

William Perkins & His Works

An Interview with Joel R. Beeke and J. Stephen Yuille

Books At a Glance: The publication of *The Works of William Perkins* is a landmark event in Christian publishing. Long overdue, the republishing of this “Father of the Puritans” gives new life to Puritan studies. We are very pleased to have Drs. Beeke and Yuille with us to talk about this large and fascinating undertaking. First, let’s talk about William Perkins himself. Perhaps you could introduce our readers to him briefly. Who was he?

Yuille & Beeke: Perkins was born in 1558 in the village of Marston Jabbet (near Coventry) in Warwickshire. No parish registers exist, so it’s impossible to trace his family ancestry. We do know that he was lame in his right hand. This must have presented a significant challenge for a young boy living in the world of plow and harness. He demonstrated sufficient promise as a student that his family enrolled him in Christ’s College, Cambridge, when he was nineteen years of age. He was converted to Christ during his early years at Cambridge. After receiving his master’s degree in 1584, he was ordained to the ministry. He preached at Great St. Andrew’s Church from 1584 until his death. He was also elected to a fellowship at Christ’s College. He held this position from 1584 to 1595. He married a young widow, Timothy Cradock, in 1595. During their seven years of marriage, they conceived seven children – three of whom died in infancy. He succumbed to complications arising from kidney stones in 1602 at age forty-four.

Books At a Glance: Give us a sense of Perkins’s significance historically and theologically. What kind of influence did he have in his own day and after he died?

Yuille & Beeke: Perkins’s legacy is multi-faceted. For starters, he was instrumental in securing the Reformation in England. The English Reformation was a drawn out process, in which the country moved back and forth

on multiple occasions between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism as monarchs came and went. In a span of twenty years, the religion of the land shifted four times. But the reign of Elizabeth I brought stability, and provided the much-needed climate for English Reformers to solidify the church’s position. Perkins played a pivotal role in this, and his works became the standard polemic against Rome. In addition to the English Reformation, Perkins made an incalculable contribution to the advancement of Reformed theology. Jacob Arminius’s treatment of predestination was predicated to a large extent on Perkins’s writings. This factor ensured that many of the theological ideas at the heart of the debate at the Synod of Dort actually were well-grounded in Perkins’s writings. Unknown to him, he left a discernible imprint upon what would later be called “the five points of Calvinism.” Finally, Perkins shaped the future of pastoral ministry on both sides of the Atlantic. His role as a physician of the soul became paradigmatic for succeeding generations of ministers. His emphasis on expounding the text, deriving doctrines from the text, and applying those doctrines through a plethora of uses, is clearly evident in the collected sermons of subsequent Puritan preachers. His method of preaching shaped the English pulpit well into the eighteenth century, and is still felt in some quarters of the church today

Books At a Glance: You mention in your book that Perkins both was and was not a Puritan. Can you explain that to us?

THE AUTHORS: *Books at a Glance* interviewed Joel Beeke and J. Stephen Yuille about the publication of the Works of William Perkins (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014–2020), 10 volumes. Dr. Beeke served as general editor of the project together with Dr. Derek Thomas, and Dr. Yuille edited several of the volumes. Drs. Beeke and Yuille also co-authored a biography on Perkins published by Evangelical Press. Here is the substance of that interview, published with permission.

Yuille & Beeke: Strictly speaking, Perkins was not a Puritan in terms of his ecclesiology, because he refused to align himself with the more militant figures of his era. He understood the church's most pressing need not in terms of ecclesiastical innovation, but theological instruction. He viewed the church as being sound in its official doctrine and worship, yet woefully hampered on account of inadequate teaching. He understood his calling in terms of filling this void, thereby bringing others to a better understanding of the faith.

When we say that Perkins was a Puritan, we're referring to his piety. He would never have described himself as a Puritan, given its negative connotation in his day, yet it's the very term that others used, favorably or not, to describe that experimental (or "experiential" theology) so prevalent in his life and ministry.

