

# William Perkins on Conscience and Casuistry: Puritan Foundations for Reformed, Scriptural Ethics

By Jacob D. Gerber

## INTRODUCTION

Since her inception, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) has sought to be faithful to the Scriptures, true to the Reformed faith, and obedient to the Great Commission. Yet, while these ideals hold broad consensus throughout the PCA, many difficulties have arisen over the details of their implementation. In particular, the PCA has faced many challenges regarding what faithfulness to the Scriptures and fidelity to the Reformed faith require in the realm of ethics. To address some of these questions, the PCA's General Assembly has formed study committees to consider ethical issues such as abortion (1978), pornography (1985), Christian responsibility in the nuclear age (1987), "heroic measures" (i.e., in medical interventions for the critically ill and dying; 1988), divorce and remarriage (1992), racial and ethnic reconciliation (2018), human sexuality (2021), and domestic abuse and sexual assault (2022). Still, disagreements persist. For example, while many of the duties required and sins forbidden by the Ten Commandments that are itemized in the *Westminster Larger Catechism* are uncontroversial, two of the most common differences taken from the Standards by officer candidates arise directly from this section: the Second Commandment prohibition against making images of any of the three persons of the Trinity (*WLC* #109) and the Fourth Commandment prohibition against worldly recreations (*WLC* #117, 119). Furthermore, ethical issues about human sexuality and the sin of abuse have recently prompted numerous overtures, extensive debates, and even officer and church departures from the denomination. Beyond these larger debates, a number of other specific duties and sins listed in the *Larger Catechism* have generated varying levels of disagreement as to application.<sup>1</sup>

While there will always be "truths and forms with

respect to which men of good character and principles may differ,"<sup>2</sup> the many questions and disagreements in the PCA on these issues suggest a need for greater alignment about the goal and methods for remaining faithful to the Scriptures and true to the Reformed faith in biblical ethics. One wonders, then, whether the PCA has made sufficient use of two central ethical insights from the Reformed tradition that are codified in the PCA's constitutional documents: (1) the Reformed doctrine of the conscience (see *WCF* 20; *PCA BCO Preliminary Principle* #1), and (2) the practice of Reformed casuistry ("cases of conscience"; *WCF* 31.2) that makes ethical judgments not only by what is "expressly set down in Scripture," but also by what is deduced from Scripture "by good and necessary consequence" (*WCF* 1.6), as illustrated in the *Westminster Larger Catechism's* thorough exposition of the Ten Commandments (*WLC* #98–148). By these

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1. e.g., Overture 26 from Potomac Presbytery to the 49th General Assembly of the PCA in 2022 (*Minutes of the 49th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America [Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2022]*, pp. 1337–39) argued that some of the sins forbidden in the *Larger Catechism's* exposition of the Sixth Commandment ("all taking away the life of ourselves, or of others, except in case of public justice, lawful war, or necessary defense" [*WLC* #136]) necessitated a denominational condemnation of political violence. The Overtures Committee disagreed, recommending that Overture 26 be answered in the negative (*M49GA*, p. 106). A Minority Report then proposed answering Overture 26 in the affirmative (*M49GA* [2022], pp. 129–31), but it was defeated by a vote of 489–1047. The General Assembly ultimately answered Overture 26 in the negative by a vote of 1108–371 (*M49GA* [2022], pp. 86–87).

2. *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America* (PCA BCO), *Preliminary Principle* #5.

insights, the Reformed faith clarifies both a clear goal for ethics (seeking a good conscience before God), as well as a clear methodology for how to do ethics in a way that is faithful to the Scriptures (the practice of Reformed casuistry in cases of conscience).

My purpose in this article, then, is not to make a direct case for or against any particular ethical issue. Rather, my goal is to work toward a fuller recovery of two of the PCA's constitutional pillars for the Reformed system of ethics (conscience and casuistry) through a focused survey of the work of William Perkins (1558–1602). Perkins's work on ethics was deeply influential during his own day and during the period of the Westminster Assembly. I will stop short of attempting to demonstrate the full extent of the Westminster Assembly's direct dependence on Perkins, and I will not evaluate whether Perkins always came to the right conclusions. My goal in this article is much more modest. Instead, I will

3. As Walter Kaiser observed, "Few aspects of Old Testament study have proven to be so difficult as Old Testament ethics" (Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983], p. 1); see also Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991); Waldemar Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994); Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004); John Goldingay, *Old Testament Ethics: A Guided Tour* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).

4. Gordon Wenham has observed the difficulty of the "indirect" ethical teaching from the Old Testament narratives, in contrast to the "direct" ethical teaching that is found in the legal codes in the Pentateuch, the exhortations of the Wisdom literature and the preaching of the prophets" (Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000], p. 2); John Barton has similarly noted the need for more work on the "implicit" ethics from Old Testament narratives beyond the more "explicit" ethics elsewhere in the Old Testament (John Barton, "Ethik des Alten Testaments," *Theologische Rundschau* 64, no. 4 [November 1999]: 425); John Barton, "The Future of Old Testament Ethics," in *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2003), p. 173; see also Robin A. Parry, *Old Testament Story and Christian Ethics: The Rape of Dinah as a Case Study* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004); S. Min Chun, *Ethics and Biblical Narrative: A Literary and Discourse-Analytical Approach to the Story of Josiah*, Oxford Theology and Religion Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Christian Frevel, "More Than Worthwhile to Consider? Old Testament Ethics between Description and Prescription," in *Key Approaches to Biblical Ethics: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*, ed. by Volker Rabens, Jacqueline N. Grey, and Mariam Kamell Kovalishyn, *BibInt* 189 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), pp. 129–153.

