

***THE
EVANGELICAL
LIBRARY
ANNUAL
LECTURE 2008***



William Perkins 1558-1602

Predestination and Evangelism in the Life and Thought of William Perkins Dr Jonathan D Moore

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Introduction

I count it a great honour to have been asked by the *Evangelical Library* to deliver its annual lecture for 2008. I myself personally owe a debt of gratitude to *the Library* for its postal lending service of fine books. At the outset of my postgraduate studies in Puritanism, it was none other than the Evangelical Library that supplied me with key texts to help me in my research, texts that my university libraries were unable to supply. These Puritan studies eventually led me to discover the writings of William Perkins to my great spiritual delight. And that is why I am here this evening in God's providence.

I do consider it, therefore, an excellent decision that the Committee of the *Evangelical Library* has made in devoting this lecture to the commemoration of the 450th anniversary of the birth of William Perkins – without any doubt, one of the most outstanding Puritan pastors and preachers that Christ ever gave to His Church in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. According to leading historical theologian Professor Richard Muller of Calvin Theological Seminary, William Perkins rose to be “perhaps the most eminent English

Reformed theologian of the late sixteenth century.”¹ And, according to Professor Carl Trueman of Westminster Theological Seminary, “Perkins was doubtless the most influential English theologian of his time. Any account of the development of Reformed theology in either England or the Netherlands must place him at the centre of the intellectual narrative.”²

So where to begin with such a great man? Rather than try and cover everything superficially, I have decided to focus in some depth on predestination and evangelism in the life and thought of Perkins. One reason I believe this is an appropriate focal point to take, is that predestination and evangelism were two concerns very close to Perkins’ heart throughout his ministry, and undoubtedly, if Perkins were to return and assess the evangelical church of today, one thing I am sure he would immediately seek to reinstill in the churches, would be an unashamed belief in, and practical application of, the doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of the Triune God in all things, and in particular in the work of salvation. And yet the popular evangelical mindset today appears to be that such a recovery would not bode well for the evangelistic endeavours of the Church. Indeed, it would inevitably prove inimical to them and a dangerous diversion into unhealthy realms of speculation and needless, sterile controversy. In this lecture, I aim to illustrate from the life and thought of Perkins that this is most emphatically not the case.

¹ Richard A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins*, Revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), p. 131.

² Carl R. Trueman, “William Perkins” in *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals*, edited by Timothy Larsen, David W. Bebbington & Mark A. Noll, 1st ed. (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003) 519-20, p. 520.

Plucking a brand from the burning

So let us begin with a glimpse into the life of Perkins as an evangelist in sixteenth-century Cambridge. Picture the scene. On a tall, wooden scaffold stands a man dressed in rags and with his hands bound in iron chains. His dark eyes are full of horror as he flinches before the jeering crowd, some of whom have brought rotten eggs and decaying fruit from the market stall to hurl at him. The hangman's noose is solemnly set round his neck and he is brought to stand over the trap door. Chilling cries arise from a few among the teeming crowd. "Die thou man of death!" "Filthy villain!" "To hell with thee!"

But as the hangman's hand is raised, and the people begin to hold their breath for the final execution, a piercing voice of authority ascends over the top of the crowd. "Halt forthwith!" Suddenly a stout Puritan minister, with stiff white collar and Geneva Bible clutched under his arm, appears at the base of the scaffold. His right hand is noticeably malformed, but he still manages to scramble up the ladder, though somewhat awkwardly, and leaps onto the platform in front of the doomed criminal. The wretched convict already appears to be in an agony of mind, and his face is gripped with terror. The Puritan minister demands, "What is the matter with thee? Art thou afraid of death?" The prisoner denies it, shaking his head. "I am afraid of something far worse than that!" "Saist thou so?" asks the minister. "Come down again man, and thou shalt see what God's grace will do to strengthen thee." So, with the hangman's consent, the minister takes the convict back down the ladder again and makes him kneel down with him at the foot of the scaffold.

Apparently, we are told by Perkins' biographer, "that blessed man of God made such an effectual prayer in confession of his sins, and aggravating thereof in all circumstances, with the horrible and eternal punishment due to the same by God's

justice, as made the poor prisoner burst out into abundance of tears.”

Then,

finding that he had brought him low enough, even to hell’s gates, [the minister] proceeded to the second part of his prayer, and therein to show him the Lord Jesus (the Saviour of all penitent and believing sinners) stretching forth his blessed hand of mercy and power to save him in that distressed estate, and to deliver him from all the powers of darkness. Which he did so sweetly press with such heavenly art and powerful words of grace upon the soul of the poor prisoner, as cheered him up again to look beyond death, with the eyes of faith, to see how the black lines of all his sins were crossed and cancelled with the red lines of his crucified Saviour’s precious blood; so graciously applying to his wounded conscience, as made him break out into new showers of tears for joy of the inward consolation which he found, and gave such expression of it to the beholders, as made them lift up their hands, and praise God to see such a blessed change in him; who (the prayer being ended) rose from his knees cheerfully, and went up the ladder again so comforted, and took his death with such patience and alacrity, as if he actually saw himself delivered from the hell which he feared before, and heaven opened for the receiving of his soul, to the great rejoicing of the beholders.³

Perkins’ life

This was one (quite astonishing) day in the life of Master William Perkins, early on in his Cambridge career. Perkins had come to Cambridge in June 1577 to study at Christ’s College at the age of 19, having been born in the tiny village of Marston Jabbett, now just outside modern day Coventry, 450 years ago

³ Samuel Clarke, “The Life of William Perkins, who died Anno Christi 1602” in *The Marrow of Ecclesiastical History*, Reprint ed. (London: Robert White for William Roybould, 1654) 850-53, pp. 852-53.

in 1558. His tutor was his lifelong friend Laurence Chaderton, who later became the first master of Emmanuel College in 1584 – the same year that Perkins proceeded M.A. and was made Fellow of Christ’s College. It wasn’t until 1595 that Perkins took up the only other position of his entire career, namely Lecturer at Great St Andrew’s, Cambridge (incidentally a congregation of the Church of England that maintains an evangelical witness to this day). Perkins continued to minister at Great St Andrew’s until his early death of the stone in 1602 at the age of only 44 – being outlived by both his parents, his wife whom he had married as late as 1595, and most but not all of his seven children.

