), 2:341. For more on Perkins’s approach to biblical interpretation, see Andrew S. Ballitch, “Scripture is both the Glosse and the Text: Biblical Interpretation and its Implementation in the Works of William Perkins” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017).

43. Perkins, *Christ’s Sermon in the Mount*, 3:256.

Perkins, “This is done by our faith in Christ: for as mutual love joins one man unto another, so true faith makes us one with Christ.”⁴⁴

By means of this union, “Christ, with all His benefits, is made ours.”⁴⁵ In particular, we become the beneficiaries of justification. Perkins writes, “The form of justification, is, as it were, a kind of translation of the believer’s sins unto Christ, and again Christ’s righteousness unto the believer, by a reciprocal or mutual imputation.”⁴⁶ This concept of “mutual imputation” flowed directly from Perkins’s covenant theology.⁴⁷ In the garden, God established the covenant of works with Adam and his posterity. That is to say, Adam stood in the place of his descendants, and God gave him a specific commandment. When Adam sinned, God counted his sin as his posterity’s sin, his guilt as his posterity’s guilt, and his punishment as his posterity’s punishment. This gave rise to the need for another covenant—the covenant of grace. Adam has a counterpart—the last Adam (Christ). Just as Adam’s “offense” resulted in death and condemnation for his posterity, so too Christ’s “gift by grace” resulted in life and justification for His posterity (Romans 5:15–19). For Perkins, when

44. Perkins, *Christ’s Sermon in the Mount*, 3:256. R. Tudur Jones demonstrates that from Perkins to John Bunyan, the Puritans stress “union with Christ.” He finds it present in earlier Protestantism; for example, Calvin insisted that there is no benefit unless the Holy Spirit engrafts us into Christ. “Union with Christ: The Existential Nerve of Puritan Piety,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 41 (1990): 186–208.

45. Perkins, *Golden Chain*, 1:83.

46. Perkins, *Golden Chain*, 1:82.

47. Perkins, *Golden Chain*, 1:170.

we believe, we are no longer in Adam (under the covenant of works) because we have been united with Christ (under the covenant of grace), who has fulfilled the covenant of works on our behalf. This is the framework for Perkins's understanding of "mutual imputation"—Christ fulfills the covenant of works, meeting its requirement by His active obedience (life) and paying its penalty by His passive obedience (death).

Perkins, therefore, insisted that we are saved by virtue of union with Christ through faith. He insisted with equal vigor that saving faith includes far more than intellectual assent. According to Mark Shaw, Perkins's "covenant theology enabled him to follow a consistent line of co-action which gave strong emphasis to God's sovereign grace in Christ as the ultimate cause of salvation while at the same time emphasizing the necessity of human response.... The human psyche as created by God needed the sovereignty of grace to deliver it from the condemnation it was helpless to alter while at the same time it needed to apply and respond to his grace."⁴⁸ In other words, Perkins did not believe we are simply forced into a state of salvation without any awareness of our own experience. Instead, he affirmed that God proceeds with us by steps, so that we are involved in the process.

Perkins adhered wholeheartedly to God's sovereign grace in salvation. He believed that "man must be considered in a four-fold estate"—namely, as he is

48. Mark Shaw, "Drama in the Meeting House: The Concept of Conversion in the Theology of William Perkins," *Westminster Theological Journal* 45 (1983): 71.

“created,” “corrupted,” “renewed,” and “glorified.”⁴⁹ Before the fall, man’s will possessed “liberty of nature, in which he could will either good or evil.” After the fall, man’s “liberty of nature” remained, meaning he still possesses the freedom to choose.⁵⁰ However, man’s “liberty of nature” is now “joined with a necessity of sinning, because it stands in bondage under sin.” Perkins believed that, in this estate, man’s will is appropriately termed by Augustine, “the bound free-will.”⁵¹ That is to say, man’s will is free in the actions it performs but captive in the way it performs them. In this condition, his heart is so captivated by sin that he has no power to escape from its bondage. For this reason, he stands in need of God’s sovereign grace. Although Perkins preached about God’s sovereign grace from eternity and God’s covenant acts of salvation, he was particularly concerned about how this redemptive process breaks through into our experience. He wanted to explain how we respond to God’s sovereign acts—that is, how the covenant of grace impacts us so as to move us from initial faith to full assurance.