5. Keith Thomas, "Cases of Conscience in Seventeenth-Century England," in *Public Duty and Private Conscience in Seventeenth-Century England: Essays Presented to G. E. Aylmer*, ed. by J. S. Morrill, Paul Slack, and Daniel Woolf (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 29.

present Perkins as a defining figure for understanding the approach of the Reformed tradition to the faithful interpretation of Scripture for ethics. Specifically, my thesis is that the work of William Perkins clarifies what the PCA's constitutional documents already teach about how to do ethics, especially by combining a warm, pastoral heart for the consciences of sinners with a precise, technical methodology of Reformed casuistry that draws out detailed ethical applications from all of Scripture for cases of conscience that arise.

To prove my thesis, I will begin by situating Perkins's understanding of the conscience and his casuistical method within his own context and as background for the Westminster Assembly's work on conscience and on the *Larger Catechism's* exposition of the Ten Commandments. Then, I will provide a detailed taxonomy for Perkins's casuistical method; however, because Perkins's written corpus is extensive, I will limit my scope to his casuistry on the most ethically difficult texts, where the strengths (and, in some cases, weaknesses) of his approach will be most apparent. Specifically, I will examine only Perkins's work with Old Testament narratives in his most significant work of practical divinity, *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience*. Ethical work in the Old Testament is widely acknowledged to be difficult,<sup>3</sup> and the Old Testament narratives are even more complex because they are neither prescriptive, direct, nor explicit, but instead are descriptive, indirect, and implicit.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Perkins's appropriation of Old Testament narratives provides ample material to see his method in action. Finally, I will offer a few concluding thoughts for what Perkins suggests about how the PCA might remain faithful to the Scriptures and true to the Reformed faith in biblical ethics in the years to come.

#### PERKINS AND THE PURITANS ON CONSCIENCE AND CASUISTRY

Keith Thomas made a salient historical observation when he wrote, "The seventeenth century can justly be called the Age of Conscience... For much of the century it was generally believed that conscience, not force of habit or self-interest, was what held together the social and political order."<sup>5</sup> In matters of faith, one may observe this burgeoning emphasis on the conscience by comparing Reformed confessional statements from the sixteenth century to the seventeenth century. So, the Three Forms of Unity, which were primarily written in the sixteenth century, acknowledge the significance of the conscience in only

a few locations.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, the seventeenth-century Westminster Assembly considered the conscience much more centrally to their overall doctrine, which is particularly reflected in their dedication of an entire chapter in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* to “Christian Liberty, and Liberty of Conscience.”<sup>7</sup>

*Perkins on Conscience*

Although Perkins died in 1602, he played a key transitional role in the sixteenth century that helped to shape the seventeenth century as an Age of Conscience. J. I. Packer argues that Perkins, who was often called the “father of Puritanism,” was instrumental in influencing the whole Puritan movement to be “supremely concerned about conscience,” so that “nothing, therefore, in their estimation, was more important for any man than that his conscience should be enlightened, instructed, purged, and kept clean.”<sup>8</sup> Thomas Pickering summarized this conviction in the dedicatory for Perkins’s *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience*: “There is no one doctrine, revealed in the Word of God or dispensed by the prophets and apostles, of greater use and consequence in the life of man than is that which prescribes a form of relieving and rectifying the conscience.”<sup>9</sup>

Perkins held an anthropology that recognized two faculties of the soul: the understanding and the will. Then, Perkins classified the conscience as a practical aspect of the understanding, “because its property is to judge of the goodness or badness of things or actions done.”<sup>10</sup> By locating the conscience as a part of the understanding, Perkins and the Puritans followed Thomas Aquinas (a Dominican) rather than the Franciscans, who located the conscience within the will.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, while Reformed writers depended heavily on Aquinas’s work on the faculties of the soul generally, Perkins and other Reformed theologians made a groundbreaking theological contribution by giving a more extensive treatment to the nature and function of the conscience than had previously appeared.<sup>12</sup> So, Perkins described the conscience as “of a divine nature... a thing placed by God in the midst between Him and man, as an arbitrator to give sentence, and to pronounce either with man or against man unto God.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, conscience was rational, but it was also relational as a “shared knowledge” with God. Packer explains Perkins’s view well:

All Puritan theologians from Perkins on are agreed in conceiving of conscience as a rational faculty, a power of moral self-knowledge and judgement, dealing with

questions of right and wrong, duty and desert, and dealing with them authoritatively, as God’s voice. Often the Puritans appealed to the form of the word (conscience, from the Latin *con-scientia*) as pointing to the fact that the knowledge which conscience possesses is shared knowledge, joint-knowledge, knowledge (*scientia*) held in common with (*con-*) another—namely God. The judgements of conscience thus express the deepest and truest self-knowledge that a man ever has—i.e., knowledge of himself as God knows him.<sup>14</sup>