These are actually pretty much all the key dates of Perkins life. And in terms of biographical material not much in addition has come down to us. There were only two near contemporary biographical accounts produced of Perkins – those by Thomas Fuller, first published in 1642, and by Samuel Clarke, first published in 1650 – and these are very brief, with Clarke heavily relying on Fuller. But what these biographical accounts both have in common is a treatment of Perkins’ evangelistic endeavours at the local prison in Cambridge. A short walk from Christ’s College up Magdalene Street and across the river to the northern edge of the city lies Cambridge Castle on top of the nearest thing that Cambridge can boast of as being a hill. In the sixteenth century this was being used as a prison, and was filled with people that Fuller describes as “out of Christendome ... often branded in their flesh, and seared in their consciences” as well as completely lacking access to the means of grace.⁴ Soon after his ordination, Perkins prevailed upon the jailor to grant him permission to have these prisoners – still in their chains -- brought every Lord’s Day to the nearby Shire House so that he could preach to them. It is said that his preaching

⁴ Thomas Fuller, “The Life of Mr Perkins” in *The Holy State*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: By Roger Daniel for John Williams, 1642) 88-93, p. 89.

there saw many conversions amongst these social outcasts, so much so that many ordinary and upstanding citizens would also come along to hear Perkins preaching. Fuller says that Perkins' "sermons were not so plain but that the piously learned did admire them, nor so learned but that the plain did understand them."⁵

And so the most remarkable story above is to be understood in the context of Perkins having most probably already preached to that prisoner many times before and the prisoner already being acquainted with the gospel that Perkins proclaimed. Perkins' ability to pluck that brand from the burning with such earnest confidence and tender compassion was the fruit of his having prayed and laboured over the Cambridge prisoners for many years.

Perkins being "moved with pity towards [the] souls" of these prisoners⁶ could partly have been a function of how from all accounts Perkins himself had narrowly escaped a similar life of lawlessness. When he first arrived at the University, like many an undergraduate today, it was to live a "very wild"⁷ life of open drunkenness and debauchery, so much so that it is said that Perkins once heard a local mother rebuking her child with the words, "Hold your tongue, or I will give you to drunken Perkins yonder."⁸ Allegedly, Perkins, observing here how his name had become a byword among the people, was pricked in his conscience and this appears to have been the first step to his conversion in the early 1580s. Perkins knew full well that if it were not for the grace of God he too might be facing the

⁵ Fuller, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-90.

⁶ Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 851.

⁷ Fuller, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

⁸ Benjamin Brook, *The Lives of the Puritans: Containing a biographical Account of those Divines who distinguished themselves in the Cause of Religious Liberty, from the Reformation under Queen Elizabeth, to the Act of Uniformity, in 1662*, 1st ed. (London: For James Black, 1813) 3 vols, II:129.

gallows for a life of vice and crime. But be that as it may, we must far more see here one of the hallmarks of any faithful gospel minister – a compassion for lost sinners and an earnest desire to introduce the Saviour into their lives with power.

Predestination in the thought of of Perkins

But surely, some might say, such a compassion for lost sinners and such earnest evangelistic endeavours are incompatible with a belief in predestination? Surely Perkins' expectancy that the most unlikely sinners would be saved was borne of a strong belief in the innate goodness of man, and in human free will? Well, this was certainly not the case with Perkins. Perkins was a strict Calvinist and a renowned and open champion of a full-orbed Reformed orthodoxy.

Perkins wrote two detailed treatises devoted specifically to predestinarian theology, and it is to Perkins' thought on predestination that we now turn.⁹ The first book, *A golden Chaine*, reached its third Latin edition by 1592 and its eighth English edition by 1600. Here we find “the fullest exposition of his systematic theology.”¹⁰ The second treatise, *A Christian and plaine Treatise of the Manner and Order of Predestination*, did not prove as immediately popular, but found a place, together with *A golden Chaine*, in Perkins' collected works which were reprinted periodically up until, significantly, 1631. Its importance is clear when it is realised that “the basic document of Arminianism,” namely Jacobus Arminius' *Examen*

⁹ For a more detailed and extensive analysis of Perkins predestinarian theology, see Jonathan D. Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism: John Preston and the Softening of Reformed Theology*, 1st ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), pp. 27-68. Nothing here is to be taken as contradicting what is written there.

¹⁰ Charles R. Munson, “William Perkins: Theologian of Transition” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Case Western Reserve University, 1971), p. 63.

Modestum Libelli, was in fact a response to this very treatise.¹¹ In addition to these two works, Perkins also gives predestination a most detailed treatment in his work on the Apostles' Creed. This book was first published in English in 1595 and had reached its sixth edition by 1631 as well as also featuring in Perkins' collected works. These books were the first English discussions of predestination to be published overseas and they contributed significantly to international debate.¹² It is upon these three works that we will mainly rely in this consideration of Perkins' theology of predestination. As regards predestination, or "Gods decree, in as much as it concerneth man,"¹³ Perkins distinguishes his own position from three other rival views. He repudiates firstly the Pelagian view in which "the causes of God's predestination" are "in man," in so far as "God did ordaine men either to life or death, according to as he did fore-see, that they would by their naturall Free-will, either reject or receive grace offered." He also repudiates the Lutheran view which, although teaching unconditional election, states that reprobation is "because [God] did eternally fore-see that they would reject his grace offered them in the Gospell." Perkins' third group of opponents are "Semi-Pelagian Papists" who "ascribe God's predestination, partly to mercie, and partly to mens fore-seene preparations and meritorious workes." This leaves the fourth and Reformed orthodox view held by Perkins. In

¹¹ Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Nashville, NY: Abingdon Press, 1971), p. 209; James Arminius, *Iacobi Arminii veteraquinatis Batavi, S. Theologiae Doctoris eximii, Examen modestum Libelli* (Leiden: Godefridi Basson, 1612).