Books At a Glance: You mentioned in the book that Perkins was a "master of experimental theology." Would you explain that for us? What is "experimental theology"? And is this characteristic of Perkins's teaching and writings throughout, as well as his preaching?

Yuille & Beeke: The term experimental comes from the Latin verb *experior*—"to know by experience." Although Perkins preached about God's sovereign grace in salvation, he was particularly concerned about how this grace breaks through into our experience. He wanted to explain how we respond to God's sovereign grace in humiliation, faith, repentance, obedience, and assurance. This conviction is evident throughout Perkins's works. He was convinced that the gospel (union with Christ through faith) is always transformative, producing godliness, cultivating new obedience, making a divorce between sin and the soul, moderating inordinate affections, stirring a desire for holiness, setting the soul upon the means of grace, and producing zeal in religion. He was also convinced that people must experience an affective appropriation of God's sovereign grace, moving beyond intellectual assent to heartfelt dedication to Christ.

Books At a Glance: Talk to us about Perkins's popularity both as a preacher and as an author. I think many will be surprised to learn that Perkins's writings became more popular than Calvin's! What accounts for this? Perhaps you could also mention something about those with whom he was popular—did he write for fellow theologians only?

Yuille & Beeke: In seeking to account for Perkins's

popularity, one scholar identifies two unique features in his writings: first, "an ability to clarify and expound complex theological issues which aroused the respect of fellow scholars"; and, second, "a gift for relating seemingly abstruse theological teaching to the spiritual aspirations of ordinary Christians." To state it simply, Perkins was able to merge intricate theology with practical piety—a rare gift indeed. This made his writings very appealing to a large audience and, as a result, the name of no preacher recurs more often in later Puritan literature. For example, 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. It has been said that "a typical Plymouth Colony library comprised a large and small Bible, Henry Ainsworth's translation of the Psalms, and the works of William Perkins."

Books At a Glance: Okay, what about Perkins's *Works*? Just how extensive was his literary output? Do the 10 volumes projected in this series comprise all that he published? Were these volumes originally published in Perkins's own lifetime? And tell us how your republication of these works is significant.

Yuille & Beeke: While living, Perkins published twenty-one books. After his death, friends and students published twenty-seven new books in his name. These were edited from his many manuscripts. John Legate gathered Perkins's works into three volumes in 1608–1609, and these were reprinted more than a dozen times. They were also translated into Latin and published eight times by 1668. At least fifty editions of Perkins's works were printed in Germany and Switzerland. There were 185 seventeenth-century printings of his individual or collected works in Dutch. Furthermore, his writings were translated into Spanish, Welsh, Irish, French, Italian, Hungarian, and Czech. The international popularity of Perkins's works led one biographer to declare that "his books spoke more tongues than the author ever knew." One of the great puzzles of church history is that Perkins's works have not been published in English since the seventeenth century.

We are so grateful that Reformation Heritage Books was able to complete its goal of publishing all ten volumes of Perkins in seven years, and believe that this fills a major gap in Puritan/Reformed literature. For decades, it has been our dream to have these volumes accessible to pastor and layman alike.

Continued on Page 266.

Editorial. Continued from Page 2.

In addition to this material on Perkins, there are a good number of articles on other interesting topics. To name just a few, Brandon Burks has a fascinating piece on the Salem Witch Trials, complementing Zachary Groff's historical examination of Roman Catholic superstition during the early years of John Calvin's ministry. In addition to two biographical articles (on A. Alexander and A. Dobbin), the article canvassing the works of William Tyndale on the authority and interpretation of God's Word, relative to worship, is particularly noteworthy. The author's hope is that it will be useful in showing Tyndale's doctrine of scripture hermeneutics, and the implications for the regulative principle of worship. In addition, the essay should be useful for summarizing Tyndale's works in publication order. Another goal is that this foray into Tyndale's works in this manner will promote wider study, by providing a framework to approach his writings. Following the articles section, there are a dozen reviews and some of the regular recurring departments. The issue is closed out with an author index for these now twenty issues of *The Confessional Presbyterian* journal. ■

THE EDITORS.