For Perkins, the conscience performs two actions: “to give testimony or to give judgment (Rom. 2:15).”<sup>15</sup> That is, the conscience bears witness in an individual’s soul about what that individual has thought, felt, or done, and then passes judgment over those actions. Thus, the conscience acts as God’s own judicial representative in the soul: “(as it were) a little god sitting in the middle of men’s hearts, arraiging them in this life as they shall be arraigned for their offences at the tribunal seat of the ever-living God in the day of judgment.”<sup>16</sup> Because of this great power, Perkins insists that the only proper “thing which has absolute and sovereign power in itself to bind the conscience... is the Word of God written in the books of the Old and New Testaments.”<sup>17</sup> An improper binder of conscience has “no power or virtue in itself to bind conscience,” but “only by virtue

6. The conscience is treated incidentally in the 1561 *Belgic Confession* (Articles 23, 24, 32, and 37), the 1563 *Heidelberg Catechism* (#32, 60), and the 1618–1619 *Canons of Dort* (1.16; 5.5; 5.10; Conclusion).

7. In the 1646 *Westminster Confession of Faith*, conscience appears much more centrally in 17.3, 18.1, 18.4 (x2), 20.2 (x4), 22.6, and 23.4. Also in the 1647 *Westminster Larger Catechism*, see #28, 55, 80, 83 (x2), 89, 96, 105, 151.3, 175.

8. J. I. Packer, *The Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), p. 107.

9. Thomas Pickering, “The Epistle Dedicatory for The Works of The Cases of Conscience,” in *The Works of William Perkins*, ed. by J. Stephen Yuille, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), p. 97.

10. William Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” in *The Works of William Perkins*, ed. by J. Stephen Yuille, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), p. 7.

11. Thomas C. Merrill, “Introduction,” in *William Perkins, 1558–1602: English Puritanist—His Pioneer Works on Casuistry: “A Discourse of Conscience” and “The Whole Treatise of Cases of Conscience,”* ed. by Thomas C. Merrill (Nieuwkoop: B. De Graaf, 1966), p. XIII.

12. For Perkins’s contribution to the Reformed concept of the conscience, see Paul Helm, *Human Nature from Calvin to Edwards* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), pp. 111–14.

13. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 9.

14. Packer, *The Quest for Godliness*, p. 109.

15. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 10.

16. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 12.

17. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 13.

of God's Word or of some part of it," such as in the cases of "human laws, an oath, [and] a promise."<sup>18</sup>

This doctrine of the conscience had great practical significance for Perkins, since it set forth the clear goal of gaining a good conscience, "which rightly excuses and comforts, according to God's Word."<sup>19</sup> Although Adam lost (for himself and for all of his posterity) the good conscience that he received at creation, the gospel holds out the promise that sinners may regain a good conscience by regeneration, where "that which being corrupt by nature, is renewed and purged by faith in the blood of Christ."<sup>20</sup> That regenerate conscience then gives new testimony that "we are the children of God, predestined to everlasting life," and new judgment "to excuse, that is, to clear and defend man, even before God, against all his enemies both bodily and ghostly."<sup>21</sup> The peace of a good conscience, then, is one of the greatest privileges that the believer enjoys.

Thus, Perkins recognizes two primary duties concerning conscience. First, we must "above all things labor to obtain [a good conscience], for it is not given by nature to any man, but comes through grace."<sup>22</sup> That is, our first duty constrains us to submit to the judgment of our conscience against our guilt, and to appeal to the gospel of Jesus Christ through faith for a good conscience. Then, "after a man has gotten a good conscience, his second duty is to keep it."<sup>23</sup> Keeping a good conscience is related to the whole work of sanctification, first by addressing "impediments" to keeping a good conscience by renewing our mind from ignorance through the Scriptures, by mortifying

our sinful corruptions and affections, and by seeking contentment in life.<sup>24</sup> The second part of keeping a good conscience requires maintaining the "preservatives" of both our "saving faith" as well as "the righteousness of a good conscience" through obedience.<sup>25</sup> So, one can *get* a good conscience only by regeneration, and not through obedience to God's Word. Nevertheless, *keeping* a good conscience requires obedience. It is not that justification in any sense depends on works, but that the human conscience is easily wounded: "the good conscience is the most tender part of the soul like to the apple of the eye; which being pierced by the least pin that may be, is not only blemished, but also loses its sight... And so we must use means to avoid whatsoever may offend or annoy conscience."<sup>26</sup>

In sum, Perkins saw a good conscience as a "precious... jewel."<sup>27</sup> For him, the close connection between the judgment of the conscience today and the judgment of Christ in the future meant that caring for one's conscience was the most important duty in life. While gaining a good conscience depends on faith in Jesus Christ alone, keeping a good conscience requires giving every effort to obey God's Word – not for the sake of one's justification, but for the sake of protecting one's regenerate conscience from further injury from sin.