¹² Ian Breward, *The Work of William Perkins*, The Courtenay Library of Reformation Classics, Vol. 3, 1st ed. (Abingdon, UK: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1970), pp. 88-89.

¹³ William Perkins, *The Workes of that famous and worthy Minister of Christ in the Universitie of Cambridge, Mr. William Perkins*, Corrected ed. (London: John Legatt & Cantrell Legge, 1616-18) 3 vols, I:16.

contradistinction to all the above, this schema teaches that

the cause and execution of God's predestination, is his mercy in Christ, in them which are saved; and in them which perish, the fall and corruption of man: yet so, as that the decree and eternall counsell of God concerning them both hath not any cause beside his will and pleasure.¹⁴

By this latter proviso, Perkins means that God "did upon his meere pleasure elect some, & reject others eternally, not mooved or urged thereunto by any thing whatsoever out[side] of himselfe."¹⁵ Perkins' doctrine of double predestination is nowhere more strikingly portrayed than in his famous schematic diagram that was published as part of *A golden Chaine*.¹⁶ This diagram illustrates Perkins' definition of election as "God's decree, whereby of his owne free wil, he hath ordained certaine men to salvation, to the praise of the glorie of his grace."¹⁷ This election "is unchangeable; so as they which are indeede chosen to salvation cannot perish, but shall without faile ataine to life everlasting."¹⁸ Reprobation on

¹⁴ Perkins, *Workes*, I:9.

¹⁵ Perkins, *Workes*, I:109.

¹⁶ Perkins, *Workes*, I:10 (opposite). This chart was reprinted in Breward, *op. cit.*, p. 168; Harry C. Porter, ed., *Puritanism in Tudor England* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1970), pp. 296-97; Richard A. Muller, "Perkins' *A golden Chaine*: Predestinarian System or schematized *Ordo Salutis*?" *Sixteenth Century Journal* 9 (1978): 69-81, pp. 774-75; Edward Hindson, ed., *Introduction to Puritan Theology: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), p. 139; Alasdair I. C. Heron, ed., *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1982), p. 54 (opposite); and James B. Torrance, "The Concept of Federal Theology: Was Calvin a Federal Theologian?" in *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor: Calvin as Confessor of Holy Scripture*, edited by Wilhelm H. Neuser (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994) 15-40, p. 40.

¹⁷ Perkins, *Workes*, I:24.

¹⁸ Perkins, *Workes*, I:281.

the other hand, “is that part of predestination, whereby God, according to the most free and just purpose of his will, hath determined to reject certain men unto eternall destruction, and misery, and that to the praise of his justice.”¹⁹ Elsewhere, Perkins states that it is “a worke of God’s providence, whereby he hath decreed to passe by certaine men, in regard of supernaturall grace, for the manifestation of his justice and wrath in their due destruction.”²⁰

In order to avoid any miscommunication, Perkins divides the decree of reprobation into “two acts.” The first of these parts is “the purpose to forsake some men, and to make knowne his justice in them. This act hath ... no impulsive cause out[side] of God,” arising as it does out of “God’s meere good pleasure.”²¹ The first act of reprobation is therefore not for sin, for “sinne is not the cause of reprobation.” However, the second act “is the ordaining of them to punishment or due destruction. ... For as men are actually damned for sinne: so God hath decreed to damne them for the same sinne.”²² So note here that although damnation is for sin, reprobation is not – otherwise the elect would be reprobate as well.

Supralapsarian

Perkins’ strictness of formulation in the matter of predestination also extends into the realm of the order of the decrees. Very early on in *A golden Chaine* the reader is confronted with Perkins’ supralapsarianism. Perkins styles the creation and fall as mere “meanes of accomplishing Gods Predestination.”²³ In terms of election,

¹⁹ Perkins, *Workes*, I:105.

²⁰ Perkins, *Workes*, II:610.

²¹ Perkins, *Workes*, II:610.

²² Perkins, *Workes*, II:611.

²³ Perkins, *Workes*, I:16.

the first act is ... a part & beginning of the divine purpose, whereby God doth take certaine men which are to be created,²⁴ unto his everlasting love and favour, passing by the rest, and by taking maketh them vessels of mercie and honour: and this act is of the sole will of God, without any respect either of good or evill in the creature.

Having decreed concerning men considered as yet uncreated, God is to be seen conceptually as proceeding to a “second act” within the decree of election which consists in “the purpose of saving or conferring glory, whereby hee doth ordaine or set apart the very same men, which were to fall in Adam, unto salvation and celestiall glory.” This second act of election “is not of men to be created as was the former, but of men false away. Therefore in this act God respecteth the corrupted masse of man kind.” Perhaps fearing the charge of being over-precise in such lofty matters, Perkins is quick to add that this second act “is in no wise to be severed from the former, but to be distinguished in the minde (for orders sake, and for the better unfolding of it).”²⁵

Contrary to the frequent claim that theologians such as Perkins were guilty of falling into a rigid predestinarian metaphysic, the christocentricity of Perkins’ supralapsarian formulations is clear. Perkins avoids the common charge against supralapsarianism, namely of subordinating Christ to the decree, by seeing the decree as trinitarian. In this way, Christ

²⁴ It is clear from what follows and from elsewhere in his *opera* that, by the phrase “which are to be created,” Perkins was referring to conceptual priority within the decree and did not merely mean “which are to be created in time.” For example, Perkins states that “when God with himselfe had decreed to manifest his glory in saving some men by his mercy, hee ordained further the creation of man in his own image, yet so as by his owne fall he should infold himselfe & all his posterity under damnation” (Perkins, *Workes*, I:282).