Perkins’s Piety

At this point, Perkins’s experimental piety steps to the fore.⁵² The term *experimental* comes from the

49. William Perkins, *A Reformed Catholic*, in *The Works of William Perkins* (London, 1608), 1:551.

50. William Perkins, *A Treatise of God’s Free Grace, and Man’s Free-Will*, in *The Works of William Perkins* (London, 1608), 1:709.

51. Perkins, *Treatise of God’s Free Grace*, 1:703.

52. For more on this, see Joel R. Beeke, “The Lasting Power of Reformed Experiential Preaching,” in *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate*

Latin verb *experior*—to know by experience. For Perkins, our experience of the covenant of grace begins with humiliation.⁵³ God “softens” our hearts by giving us a “sight of sin” arising from our knowledge of the law and a “sorrow for sin” arising from our knowledge of His displeasure.⁵⁴ Perkins equated this “pricking in the heart” with the “spirit of bondage” that the apostle Paul mentions in Romans 8:14. “This sorrow,” says Perkins, “is called the *spirit of bondage to fear*; because when the Spirit has made a man see his sins, he sees further the curse of the law, and so he finds himself to be in bondage under Satan, hell, death, and damnation: at which most terrible sight his heart is smitten with fear and trembling.”⁵⁵ Once this spirit of bondage takes hold, the result is “holy desperation.”⁵⁶ Simply put, we recognize that we will never attain salvation by any strength or goodness of our own. Perceiving this, we acknowledge that

Plea for Preaching, ed. Don Kistler (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 2002), 94–128.

53. For more on this, see J. Stephen Yuille, “Ready to Receive: Humbling and Softening in William Perkins’s Preparation of the Heart,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 5 (2013): 91–106.

54. William Perkins, *A Treatise Tending Unto a Declaration, whether a man be in the estate of damnation, or in the estate of grace*, in *The Works of William Perkins* (London, 1608), 1:363.

55. Perkins, *Tending Unto a Declaration*, 1:364. Perkins was careful to acknowledge that this experience of humiliation varies in degree and expression from person to person; that is to say, the issue is not the magnitude of our sorrow, but whether or not we are convinced that our righteousness is unacceptable in God’s sight. “It is often seen in a festered sore,” writes Perkins, “that the corruption is let out as well with the pricking of a small pin as with the wide lance of a razor.” *Tending Unto a Declaration*, 1:364–65.

56. Perkins, *Tending Unto a Declaration*, 1:365.

we are without moral virtues adequate to commend ourselves to God, and that anything short of damnation is a mercy.

Having thereby softened our hearts, God now causes faith to “breed.” For a better understanding of how God cultivates faith in the heart, Perkins appealed to the fact “that a sinner is often compared to a sick man in the Scriptures.”⁵⁷ His point is that disease is to the body as sin is to the soul; moreover, the method of curing disease points to the method of curing sin.⁵⁸ When we are convinced we suffer from a disease, we immediately call for the doctor. When the doctor arrives, we yield ourselves to his counsel and willingly accept whatever remedy he prescribes. The same is true when it comes to faith in Christ. When we are absolutely convinced of our need, we submit to His cure. God leads us to “ponder most diligently” His great mercy offered in Christ, and He brings us to acknowledge our “need of Christ” whereby we pray, “O God, be merciful to me a sinner.”⁵⁹

Accompanying this faith is repentance, which Perkins defines as “a work of grace, arising of a godly sorrow; whereby a man turns from all his sins unto God, and brings forth fruits worthy amendment of life.” For Perkins, God produces repentance by “steps and degrees.” There must be: (1) the knowledge of the law of God, the nature of sin, the guilt of sin, and the judgment of God; (2) the application of this knowledge to the heart by the Spirit of bondage;

57. Perkins, *Tending Unto a Declaration*, 1:365.

58. Perkins, *Tending Unto a Declaration*, 1:365–66.

59. Perkins, *Tending Unto a Declaration*, 1:365.

(3) the consequent fear and sorrow; (4) the knowledge of the gospel; (5) the application of this knowledge to the heart by the Spirit of adoption; (6) the consequent joy and sorrow; and (7) the “turning of the mind, whereby a man determines and resolves with himself to sin no more as he hath done, but to live in newness of life.”⁶⁰