#### *Perkins on Casuistry*

How, though, does someone know what duty God (and, therefore, the conscience) may require in any given situation? For the sake of keeping a good conscience, Perkins and the Puritans developed a form of casuistry by which they sought to identify moral and ethical obligations from the Bible.<sup>28</sup> In this, they drew upon the Roman Catholic tradition of casuistry; however, they believed that the Jesuits "stunted the proper development of the conscience by dictating the minimal requirements for the good life rather than inspiring men to strive for the best that was within them."<sup>29</sup> The Puritans, therefore, sought to more fully "harness our consciences to the Holy Scriptures, in which the mind of God is fully revealed to us."<sup>30</sup>

Importantly, Beeke and Jones note that "we would call much of this teaching personal and social ethics, but Perkins saw it as cases of conscience."<sup>31</sup> This is an important point, since it clarifies the meaning of *Westminster Confession of Faith* 31.2: "It belongeth to synods and councils, ministerially to determine controversies of faith, and *cases of conscience*..." (emphasis added; see also PCA BCO 11-2). Thus, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* acknowledges the

18. Perkins, "A Discourse of Conscience," p. 26.

19. Perkins, "A Discourse of Conscience," p. 56.

20. Perkins, "A Discourse of Conscience," p. 56.

21. Perkins, "A Discourse of Conscience," pp. 79, 81.

22. Perkins, "A Discourse of Conscience," p. 86.

23. Perkins, "A Discourse of Conscience," p. 91.

24. Perkins, "A Discourse of Conscience," pp. 91-92.

25. Perkins, "A Discourse of Conscience," pp. 92-94.

26. Perkins, "A Discourse of Conscience," p. 93.

27. Perkins, "A Discourse of Conscience," p. 90.

28. While Keenan persuasively disputes classifying the genre of Perkins's work as casuistry, I will nevertheless use the term casuistry since historical genre questions are beyond the scope of this article: James F. Keenan, "Was William Perkins' Whole Treatise of Cases of Consciences Casuistry?: Hermeneutics and British Practical Divinity," in *Contexts of Conscience in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1700*, ed. by Harald E. Braun and Edward Vallance (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 17-31.

29. Merrill, "Introduction," p. XII.

30. Packer, *The Quest for Godliness*, p. 113.

31. Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, "Puritan Casuistry," in *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), p. 933.

ministerial role of the church courts for determining questions of doctrine (“controversies of faith”) and ethics (“cases of conscience”). In part, this reminds us that Puritan casuistry is not an historic relic from the seventeenth century, but it remains a constitutional provision for the PCA to this day. More importantly, this also reminds us that the church courts exercise only a *ministerial* power over doctrine and ethics; they do not possess a *magisterial* power to make final, binding judgment on the Scriptures. As noted above, Perkins and the Puritans believed above all that “the Word of God alone, by an absolute and sovereign power, [properly] binds conscience.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, Puritan casuistry “was offered as exposition and application of Scripture, and was to be checked against Scripture by those who received it, according to the Protestant principle of the duty of private judgement.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, Andrew Ballitch argued that Perkins interpreted the Scriptures by paying close attention to each text’s “context” (“a close reading of the text in terms of the argument and literary features”), “collation” (“a comparison with other passages”), and “the analogy of faith” (“faith the boundaries of the Reformed tradition”).<sup>34</sup>

In his casuistry, Perkins argued that “conscience gives judgment in or by a kind of reasoning or disputing, called a practical syllogism.”<sup>35</sup> As an illustration of this kind of practical syllogism, Perkins writes that our consciences reason within us like this: “Every murderer is cursed,’ says the mind. ‘You are a murderer, says conscience assisted by memory. Ergo, ‘You are accursed,’ says conscience, and so gives her sentence.”<sup>36</sup> Of course, we often make simple ethical judgments without consciously thinking through this kind of reasoning, but the Puritans sought to equip people to employ and evaluate these practical syllogisms through training the conscience:

Occasionally, however, situations arise which give pause. At times it may not be clear to the morally earnest individual which of two possible courses best serve his highest duty. It may fall out, in fact, that he is confronted with a dilemma where two opposing actions lay moral claim upon him on the bases of two general principles to both of which he holds conscientious allegiance [Casuistry] is a tool which applies a general moral precept to a particular human being in a particular place at a particular time.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, the ultimate goal of Puritan casuistry was to apply the whole Bible to modern life, which would therefore

“bring all of human activity under the immediate judgment of the will of God.”<sup>38</sup>

#### *Perkins’s Conscience and Casuistry in the PCA*

Perkins stands at the head of the rich, Puritan and Reformed efforts in casuistry for the sake of conscience that stretched over the course of the seventeenth century. While other Puritans offered works on casuistry, Louis Wright has argued that Perkins “was probably read more widely than any other preacher of his day,” with the result that Perkins (along with the others) helped “to shape the whole social, ethical, and even literary outlook of the masses of Englishmen.”<sup>39</sup> Beeke and Jones call Perkins the “father of Puritan casuistry,” citing Thomas Merrill’s evaluation that Perkins’s work “set a pattern for all later work in Protestant moral divinity.”<sup>40</sup> Even historians who argue that Perkins’s legacy was harmful do not dispute the influence of his work.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, to understand the approach to biblical ethics that was dominant in the seventeenth century during the creation of the Westminster Assembly, we must understand the work of William Perkins.