²⁵ Perkins, *Workes*, II:607-8.

himself is both the subject and the object of predestination. Firstly, Christ is the author of predestination, for “as he is God, we are predestinate *of him*, even as we are predestinate of the Father and the holy Ghost.” Secondly, and conceptually subsequent to the decree of the creation and the fall, God “also decreed that the Word should be incarnate actually, to redeeme these out of the former misery, whom hee had ordained to salvation. Christ therefore him selfe was first of all predestinate as hee was to be our head.” The elect are therefore “predestinate *in him*,” because “God ordained that the execution of mans election should be in him.”²⁶

Although the emphasis in the exposition of *A golden Chaine* is on election, Perkins does not shy away elsewhere from delineating the supralapsarian nature of the decree of reprobation also. Perkins’ is adamant that “sinne is not the cause of reprobation.” We must realise that “when God had decreed to passe by some men, he withall decreed to the permission of sinne, to which permission men were ordained.” As a result it is true to say that everyone

is unto God, as a lumpe of clay in the potters hand: and therefore God according to his supreme authoritie doth make vessels of wrath, he doth not find them made. But he should not make them, but find them made, if we say that God willed in his eternall counsell, to passe by men only as they are sinners, and not as they are men for causes most just, though unknowne to us.²⁷

Incidentally, recognisable in that quotation is the language of Romans 9. In case we are tempted to think that Perkins is being rather speculative in all this, we should remember that, as Richard Muller has observed, and as this use of Romans 9 helps to illustrate, Perkins’ “formal analysis of predestination

²⁶ Perkins, *Workes*, I:282.

²⁷ Perkins, *Workes*, II:611, I:288, II:610.

[is] one of the most exegetically oriented analyses of the early orthodox period.”²⁸

Particular redemption

As one would expect with such an understanding of God’s decree, in Perkins Christ came to earth to redeem only the elect and not the reprobate. Without denying or downplaying the universal language of Scripture concerning the work of Christ, particularly with regard to the sufficiency of the atonement, Perkins taught a rigorous doctrine of particular redemption.

In Perkins’ chart for *A golden Chaine*, there are no lines between the ineffectually called reprobate and Christ’s work.²⁹ That this feature of the chart is no accident is clear from the numerous references in Perkins’ treatises to the particular nature of Christ’s redemptive work. Concerning the death of Christ, Perkins states that “the price is payd in the counsell of God, and as touching the event, only for those which are elected and predestinated.” In case his readers are still in any doubt as to his doctrine, Perkins adds: “wee utterly denie, that [Christ] died for all and every one alike in respect of God, or as well for the damned as elect, and that effectually on God’s part.”³⁰

Perkins does not rest in a distinction between the sufficiency and efficiency of the atonement. The sufficiency is really only a hypothetical consideration from the christological perspective, and not an ordained reality from the decretal perspective. He does not shy away from stating bluntly of the reprobate that God “giveth them no Saviour. For Christ is onely

²⁸ Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, p. 163.

²⁹ Muller, “Perkins’ *A golden Chaine*,” p. 77; cf. Munson, *op. cit.*, p. 92; Donald K. McKim, *Ramism in William Perkins’ Theology*, 1st ed. (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), p. 189.

³⁰ Perkins, *Workes*, II:609, 621.

the Redeemer of the Elect, and of no more.”³¹ He exhorts his readers to “looke for whome Christ is an advocate.” Then it is that they shall see that

to them onely is he a redeemer; for redemption and intercession, which are parts of Christ’s priesthood, the one is as generall and large as the other, and so surely united and fastened together, as one cannot be without the other. But Christ is onely an advocate of the faithfull.³²

The conclusion, for Perkins, is inescapable: “the price is appointed and limited to the elect alone by the Fathers decree, and the Sonnes intercession and oblation.”³³ Perkins does not see himself as advocating novel doctrine here, but sees it as “the judgement of the ancient Church,” and gives copious patristic and medieval quotations.³⁴

It is not only Perkins’ predestinarianism which drives him to this particularism, but, as has already been emerging in the above quotations, a developed federal theology. Perkins insists that regarding his passion, “Christ must not be considered as a private person: for then it could not stand with equitie that hee should bee plagued and punished for our offences, but as one in the eternall counsell of God set apart to be a publike surety or pledge for us.”³⁵ That is to say, Christ was set apart to “be a publike person to represent all the Elect in his obedience and sufferings.”³⁶ Thus, Christ, as “the head of the faithful, is to bee

³¹ Perkins, *Workes*, I:415. Perkins cannot accept a universal donation of Christ since “this donation is not single but mutuall. As Christ is given to us, so wee [*i.e.* the elect church] againe are given to Christ” (Perkins, *Workes*, I:299).

³² Perkins, *Workes*, I:108.

³³ Perkins, *Workes*, II:609.

³⁴ Perkins, *Workes*, II:609-10.

³⁵ Perkins, *Workes*, I:186-87.