From humiliation, faith, and repentance, our experience of the covenant of grace moves to obedience. Perkins viewed the law as the point of contact between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace since obedience is fundamental to both covenants. He also asserted that the focus shifts between the two covenants from our obedience to Christ’s obedience—the covenant of works having been fulfilled in the covenant of grace. For Perkins, therefore, we are free to obey the law in accordance with the new covenant. In his exposition of Matthew 7:21–23, he affirms that those who profess Christ’s name seek to do the Father’s will.⁶¹ He defines the Father’s will in terms of two texts in Scripture. The first is John 6:40, where Christ declares, “And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day.” The second text is 1 Thessalonians 4:3–4, where the apostle Paul

60. William Perkins, *Two Treatises. I. Of the nature and practice of repentance. II. Of the combat of the flesh and spirit*, in *The Works of William Perkins* (London, 1608), 1:453.

61. For an analysis of Perkins’s exposition of Christ’s Sermon on the Mount, see J. Stephen Yuille, *Living Blessedly Forever: The Sermon on the Mount and the Puritan Piety of William Perkins* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012).

writes, “For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: that every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour.” Based on these verses, Perkins maintains that “the doing of the Father’s will” stands in three things: faith, repentance, and new obedience.⁶²

Simply put, “new obedience” is the fruit of faith and repentance, whereby a man “endeavors himself to yield obedience to all God’s commandments, from all the powers and parts both of his soul and his body.” It is called *new*, because “it is a renewing of that in man whereto he was perfectly enabled by creation.”⁶³ Perkins believed the affections are the inclination of the soul to a particular object. The soul loves whatever it perceives as good, and this love is manifested in desire (when the object is absent) and delight (when the object is present). Conversely, the soul hates whatever it perceives as evil, and this hatred is manifested in fear (when the object is absent) and sorrow (when the object is present). Prior to Adam’s fall in the garden, man’s love was set on God and, consequently, his affections were well directed. When Adam fell, however, the object of man’s love changed. In his fallen condition, his love is no longer set on God but on self. In a state of regeneration, the Holy Spirit renews our love for God, and the result is new obedience. Perkins elaborates, “Sanctified

62. Perkins, *Christ’s Sermon in the Mount*, 3:245. Perkins sees *faith* in John 6:40 and *repentance* (i.e., sanctification) and *new obedience* in 1 Thessalonians 4:3.

63. Perkins, *Christ’s Sermon in the Mount*, 3:246.

affections are known by this, that they are moved and inclined to that which is good, to embrace it: and are not commonly affected and stirred with that which is evil, unless it be to eschew it.”⁶⁴

For Perkins, this experience of the covenant of grace in humiliation, faith, repentance, and obedience was absolutely essential. We must seek “the graces of God’s children who are regenerate, even true faith, true repentance, and new obedience, and not rest in other gifts though they be most excellent.”⁶⁵ He was convinced that many people err at this very point because they satisfy themselves with “a general persuasion of God’s mercy.”⁶⁶ But this “general persuasion” is not the same thing as genuine faith and repentance. It may produce “reformation of life,” but it never produces “new obedience.”

Expectedly, this discussion of “a general persuasion of God’s mercy” leads to Perkins’s handling of the doctrine of assurance. By the late sixteenth century, the issue of assurance loomed large within the Church of England because of the growing tendency on the part of many to take God’s saving grace for granted. As Richard Lovelace explains, “The problem that confronts the Puritans as they look out on their decaying society and their lukewarm church is not simply to dislodge the faithful from the slough of mortal or venial sin, but radically to awaken those who are professing but not actual Christians, who are

64. Perkins, *Tending Unto a Declaration*, 1:371.

65. Perkins, *Christ’s Sermon in the Mount*, 3:249.

66. Perkins, *Christ’s Sermon in the Mount*, 3:247.

caught in a trap of carnal security.”⁶⁷ The early Puritans in particular reacted to dead orthodoxy, which minimized the seriousness of sin and regarded mere assent to the truths of Scripture as sufficient for salvation. It thus became essential for them to distinguish between assurance and presumption. Perkins was particularly concerned with the prevalence of civility within the professing church. “If we look into the general state of our people,” says he, “we shall see that religion is professed, but not obeyed; nay, obedience is counted as preciseness, and so reproached.”⁶⁸ He was deeply concerned, therefore, about awakening a sleepy generation of church-goers from their false sense of security. As a result, he labored to lead his flock into a well-grounded assurance of salvation.⁶⁹