This also means that, although many abandoned this emphasis on conscience and casuistry by the end of the seventeenth century,<sup>42</sup> Perkins’s legacy lives on in the *Westminster Standards* of the PCA. Of these two emphases, the PCA seems to have given more attention

32. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 13.

33. Packer, *The Quest for Godliness*, p. 119.

34. Andrew S. Ballitch, *The Gloss and the Text: William Perkins on Interpreting Scripture with Scripture*, Studies in Historical and Systematic Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), p. 3.

35. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 50.

36. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 50.

37. Merrill, “Introduction,” p. XI.

38. Merrill, “Introduction,” p. XV.

39. Louis B. Wright, “William Perkins: Elizabethan Apostle of ‘Practical Divinity,’” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (1940): 196.

40. Beeke and Jones, “Puritan Casuistry,” 931; Merrill, “Introduction,” p. xx.

41. Bozeman, for example, has argued that Perkins’s extraordinary influence led to “an unrelenting absorption in ‘cases’ and an increasingly refined analysis of affliction of conscience, its causes and cures” (Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain: Disciplinary Religion and Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* [Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004], pp. 145–46).

42. Kenneth E. Kirk, *Conscience and Its Problems: An Introduction to Casuistry*, Library of Theological Ethics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 203; regarding casuistry, “the rise of Deism, the struggle with Socinianism and Arminianism and the attacks of Hobbes and Locke on the validity of the idea of conscience, all worked together to create an intellectual and religious atmosphere that was uncongenial to [its] cultivation and further development”

to the role of the conscience than to the method of casuistry. For example, the PCA has recently witnessed major debates about the general role and limitations on individual conscience;<sup>43</sup> however, it would go beyond the scope of this article to evaluate those questions here. Rather, Perkins's emphasis on the importance of the conscience led directly into his method for identifying specific ethical responsibilities. In the next section, then, we will examine Perkins's approach to Reformed casuistry.

#### A TAXONOMY OF CASUISTICAL METHODS IN PERKINS'S USE OF OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES

Perkins never explicitly articulated his methodology for drawing ethical applications from Scripture. Therefore, it will be the goal of the remainder of this article to trace aspects of his methodology inductively by reverse engineering and providing a taxonomy for categorizing the various ways that he appealed to the most challenging ethical portions of Scripture in the Old Testament narratives. Perkins did not limit his focus to the prescriptive, direct, and explicit ethical statements in the Bible, and neither did he overemphasize the descriptive, indirect, and implicit ethical witness of Old Testament narratives.

(N. Keith Clifford, *Casuistical Divinity in English Puritanism During the Seventeenth-Century: Its Origins, Development and Significance* [PhD diss., University of London, 1957], p. 40); cited by Beeke and Jones, "Puritan Casuistry," p. 939.

43. For example, the 46th and 47th General Assemblies of the PCA cited Calvary Presbytery for binding the conscience of a minister: "The resulting prohibition whereby a TE [Teaching Elder] was prevented from teaching his accepted view is contrary to our practice of good faith subscription and the first preliminary principle [dealing with liberty of conscience]" (*Minutes of the 46th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America* [Office of the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2018], pp. 20–21, 367; see also *Minutes of the 47th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America* [Office of the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2019], pp. 29–31, 449–52). The 48th General Assembly, however, reversed this decision by determining that restricting a TE from teaching contrary to the doctrinal standards of the church did not violate the TE's conscience (*Minutes of the 48th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America* [Office of the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2021], pp. 24–26, 527–34, 630–33.)

44. Cited in John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), pp. 129–30.

45. Donald K. McKim, "Perkins, William (1558–1602)," in *Dictionary of Major Bible Interpreters*, ed. by Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), p. 816.

46. See footnote 16 in William Perkins, "The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience," in *The Works of William Perkins*, ed. by J. Stephen Yuille, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), pp. 413–14.

Instead, Perkins integrated straightforward ethical commands alongside the more challenging material contained in Old Testament narratives. In drawing ethical applications so freely, Perkins's approach was controversial in his own day, and remains controversial to this day. John Barton, for example, dismisses many of the ethical conclusions of the Puritans by arguing that they tended to "ignore genre distinctions," a charge he bolsters by citing Perkins's contemporary, the Anglican Richard Hooker (1554–1600), who wrote this against Puritans like William Perkins: "their common ordinary practice is, to quote by speeches in some historical narration or other, and to urge them as if they were written in most exact form of Law."<sup>44</sup> As I will argue through the rest of this article, however, Perkins's appropriation of ethical applications from Old Testament narratives was much more principled than has been previously recognized.

Throughout the *Whole Treatise*, Perkins employs the Ramist method of seeking to understand a subject by "by way of definition and division" where "an 'axiom' was divided into two parts or into dichotomies."<sup>45</sup> So, Perkins cited Old Testament narratives in a variety of ways to demonstrate whether, under which circumstances, and to what degree, the Bible demonstrates a binding, moral obligation regarding a given ethical question. Only rarely, however, does Perkins explain how he is using a particular text for drawing out moral and ethical imperatives. In the following sections of this article, I will construct a taxonomy by noting at least eight different ways that Perkins uses Old Testament narratives in his casuistry: examples (from both human and divine actions), illustrations, confirmations to prove a debatable point, principles drawn directly from narratives, taxonomies, triangulations, and analogies. Then, we will examine a few of Perkins's more disputable interpretations and applications.