³⁶ Perkins, *Workes*, I:282.

considered as a publike man sustaining the person of all the elect,” and “consequently, whatsoever Christ did as a Redeemer, the same did all those in him, and with him which are redeemed.”³⁷ For example, in his resurrection

Christ rose againe not as every private man doth, but as a publike person representing all men that are to come to life eternall. For as in his passion, so also in his resurrection, he stood in our roome and place: and therefore when he rose from death ... the whole Church rose in him, & together with him.³⁸

That Perkins does not see himself as teaching a clever embellishment of the gospel is clear when he states that if this federal construction of Christ’s resurrection is “not considered, wee do not conceive aright of Christ’s resurrection, neither can we reape sound comfort by it.”³⁹ Perkins also reveals how this federal theology leads him to his strict statements against the reprobate having any part at all in Christ’s death. He argues that a “wicked man which perisheth for his sin, cannot be said to have risen again with Christ; and therefore Christ did not beare his person upon the crosse.” Thus, for a federalist like Perkins, Christ’s redemption cannot be as general as Adam’s fall for “Christ is ... a roote ... of the elect onely ... Hee cannot be said to be the roote of all, and every singular man.” Perkins must conclude that “it was not Christ’s purpose to give himselfe for a ransome for all & every one alike.”⁴⁰

Finally, Perkins’ doctrine of the particularity of Christ’s priestly work – which he saw as having two parts: satisfaction followed by intercession⁴¹ – also drove him to a doctrine of particular

³⁷ Perkins, *Workes*, I:78; II:609.

³⁸ Perkins, *Workes*, I:235.

³⁹ Perkins, *Workes*, I:235.

⁴⁰ Perkins, *Workes*, II:609; I:108; II:621.

⁴¹ Perkins, *Workes*, I:27, 169, 235.

redemption. In his *A golden Chaine*, Perkins states that God “punished the sinnes of the Elect, in his Sonnes own person.” Thus, Christ’s satisfaction is “that, whereby Christ is a full propitiation to his Father for the elect.” He divides Christ’s satisfaction itself into two parts: his Passion and his fulfilling of the whole law. He says of his passion that Christ “satisfied God’s justice, and appeased his anger for the sinnes of the faithfull.” “Christ’s marvelous passion” is therefore “a perfect ransome for the sinnes of all and every one of the elect.”⁴² Perkins defines Christ’s priestly ministry of intercession as that “whereby Christ is an advocate & intreater of God the father for the faithfull.” This means that “Christ maketh intercession ... by desiring the salvation of the elect,” and “for them onely which are elected and shall beleve in him, he makes intercession.”⁴³ More specifically, we are to appreciate the fact that Christ “alone doth continually appeare before his father in heaven, making the faithfull, and all their prayers acceptable unto him, by applying of the merits of this owne perfect satisfaction to them.”

Perkins, on the basis of John 17:9, notes that “Christ makes no intercession for the world.” By ‘the world’ we are to understand “all such as are not the Fathers, & were never given to Christ” by the Father.⁴⁴ Limited satisfaction and limited intercession go hand in hand for Perkins. “To make intercession and to sacrifice are conjoynd,” and redemption and intercession are “so surely united and fastened together, as one cannot be without the other.”⁴⁵

⁴² Perkins, *Workes*, I:95, 27, 29.

⁴³ Perkins, *Workes*, I:29; I:415.

⁴⁴ Perkins, *Workes*, I:5, 296.

⁴⁵ Perkins, *Workes*, II:609; I:296, 108.

The call of the gospel

The question now arises as to how Perkins, espousing as he did so explicitly such a robust Calvinism, could evangelise. How could he freely offer Christ to his hearers and that with such a remarkable number of conversions? In the light of his strictures on the absolute and supralapsarian decree of reprobation and the limited extent of Christ's satisfaction, Perkins certainly had to justify the Church's commission to preach the gospel to 'every creature.' This commission might appear inconsistent with Perkins' rigorous particularism, and God might seem hypocritical in the offering of a non-existent salvation to the reprobate. It is significant that at this point Perkins does *not* appeal to paradox, but offers a clear solution.

Perkins is militantly opposed to any attempt to deduce a universal grace from the universal command to "preach the gospel to every creature." To illustrate the futility of any such extrapolations, Perkins repeatedly points out that despite this New Testament command, in actuality the gospel never has been preached to all men, either under the Old or New Covenants. Perkins knew that "the meanes to receive grace, is the hearing of the word." However, given that "all men in all ages never had [this] vouchsafed unto them," we must conclude that in actuality God has never called all men without exception to faith.⁴⁶ Perkins uses the fact that the church was "for so long a time" only "a small remnant, among the people of the Jewes only," with "not one of tenne thousand" Gentiles having faith, in order to deny a "universall calling of all and every man to the estate of grace and salvation."⁴⁷ There is therefore no universal grace or universal, conditional covenant

⁴⁶ Mk. 16:15; Perkins, *Workes*, III:(ii)333.

⁴⁷ Perkins, *Workes*, III:(ii)165.

here, since “a benefit to be apprehended by faith, if it be unknowne, is no benefit.”⁴⁸

Perkins defends this teaching from the text “many are called, but few chosen.” He concludes that “God would not have all men called unto Christ,” which is evident from Christ’s own restriction of his own and his disciples’ preaching ministry. This is why there “be many millions of men, which have not so much as heard of Christ,” and why the “greatest part of the world hath ever bin out of the covenant of grace.” To the objection to this teaching that Perkins is focusing too much on the preaching of the Word and overlooking the fact that the written Scriptures are available to all, Perkins replies that “the Scriptures were committed to the custodie of the Church of God, & every one was not credited with them.” Perkins’ particularism is everywhere.⁴⁹

Perkins therefore rejects as a “very unreasonable position” an actual universal call of the gospel, holding that there is no revelation of the gospel in the created order, and that just as the Scriptures are not read by all, so preachers, in practice, never get to preach to all men without exception. However, this does not mean that Perkins denies a hypothetical universal call, in that all without exception who come under the sound of the preaching of the gospel *are* to be called in God’s name to repentance: “the Ministers of the Gospell ought indifferently to exhort all and every one to repent.”⁵⁰ So what does in fact occur when the gospel, in the sovereign purposes of God, *is* preached to some of the reprobate?