To that end, Perkins produced several writings, in which he explains how we are to search our consciences for the least evidence of salvation based on Christ’s saving work.⁷⁰ He viewed his efforts in this regard as part of a pastor’s fundamental task in

67. Richard C. Lovelace, “The Anatomy of Puritan Piety: English Puritan Devotional Literature, 1600–1640,” in *Christian Spirituality* 3, ed. L. Dupré and D. E. Saliers (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 303.

68. Perkins, *Christ’s Sermon in the Mount*, 3:261.

69. Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 18.

70. For Perkins’s treatment of the doctrine of assurance, see *A Treatise Tending unto a Declaration, whether a man be in the estate of damnation or in the restate of grace; A Case of Conscience, the greatest that ever was, how a man may know whether he be the child of God or no; A Discourse of Conscience, where is set down the nature, properties, and differences thereof, as also the way to get and keep a good conscience; and A Grain of Mustard-seed, or, the least measure of grace that is or can be effectual*

keeping “balance in the sanctuary” between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.⁷¹ Pastors had to demonstrate how God’s immovable will moved man’s will and how to look for evidence of inclusion in God’s covenant. They also had to instruct their people as to how to make their election sure.

According to Perkins, one of the principal means by which God imparts assurance is the covenant of grace. The golden chain of salvation (predestination, calling, justification, sanctification, and glorification) is linked to us through the preaching of God’s gracious covenant. Perkins pointed to this covenant as a basis for assurance, maintaining that God becomes our God by means of the gracious covenant propounded in the gospel, promising pardon of sin in Christ. “What must we do to say truly and in assurance that God is our God?” Here are the basics of Perkins’s answer:

We must for our parts make a covenant with Him, unto which is required consent on either party; first on God’s part, that He will be our God.... On our part is required consent.... When we receive the sacraments...there is required in our consent a further degree which stands in an outward consent of the heart, whereby a man takes God for his God; which is then begun, when first a man acknowledges and bewails his sins...when he endeavors to be reconciled to God...when he purposes never to sin

to salvation. These four treatises are found in *The Works of William Perkins* (London, 1608), vol. 1.

71. Irvonwy Morgan, *Puritan Spirituality* (London: Epworth, 1973), chap. 2.

again. When this covenant is thus concluded by consent of both parties, a man may safely and truly say that God is his God. Now seeing we know these things, our duty is to labor to be settled and assured.... First in this assurance is the foundation of all true comfort: all the promises of God are hereupon grounded...and not only is it the foundation of all comfort in this life, but of all happiness after death itself...for by virtue of this covenant shall we rise again after death to life, glory, and immortality.⁷²

Clearly, as far as Perkins was concerned, we are active in terms of our covenant relation with God. Yet he acknowledged that we never glean assurance from a conditional covenant alone, for human conditionality can never answer all the questions conjoined with human depravity and divine sovereignty. For Perkins, the covenant also contains an absolute relationship. Assurance does not flow from the covenant's conditional nature, which is connected to our performance, but from the covenant's absolute nature, which is grounded in God's gracious being and promises. Perkins comments, "God has spoken to us; He has made promise of blessing to us; He has made covenant with us; and He has sworn unto us. What can we more require of Him? What better ground of true comfort [is there]?" He adds, "The promise is not made to the work, but to the worker, and to the worker, not for the merit of

72. William Perkins, *A Godly and Learned Exposition Upon the Whole Epistle of Jude*, in *The Works of William Perkins* (London, 1631), 3:520.

his work, but for the merit of Christ.”⁷³ Although Perkins encouraged people to strive after assurance, he ultimately pointed them to the one-sided grace of God, declaring that the covenant itself is a divine gift rooted in the merits of Christ. Assurance, in the final analysis, rests on God’s faithfulness to His covenant promises, making even the fulfillment of the condition of faith on our part possible only by God’s gracious gift.