#### Examples (Human and Divine)

Perkins's use of *examples* represents the first major category in his appropriation of Old Testament narratives. Perkins uses Old Testament narratives as examples more often than for any other kind of method. Perkins cites examples from narratives to serve as proof in themselves of moral obligations, especially when there is no explicit precept to teach the point. Perkins's editor, Thomas Pickering, confirms this understanding of Perkins's use of examples through a postscript to apologize for the accidental inclusion of two examples "in a way of proof of a rule there mentioned."<sup>46</sup> Perkins

himself most clearly defines the way he uses “examples” in his discussion of modesty in dress:

Seventh, it must be framed to the example, not of the lighter and vainer sort, but of the most grave and sober of our order and place, both of men and women. *We have no express rule in Scripture touching the measure and manner of our apparel; and therefore the wise and grave presidents* [editor’s note: “Probably should be ‘precedents.’”] *of good and godly men, who are of the same or like degree with ourselves, ought to stand for a rule of direction in this behalf.* To which purpose Paul exhorts, “Whatsoever things are pure, honest, of good report, if there be any virtue... think of these things which ye have both learned and received and heard and seen in me, those things do” (Phil. 4:9). We have many examples hereof in the Word of God.<sup>47</sup>

Here, Perkins acknowledges the lack of express rule in Scripture dealing with apparel, and, in the absence of a clear precept, he appeals to the “wise and grave [precedents]” and the “many examples hereof in the Word of God.” Subsequently, he notes the rough clothing of Elijah and John the Baptist as customary for prophets to wear in those days (2 Kgs. 1:8; Zech. 13:4; Matt. 3:4). One could, perhaps, argue that the highly unique vocations and circumstances of Elijah and John the Baptist as prophets should not be applied directly to the lives of ordinary believers today. Still, it should be noted that Perkins does not appeal to the examples of Elijah and John the Baptist as the sole reason for advocating “grave and sober” apparel, but the seventh and final reason as he first argues for modesty in dress from six other angles.<sup>48</sup> Perkins cites these final examples only to give specific direction regarding the specific “measure and manner” of apparel, to build off of those other biblical principles. Regardless of whether we may agree with him on this point, this passage is valuable to reveal Perkins’s own methodology for how he uses “examples.”

Perkins cites numerous examples throughout *The Whole Treatise*, often explicitly using the term. So, Ezra and Daniel are “examples” of people who make “supplication made to God for mercy.”<sup>49</sup> Job is an “example” of one “who, having been long in outward afflictions, was withal exercised by the apprehension of the anger of God.”<sup>50</sup> Regarding “divine temptation,” which is “a combat with God himself immediately” so that “the distressed party feels some evident tokens of God’s wrath,” Perkins points to Cain and Saul as figures who experienced this trial due to their own great sins,

but Job and David as “examples” of those who came under such a trial “when there is no sin committed, but obedience to God performed.”<sup>51</sup> Jacob, the people of Israel under Moses with the brazen serpent, and David are all Old Testament “examples” to prove that “they who desire with comfort to bear the pangs of death... must set before their eyes promise of remission of sins and everlasting life.”<sup>52</sup> David and Daniel provide “examples” for how to repent from sins: “when he sins and falls, he is grieved with himself and labors every day to mortify his corruptions, which are the matter of sin in his heart and life.”<sup>53</sup> On three occasions, Perkins cites the “example” of Laban’s oath to demonstrate that even oaths made to false gods are binding on those who make them.<sup>54</sup> Perkins calls Lot and Abraham an “example” to prove that we may give civil worship, or social honor, to angels and men who are worthy of it.<sup>55</sup> The “examples of holy men,” including “the poor maids of Ramath Zophim” in 1 Samuel 9:13, demonstrate the moral duty that we should not eat until having blessed the food.<sup>56</sup> Finally, Perkins cites the “examples of sundry persons in Scripture,” including Abraham, Joseph, the Israelites under Moses, and Solomon, that we may lawfully use costly jewelry: “All these examples do show thus much, that there is a lawful use of these things in them to whom they appertain.”<sup>57</sup>

Perkins also cites examples from Old Testament worship as binding on New Testament worshipers today. First, he argues that we must conceive of God only as He reveals Himself to us in His Word, so that we should not attempt to know or to conceive of God as He is in Himself:

The truth hereof may appear in this one example (to allege no more): When Moses desired to see the glory and majesty of God, for a further confirmation and assurance of his calling, answer was made him by God, that he could not see His face, but he should see His back parts, as He passed by him [Ex. 33:23]... But the

47. Perkins, “Whole Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 410, emphasis added.

48. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” pp. 408–10.

49. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 143.

50. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 170.

51. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” pp. 170–71.

52. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 192.

53. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 209.

54. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” pp. 231, 316, 320–21. The word “example,” however, only appears on p. 316.

55. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” pp. 303–04.

56. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 398.

57. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 405.

perfect and full sight thereof no creature was ever able to attain unto, it being reserved for the life to come when (and not before) they shall see Him as He is in Himself face to face.<sup>58</sup>

Second, Perkins argues that we have a duty for the “exaltation or advancement of God’s majesty above all the things in the world. We have many examples of these in the Scriptures, as of Abraham, who called God ‘his Lord’ and himself ‘dust and ashes’ (Gen. 18:27).”<sup>59</sup> While Perkins often goes to great lengths to argue that old covenant ceremonies do not bind the modern Christian, in cases like this he does not hesitate to argue that examples like this from Old Testament narratives lay down timeless principles that are still binding.

Other times, Perkins does not use the term “example,” but he urges behavior to imitate the example in view. So, Perkins points to David as an example to follow in terms of his faithfulness in diverse vocations, first as a shepherd of sheep and then as a king over Israel: “Look then, as David did, so ought we, even by our works, to be answerable to our callings.”<sup>60</sup> When Perkins holds up David as an exemplar of someone who was “content with any condition of life,” including during the uprising of Absalom, he explains, “So did David...”<sup>61</sup> Noting that Manasseh, Job, Daniel, and the nation of Judah demonstrate the necessity of examination, confession of sin, and prayer, he asserts that these are examples for us to follow: “By all these places it is apparent that there is no better remedy in the world for the mind of man, grieved by means of outward afflictions, than the practice of the duties before named.”<sup>62</sup> As proof of the vanity of the things of this world, Perkins cites Solomon as an example by writing, “And the truth hereof appears in the experience of Solomon himself...”<sup>63</sup> To prove our need of submitting to the Word of God preached in worship, Perkins cites Naaman as an example: “in this regard, let him follow the practice of Naaman.”<sup>64</sup>

One particular use of the term “example” merits our

58. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” pp. 250–51.

59. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 254.

60. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” pp. 151–52.

61. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 173.

62. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 176.

63. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 188.

64. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 271.

65. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 369.

66. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 369.

67. Perkins, “Treatise,” *ibid.*, p. 370, emphasis added.

68. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 319; for similar reasons, Perkins considers Abigail’s swearing by David’s life (1 Sam. 25:26) as “only an obtestation, or earnest avouchment, joined with an oath” (Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 320).

attention, where Perkins uses an example to prove what is wrong, rather than what is right. In the “Third Book of the Cases of Conscience,” Perkins asks “Whether a man may lawfully, and with good conscience, use policy [i.e., strategic deception] in the affairs of this life?”<sup>65</sup> Positively, Perkins finds several “examples” where God explicitly commands “policy,” such as Joshua 8:5, where “Joshua uses martial policy in the besieging of Ai,” and in 2 Samuel 5:23, where David “being to make war against the Philistines, asks counsel of God, and God teaches him policy.”<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, Perkins notes special cases where policy is unlawful, including David’s feigning madness before Achish, king of Gath:

Now if it falls out otherwise, that policy is used, and any of these four caveats are not observed, then it loses both the name and nature of true policy, and becomes fraud, craft, and deceit, and so is condemnable. We have an *example* hereof in David, who, when he came to the court of Achish, king of Gath, and saw himself in danger, he feigned himself mad (1 Sam. 21:14). Though he did this to save his own life, yet his policy was not to be allowed, for it tended to his own disgrace (he being king of Israel). And it was also dishonorable unto God, who had appointed him to be the king of Israel... Besides that, it is not only against the written law of God, but even against the law of nature.<sup>67</sup>

Here, David’s actions are an “example” of unlawful policy; however, Perkins’s categorization of this “example” from David as a demonstration of what *not* to do is unique in his casuistry.

Relatedly, Perkins also cites *counter*-examples that some may point to in order to object to an ethical principle that Perkins has articulated from other texts. So, after arguing that it is not lawful for a man to hear mass because of its idolatrous nature, Perkins raises the “example” of Naaman (2 Kgs. 5:18–19), as well as Jehu (2 Kgs. 10:18) and Daniel (whether by implication he did worship the Nebuchadnezzar’s image; Dan. 3:6) and asks whether these examples contradict his thesis. Then, Perkins explains why the specific features of each of these narratives do not contradict his thesis. Or, after arguing against the lawfulness of swearing an oath by a creature, Perkins cites Joseph’s swearing by the life of Pharaoh (Gen. 42:15) as a possible counter-example, and then provides two reasons why an objection from Joseph’s actions does not stand: (1) “Joseph sinned in so swearing, for therein he imitated the Egyptians who swore by the life of their king”; and (2) “Joseph does only make an asseveration and not an oath.”<sup>68</sup>