⁴⁸ Perkins, *Workes*, II:250.

⁴⁹ Mt. 20:16; Perkins, *Workes*, I:111.

⁵⁰ Perkins, *Workes*, I:111; II:608.

No desire in God to save the reprobate

We have already seen how Perkins taught that “Christ maketh intercession . . . by desiring the salvation of the elect,” and that “God would not have all men called unto Christ.” But does Christ desire the salvation of the reprobate in anyway at all? While Perkins is willing to concede that “God doth love all his creatures” in one sense, and while he saw Christ’s tears over the children of Jerusalem as a manifestation of “a tender compassion over their miserie to come,” he adamantly denied any will or desire in God to save the reprobate.⁵¹ Due to his polemical context this denial is a dominant strain in Perkins’ theology. Perkins was concerned to defend the unity of God’s will. “God’s will is onely one, considered in it selfe, as God is one.” Perkins conceded that from our point of view the will of God needed to be “distinguished” in terms of “either [an] absolute, or revealed” will. However, when God commands the sinner to be saved, this is not to be taken as revelation that the ever blessed God desires that he be saved, but he is rather “revealing unto him . . . what he will have man to doe . . . if he desire to come to life, and would not be condemned.” God wills the conversion of the reprobate “onely in respect of approbation, exhortation, and meanes” from the human point of view, but not in his being in which there is no conflict. Thus, God, by his commandments, “sheweth what hee liketh, & what he willeth that we should do to him, not what he will do to us or in us.” Perkins’ theology revolved entirely around God’s purposes for the elect. God “doth in part only so farre forth propound his will, as he knoweth it expedient for the salvation

⁵¹ Perkins, *Workes*, I:108; III:(i)131 (referring to Luke 19:41). Indeed, Perkins was even prepared to say, in connection with Christ’s earthly ministry, that the will of Christ as man is no sure guide in this connection, for “there is one will in Christ as God; another, as man” (Perkins, *Workes*, I:26).

of the elect.”⁵² Perkins concludes that

therefore it is an untruth for a man to say, that God would have none condemned. For whereas men are once condemned, it must be either with Gods will, or without it: if without it, then the will of God must needs suffer violence, the which to affirme is great impietie; [and] if with his will, God must needes change his sentence before set downe, but we must not presume to say so.⁵³

Furthermore, if God would have all men to be saved, then why are not all saved? The answer would have to be that “Men will not keep the condition and beleve.” But, says Perkins, this “is flat to hang God’s will upon mans wil, to make every man an Emperour, and God his underling, and to change the order of nature by subordinating God’s will, which is the first cause, to the will of man, which is the second cause.”⁵⁴

A sincere call

Perkins refused to concede that his position therefore rendered the gospel call to the reprobate insincere. He writes:

God must not bee said to mocke men, if by the word preached he do outwardly call those, whome he will not have to be saved: for by this meanes he shewes unto them the riches of his grace, and declares that they perish by their owne fault, because they will not receive salvation offered. ... that inability whereby they cannot, is voluntarie, and borne together with us, not infused into us by God: and therefore it cannot bee excused.⁵⁵

⁵² Perkins, *Workes*, III:(i)131; II:608-9.

⁵³ Perkins, *Workes*, I:296, 109.

⁵⁴ Perkins, *Workes*, I:295.

⁵⁵ Perkins, *Workes*, I:297; II:625.

The main reason why the gospel is preached to the reprobate wicked is because the ministers of the gospel do not know who the “mingled” elect are, and “therefore” must adopt the policy of preaching “indifferently” or indiscriminately. The salvation of the elect is always of paramount concern in Perkins’ thought. The preaching of the gospel is not to announce God’s general love to all, but is “an ordinance of God appointed for the gathering together and the accomplishment of the number of the Elect.” The whole of human history exists that the elect might be saved. Thus, “grace & salvation is offered principally and directly to the elect, and onely by consequent to them which are ordained to just damnation.” However, the second and subordinate, but nevertheless very real, reason why the gospel is preached to at least some reprobate is that they might be hardened and left inexcusable. “For the offering of grace doth not onely serve for the conversion of a sinner, but also to be an occasion by mens fault, of blinding the minde, and hardning the heart, and taking away excuse in the day of judgement.”⁵⁶ Perkins held that “God sometimes giveth a commandement not that it should bee actually done, but that men may bee tried, and that they may be convicted of their naturall infidelity before God in the last judgement.”⁵⁷

A particular promise

So what exactly is the good news of the evangel in our evangelism? What exactly is the call of the gospel? In Perkins the gospel call may be said to be the universal proclamation of a particular promise. Perkins explicitly and frequently denies that the gospel promise is something that belongs to all or is made to all. Perkins says this doctrine is one of the “waightie points to bee knowne and beleaved” concerning God’s

⁵⁶ Perkins, *Workes*, I:297; II:608.

⁵⁷ Perkins, *Workes*, II:625.

“speciall mercy.” To affirm “that the promises of the Gospel ... belong to all and every man whatsoever, unlesse he will reject them, is a device of mans braine.” Rather, the biblical teaching is that “the promise of remission of sinnes, and life everlasting ... is not universall to all, but indefinite to many of all sorts, kinds, and estates.”⁵⁸ “[T]he promise is not made to the worke, but to the worker, and to the worker, not for the merit of his worke, but for the merit of Christ.”⁵⁹ The promises of the gospel are universal in the sense that they are “universall indeede to all that overcome.” But we are ever to remember that “that is a propertie which restraines them wholly to true beleevers.”