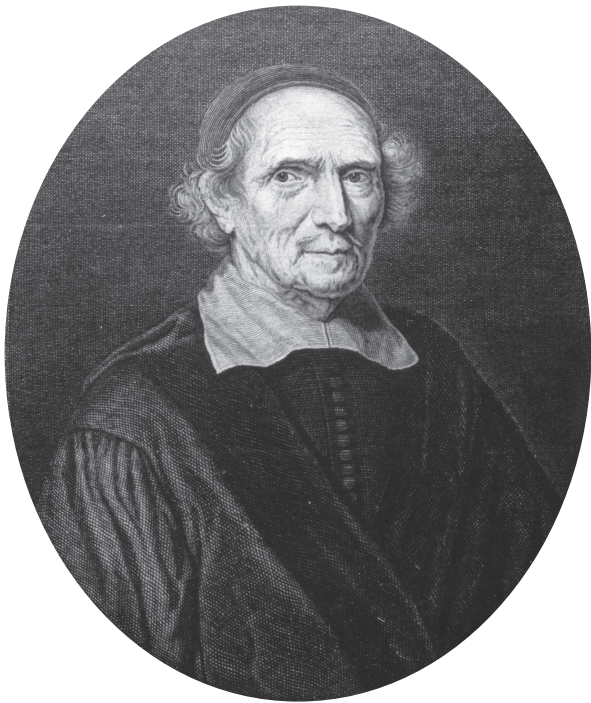
For Perkins, faith is a supernatural gift by which we take hold of Christ with all the promises of salvation. The object of faith is Christ alone. Faith sees Christ, first, as the sacrifice on the cross for the remission of sins, then learns to experience Him as the strength to battle temptation, the comfort to endure affliction, and ultimately as everything needed in this life and the life to come. In sum, faith shows itself when “every several person does particularly apply unto himself, Christ with His merits, by an inward persuasion of the heart which comes none other way, but by the effectual certificate of the Holy Ghost concerning the mercy of God in Christ Jesus.”⁷⁴

Faith, therefore, has no meaning apart from Christ. “Faith is... a principal grace of God, whereby man is engrafted into Christ and thereby becomes one with Christ, and Christ one with him.”⁷⁵ Perkins’s numerous references to faith as an “instrument” or

73. William Perkins, *A Commentary or Exposition Upon the Five First Chapters of the Epistle to the Galatians*, in *The Works of William Perkins* (London, 1631), 2:243, 393.

74. Perkins, *Golden Chain*, 1:79–80.

75. Perkins, *Cases of Conscience*, 45.



Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676)

Dutch theologian at the University of Utrecht known for combining academic theology and personal Christian devotion. Voetius referred to Perkins as “the Homer of practical Englishmen.”

“hand” must be understood in this context. Faith is a gift of God’s sovereign pleasure that moves us to respond to Christ through the preaching of the Word. Perkins’s use of “instrument” or “hand” conveys the simultaneously passive and active role of faith in this redemptive activity. As Hideo Oki writes, “The connotation of ‘instrument’ suggests activity. This activity, however, is never simply ‘positive’; on the contrary, it means that when it is most active, then it is moved and used by something other and higher than itself. Thus, in the midst of activity there is passivity, and in the midst of passivity it [is] most efficient in activity.”⁷⁶ This is precisely what Perkins intended. Initially, faith is the passive “instrument” or “hand” granted by God to the sinner to receive Christ. Yet, precisely at the moment when Christ is received, faith responds to the gift of grace. Thus, the response is most active when it has completely yielded to the person it has received. This concept of faith, within the context of covenant, is the genius of Perkins’s theology. His intense concern for the godly life arises alongside his equally intense concern to maintain the Reformation principle of salvation by grace alone, for we are never granted salvation on account of our faith but by means of faith.

Perkins’s Legacy

Perkins was committed to proclaiming this experience of God’s sovereign grace from humiliation to assurance and seeing it cultivated in others.

76. Hideo Oki, “Ethics in Seventeenth Century English Puritanism” (ThD diss., Union Theological Seminary, New York, 1960), 141.