William Perkins (1558–1602) & His Agenda. Continued from Page 16.

LESSONS

There are many ways we may profit from reading Perkins, but I conclude below with three brief lessons as suggestions, particularly for the minister—although every Christian will profit from reading Perkins, and I advise all to get acquainted with him. My personal 'Mount Rushmore of Calvinistic Theologians' is Calvin, Perkins, Owen, and Turretin. Perkins will teach you to live well. One interesting note is his style. Reading Perkins is pretty much like reading a good, modern writer such as J. I. Packer. However, I offer three lessons for the minister. The first lesson: learn from Perkins how to be a better pastor. He will teach you how to deal with the conscience and apply the Word to the complexities of life. He will challenge you to stick to the work of regular pastoral care.

A second lesson: Perkins will help you learn to be a better preacher. Perkins teaches us five very important things about preaching. First, carefully exegete the text, treating it reverently as the Word of God. Second, have a logical and thus memorable outline. Third, be committed to specific, searching, discriminatory application. Fourth, speak plainly and powerfully; learn to preach extemporaneously. Fifth, preach Christ. Just as 'all roads lead to Rome,' in our sermons let all statements lead to Christ.

A third lesson: develop the right priorities. It is easy to get sidetracked by many pressing problems, but Perkins teaches us that our highest priority is to seek to bring the lost to Christ

and teach them how to live for Christ. Although we should never neglect the legitimate avenues of reform in Church courts, reformation and revival will come through careful exercise of the simple means of grace. Let prayer, sermon preparation, preaching, and pastoring be the mark of your ministry. ■

William Perkins & His Works. Continued from Page 18.

Books At a Glance: Let's talk a moment about just the first volume. What kind of things await the reader in this volume? And what, in particular, do you find especially valuable as a contribution to biblical studies today?

Yuille & Beeke: Volume 1 contains three of Perkins's books. The first is *A Digest or Harmony of the Books of the Old and New Testament*. It made a significant contribution in his day to the long standing debate surrounding biblical chronology. The second book is *The Combat between Christ and the Devil Displayed*. Here, Perkins expounds Matthew 4:1–11. It's a great resource for understanding the devil's stratagems and appreciating the believer's calling to look to his "merciful and faithful high priest" in the midst of temptation. The third book is *A Godly and Learned Exposition upon Christ's Sermon in the Mount*. This is the most significant treatise in volume 1. Perkins did not view Christ's sermon as a legalistic system of morality, a paradigm for the establishment of new society, or a standard of ethics for a future millennial kingdom, but as the definitive word on the nature of true godliness.

As for his contribution to biblical studies, Perkins believed the "canonical" Scriptures constitute the "wisdom of God concerning the truth." For this reason, he championed what he called Scripture's "infallible certainty," meaning "the testimony of Scripture is the testimony of God Himself." Owing to this conviction, he adopted Scripture as the axiom of all his thinking and the focus of all his teaching.

Books At a Glance: Can you give us a glimpse of the kind of material that is in the other nine volumes?

Yuille & Beeke: Perkins's works include expositions of Galatians 1–5, Matthew 5–7, Hebrews 11, Jude, and Revelation 1–3; discourses on various cases of conscience; treatises on worship, preaching, assurance, predestination, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer; and the errors of the Roman Catholic Church. We've organized these according to three major sections. Volumes 1–4 include his expositional works. Volumes 5–7 include his doctrinal and polemical works. Volumes 8–10 include his practical works.

The Works of William Perkins, gen. ed. Joel R. Beeke and Derek W.H. Thomas, can be ordered at a steeply discounted price from Reformation Heritage Books at heritagebooks.org. ■