Perkins held to the particularity of the promise because “life eternall is not promised to every man as he is a man comming of Adam; but to a man as he is in Christ by faith, and a new creature.”⁶⁰ This did not mean that Perkins could not consistently preach the gospel to ‘every creature,’ since “[w]ith the promise there is joyned an exhortation, or commandment to beleeve: which is more generall than the promise.”⁶¹ God, therefore, never once promises to save the reprobate, and therefore he never once breaks his promise by instead casting them into hell. They hear this annunciation of the gospel promise made by God in Christ to the universality of the elect, but they do not obey the accompanying command to repent and believe in Christ. But to the elect, the universal proclamation of this particular promise of free salvation in Christ draws them to the Saviour, believing that ‘he is faithful that promised.’

⁵⁸ Perkins, *Workes*, III:(i)117; III:(ii)281.

⁵⁹ Perkins, *Workes*, II:392-93.

⁶⁰ Perkins, *Workes*, III:(ii)281.

⁶¹ Perkins, *Workes*, II:608.

Reformed ecclesiology & evangelism

We have already seen how Perkins asserts that the reprobate have no “title to the death of Christ” whatsoever. However, it is important for us to appreciate an important qualification Perkins makes to this by way of his judicial ecclesiology and high sacramentology. The reprobate do not have any title to the death of Christ as reprobate, but as those whom God has made outward members of the church they *do* have such a title. Similarly, the universal gospel call does *not* consist in being called upon to believe that one is “effectually redeemed by Christ.” However, “Every one in the Church, by God’s commandment ‘Believe the Gospell’ is bound to beleve that he is redeemed by Christ; yea even the reprobate as well as the elect.”⁶² In this way, Perkins discourages morbid introspection as to the vexed question of whether one is elect or not, and one for whom Christ did in fact die. Just as “the ministers of God, not knowing his secret counsel, in charitie think al to be elect,” so all church members are to work out their own salvation in fear and trembling *as Christians* and not in order that they might *become Christians*. They work out their salvation from *within* the covenant, not in order to enter it, and do so on the basis of their very real judicial standing and sacramental privileges.⁶³

Although, as we have seen, the covenant of grace and the gospel promise for Perkins are strictly particular, he is prepared to say that “God the Father hath made an Evangelicall covenant with his church.”⁶⁴ This results in a relaxing of his particularist provisos within the visible church, since this is, afterall, to be considered as the company of God’s elect. Thus, within this

⁶² Perkins, *Workes*, II:625.

⁶³ Perkins, *Workes*, I:297.

⁶⁴ Perkins, *Workes*, I:299. Thus Christ as “a grant” is also to the church only (Perkins, *Workes*, I:299).

‘Evangelicall covenant with the church’ Perkins can say that “the Evangelical promises are indefinite and doe exclude no man, unlesse peradventure any man do exclude himselfe.” The two sacraments “do to everyone severally apply indefinite promises, and therefore are very effectuall to enforce particular assurance or plerophie of forgiveness of sinnes.” In baptism, the water “signifieth, that the partie baptized doth receive the internall washing, which is by the blood of Christ, or at the least that it is offered unto him.” The distribution of the elements at the Lord’s Supper “sealeth the action of God offering Christ unto all, yea, to the hypocrites: but giving him indeede unto the faithfull, for the daily increase of their faith, and repentance.”⁶⁵ Thus on one level at least, the polarity between the elect and the reprobate in Perkins’ thought knows a short respite in the realms of ecclesiology and sacramentology. In distinction from the world of the heathen, the church in history is the company of the redeemed. The eternal division between elect and reprobate does not so control his ecclesiology that he has a doctrine of dual church membership, as found in post-Restoration Puritanism. Perkins wants a particularism that magnifies the sovereignty of God and glorifies the free grace of God, but not one that chokes the life and diminishes the privileges of the church militant. It is to the church that Perkins acknowledges Christ makes ‘offers.’ To the world of the lost, Christ makes no offers. To them the gospel is presented as a divine command, and the particular promise is generally proclaimed.

There is therefore in Perkins still no conditional gospel promise.⁶⁶ In Perkins the Christian works at all times within the sphere of the covenant. Evangelism therefore concerns

⁶⁵ Perkins, *Workes*, I:87, 74, 75.

⁶⁶ This is not, of course, to deny that Perkins frequently styles faith as a ‘condition’ is terms of a *sina qua non* or requirement of the gospel (e.g. Perkins, *Workes*, I:32; II:299, 625).

bringing the gospel to the unchurched. Evangelism does not take place *within* the Church. This sounds a cautionary note to those ministers today who seem to believe they are discharging their duty of bringing the gospel to the lost, simply by preaching so-called ‘evangelistic’ sermons to those who are already members of Christ’s Church. No, evangelism involves going to where the unchurched are found, and meeting them in their totally lost condition.

Concluding reflections

Let us now resurface from that deep dive into Perkins’ exposition of predestination and evangelism and reconsider him in historical context. How did Perkins compare with his contemporaries, and how did they view him? Well as you would expect, not everyone agreed with him on every point. So there are no surprises there. But what *is* striking is that Perkins was so astonishingly popular and influential. Perkins’ theology was standard fare in Elizabethan England – the era that produced the famous Lambeth Articles. Indeed, to teach against Calvinism in Perkins’ day would most likely cost you your career in Church or State, and sometimes even worse. Perkins was in no way marginalised for his views or dismissed as some maverick hyper-Calvinist.