Behind the industrious scholar, combative polemicist, exhaustive expositor, and prolific author, stood a pastor deeply concerned about the spiritual condition of the individual in the pew. For Perkins, there was a clear difference between speculative (notional) knowledge and sensible (inclinal) knowledge. The first involves the head alone, whereas the second involves the head and heart. With this distinction in view, he exhorts:

We must labor for the power of this knowledge in ourselves, that we may know Christ to be our Savior, and may feel the power of His death to mortify sin in us, and the virtue of His resurrection to raise and build us up to newness of life for knowledge in the brain will not save the soul. Saving knowledge in religion is experimental, and he that is truly founded upon Christ feels the power and efficacy of His death and resurrection, effectually causing the death of sin, and the life of grace which both appear by new obedience.⁷⁷

In Perkins's estimation, the Reformed theology of grace ("golden chain") was not a subject for mere academic debate and discussion, but it was crucial to the development of true Christian piety. Perkins was concerned that the church was full of people who possess a notional belief in God, yet remain worldly in their ultimate concerns and pursuits. He was convinced, therefore, that such people must experience an affective appropriation of God's sovereign grace,

77. Perkins, *Christ's Sermon in the Mount*, 3:259–60.

moving beyond intellectual assent to heartfelt dedication to Christ.

This emphasis is prevalent throughout Perkins's works. It is central, for example, in his sermons on the book of Jude. Jude reminds his readers that they "should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (v. 3). Perkins declares that the faith "is nothing else but the wholesome doctrine of the gospel,"⁷⁸ consisting of two "general" heads: faith and love. He derives these two "heads" from 2 Timothy 1:13: "Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus." In short, "the wholesome doctrine of the gospel" contains things needful to be "believed" (faith) and things needful to be "practiced" (love). Accordingly, Perkins expounds twenty-one "grounds of doctrine to be believed"⁷⁹ and eleven "grounds of doctrine to be practiced,"⁸⁰ thereby demonstrating the relationship between faith and love.

In the following pages you will find these grounds with accompanying explanations drawn from across Perkins's works. It is hoped that these chapters will serve as a helpful introduction to his works and an insightful glimpse into his understanding of the wholesome doctrine of the gospel.

78. Perkins, *Works* (2014), 4:47.

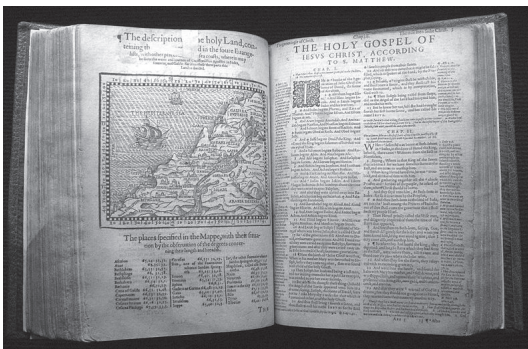
79. Perkins, *Works* (2014), 4:47–72.

80. Perkins, *Works* (2014), 4:72–92.

SECTION ONE

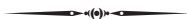


Faith: Grounds of
Doctrine to Be Believed



The Geneva Bible, 1560

An English Bible translation with marginal notes. Perkins used and often quoted this English translation in his works.



The Certainty of Scripture

All scripture is given by inspiration of God.

—2 Timothy 3:16

It is a thing most necessary that men should be assured that the doctrine of the gospel and the Scripture is not of man but of God.¹ This is the first thing which Paul stands upon in this epistle. It may be asked how this assurance is obtained. I answer, for the settling of our consciences that Scripture is the Word of God, there are two testimonies.

The first testimony is the evidence of God's Spirit, imprinted and expressed in the Scriptures. This is an excellency of the Word of God above all words and writings of men and angels. It contains thirteen points. The first is the purity of the law of Moses, whereas the laws of men have their imperfections. The second is that the Scriptures set down the true cause of all misery, namely sin, and the perfect remedy, namely the death of Christ. The third is the antiquity of Scripture, in that it sets down a history from the beginning of the world. The fourth is the prophecies of things in sundry books of Scripture,

1. *Commentary on Galatians*, ed. J. Stephen Yuille, vol. 2 of *The Works of William Perkins*, gen. ed. Joel R. Beeke and Derek W. H. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 39–41.