The overwhelming contemporary opinion was that Perkins was a pillar of Protestant orthodoxy.⁶⁷ The Puritan divine William Ames was formerly a student of Perkins and later stated that Perkins “for many yeares held forth a burning and shining light, the sparks whereof did flie abroad into all corners of the land.”⁶⁸ In generations immediately after his death, Perkins

⁶⁷ Helena Hajzyk, “The Church in Lincolnshire, c.1595-c.1640” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1980), p. 232.

⁶⁸ Ames writing in the preface to Paul Baynes, *The Diocesans Tryall. Wherein all the Sinnewes of Doctor Downhams Defence are brought into*

continued to be held up by multitudes as an archetype of the perfect combination of rigorous doctrine and fervent piety. His witness was deemed to have been both prophetic and definitive. This is fascinatingly illustrated in a book plate published in 1628 (Figure 1 By permission of the British Library).⁶⁹ In this picture the artist depicts the growing “Danger of Arminian Heresie” as the devil and the Pope, accompanied by hoards of cardinals and Papist armies, engaged in an open assault against the castle of Reformed Orthodoxy. In the centre of the plate stands the castle’s keep, the citadel of truth, built with huge stones comprising Christ Himself, the Old Testament prophets, the New Testament apostles, various church fathers, and then, higher up in the edifice, various Protestant leaders. But the only name to herald from the British Isles is that of William Perkins, who is given a prominent place as a key defence against the Arminian onslaught, and who therefore appears to be of greater significance to the artist than the likes of Thomas Cranmer or John Knox. The book in which this plate was first published was not about Perkins at all, and so we are not dealing here with some hagiographical focus on Perkins, but rather an almost incidental indication of the extent of Perkins’ towering influence upon the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Church.

But this is not to say Perkins was being original or innovative. It is possible to find Perkins’ views in many other leading

three Heads, and orderly dissolved ([London]: n.p., 1621 [i.e. 1644]), p. A2v.

⁶⁹ See between John Russell, *The Spy, discovering the Danger of Arminian Heresie and Spanish Trecherie* (Amsterdam: n.p., 1628), pp. A2v-A3r. This pamphlet was not actually published at Strasbourg as the title-page states, but at Amsterdam. Significantly, around the time this plate was published the arminianising Archbishop of York, Samuel Harsnett, banned the sale of Perkins’ works. Harsnett clearly saw where Arminiansim was best refuted (Nicholas R. N. Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism c. 1590-1640*, 2nd ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990, pp. 182-83).

divines of his day and before – even supralapsarianism was the fashionable majority position amongst theologians in late sixteenth-century England. What Perkins did rather, was, in a way few could match, systematise at the international academic level and popularise at the local level of ordinary church members and the likes of Cambridge prisoners, the glorious truths of sovereign grace in the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Something of Perkins' powerful influence can be felt when we consider the publication of his thought. His output crossed the whole range of theological and pastoral writings – from systematic treatises like the ones we have considered in this lecture and largely aimed at fellow ministers, to plain sermons, commentaries, traditional expositions of the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer, and detailed works on casuistry and cases of conscience aimed at ordinary believers. This pastoral and practical concern even permeates Perkins' systematic treatises, and is notably illustrated by the fact that Perkins' chart on predestination was developed by Perkins in order to serve as "an ocular Catechisme" to aid ministers in teaching his doctrine of predestination to the illiterate. Although his life only just spanned the years of Elizabeth's reign, Perkins' output as a preacher and theological writer was astounding. Between 1590 and 1618 approximately 210 books were printed by the primary publishing house in Cambridge. Of these 210 books Perkins wrote no fewer than fifty – nearly 25 per cent!⁷⁰ Given the relatively small number of publishing houses in England at that time, this is the rough equivalent of Perkins' theology today being published in one out of every ten books across all subjects! So that's not just one in ten books in every Christian bookshop, but one in ten books of any and every bookshop in

⁷⁰ Harry C. Porter, *Reformation and Reaction in Tudor Cambridge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958, p. 264. For a chronology of Perkins' works, see McKim, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-50.

the land! How times have changed! Furthermore, while the English presses heaved with Perkins' heavy tomes, no publications against Perkins' theology appeared until after his death. In addition, Perkins works were translated into numerous foreign languages – Welsh, Irish, French, Spanish, Italian, Hungarian and Czech – and were disseminated across Europe and into the New World.⁷¹

It was this same supralapsarian, predestinarian Perkins, “a formidable patristic scholar”⁷² and leading academic theologian of international repute, who did not hide away in the ivory towers of a Cambridge college, but rather freely presented Christ to the illiterate social outcasts of Cambridge and sought to win for Christ needy souls wherever opportunity arose. And this he did without any self-contradiction or resorting to paradox theology, but demonstrating rather, in word and deed, that a robust Calvinism, with its rigorous doctrine of absolute and unconditional predestination and an uncompromised doctrine of divine sovereignty in salvation, sits comfortably, indeed most comfortably, with earnest, heartfelt and effective evangelism. Reformed Orthodoxy is *not* incompatible with zealous evangelism, but rather is the only theology that consistently undergirds it and energises it. Returning to Perkins' chart – his ocular catechism – we can see that the last circle and the great end point of the whole scheme, predestination and evangelism included, is “Gods glorie”. For, as the Apostle says, “of God, and through God, and to God, are all things to whome be glory for ever. Amen.”

⁷¹ See Beward, *op. cit.*, p. 130 for an extensive list of Perkins' foreign language publications. It is regrettable that the nineteenth-century Puritan publishing enterprises neglected the works of Perkins and that consequently the more recent wave of Puritan publications have also largely omitted him. The six-volume edition of Perkins' Works currently being edited by Joel Beeke and Derek Thomas for Reformation Heritage Books should serve to rectify this situation.

⁷² Ian Beward, “Perkins, William (1558-1602)” in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, edited by James D. Douglas, [1974] 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), p. 765.

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