Other times, Perkins offers counter-examples both to give specific exceptions to a general rule, and also to use exceptions as the proof of a general rule. So, on the question of whether it is ever lawful to flee persecution, Perkins generally answers the question in the negative, but then also cites “the example of many worthy men recorded in Scripture” who flee for godly reasons, such as Jacob’s flight from Esau, Moses into Midian, Obadiah’s hiding a hundred prophets, and Elijah’s flight from Jezebel.<sup>69</sup> Later, Perkins argues that the extreme nature of Nabal’s foolishness and drunkenness means that Abigail’s “example, therefore, is no warrant for any woman to give alms [apart from her husband’s consent], unless it is in the like case.”<sup>70</sup> These all constitute exceptions to their respective general rule. By contrast, Perkins also cites the rarity of makeup use to argue that Jezebel’s makeup use was proof of its evil: “This practice is most abominable in the very light of nature, and much more by the light of God’s Word, wherein we have but *one only example thereof*, and that is of wicked Jezebel, who is noted by this mark of a notorious harlot, ‘that she painted her face’ (2 Kings 9:30).”<sup>71</sup> Here, the exception of Jezebel’s case – in the text of her overall wicked reputation – proves (for Perkins, at least) a general rule against using makeup.

Less commonly, Perkins does not cite human action as examples, but divine action. Sometimes, Perkins insists that we should follow God’s example directly: “Second, we must be rightly and truly informed in the matter, before we give judgment. This was God’s own practice, who came down to see whether the sin of Sodom was answerable to the cry (Gen. 18:21).”<sup>72</sup> More often, however, Perkins draws out examples of divine actions in order to define our ethical responsibility in response to what God does. So, Perkins deals at length with questions of theodicy, where he argues for the ethical necessity of praising God for his goodness through our suffering by drawing out “the fruits of affliction” from several biblical examples.<sup>73</sup> In this vein, Perkins proves the general principle that God “has determined certainly the accomplishment of all and every of His promises” from “an example hereof in the Israelites, of whom the Lord said to Abraham that they should be in affliction in a strange land [for] 430 years, and then be delivered [Gen. 15:13].”<sup>74</sup> Or, he cites Abraham, David, and others as proof that God “does not always grant [His servants’] requests. . . . And, therefore, if it shall please Him thus to deal with any of us, we must from these examples be taught to possess our souls with patience, resting contented in His will, and waiting on His good pleasures to the end.”<sup>75</sup> When

Perkins advocates that we should follow God’s example directly, his use of “example” follows closely what he generally means when he speaks of the examples of human beings. More often, though, Perkins uses divine “examples” to fill out our understanding and our faith in our invisible God and what he may be doing in our lives.

### Illustrations

Whereas Perkins uses *examples* as proof of the moral necessity of certain actions, he also uses what I will call “illustrations” that do not so much prove a point as they fill out the contours of a duty previously established by other texts. So, regarding oaths, Perkins points to David’s oath concerning Shimei as an illustration that defines the extent that such an oath would bind a person:

David, at the humble request of Shimei (who had before cursed him), pardons his fault for the time, and swears to him that he should not die (2 Sam. 19:23). David made conscience of this oath, knowing himself to be bound thereby, and therefore till his death he kept it; only he charged Solomon not to count him innocent (1 Kings 2:9).<sup>76</sup>

On a few occasions, Perkins uses the operative word “as” to preface an illustration. So, regarding the duties of keeping the law in the “whole man . . . in his mind, will, affections, and all the faculties of soul and body,” Perkins writes, “As it is said of Josiah, that he ‘turned to God, according to all the laws of Moses, with all his heart’ (2 Kings 23:25).”<sup>77</sup> Or, to illustrate the kind of rejoicing commended on the Sabbath, Perkins writes, “But this rejoicing must be such *as* was the rejoicing of the Jews (Neh. 8:12), which was only spiritual and in the Lord. For they rejoiced only for this, that they understood the law of God that was taught them.”<sup>78</sup> These illustrations do not prove the ethical obligation, but only clarify what that obligation requires.

69. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 310.

70. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 424.

71. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 413, emphasis added.

72. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 434.

73. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” pp. 179–81.

74. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” pp. 182–83.

75. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 185.

76. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 320.

77. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 148, emphasis added.

78. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 354, emphasis added.

In a few other cases, Perkins draws from Old Testament narratives for their pure illustrative (i.e., figurative) value, without directly filling out any specific ethical duties. So, regarding the principle that, “in the work of our redemption, Christ gives life, not by life, but by death, and He sends men to heaven by the gates and suburbs of hell,” Perkins uses the Passover menu as an illustration: “The Paschal lamb was eaten with sour herbs to signify that we can feel no sweetness in the blood of Christ till we first feel the smart of our own sins and corruptions [Ex. 12:8].”<sup>79</sup> Or, as an illustration of our duty to prepare for death, so that we may “disarm and weaken” him, Perkins argues that we must be as cunning and relentless as the Philistines with Samson (note the use of “as”):

And in this case, we must deal with death *as* the Philistines dealt with Samson. They saw by experience that he was a mighty man, and by his power and strength had given them many foils; and, therefore, they labored to know in what part of his body his strength did lie. And after inquiry, finding it to be in the hair of his head, they never rested till they had spoiled him thereof. And without question, the time will come when we all must encounter with this strong and powerful Samson, death. In the meantime, it is a point of wisdom to inquire wherein his power and might consist.<sup>80</sup>

Then, Perkins argues that Samson illustrates our duty to “use all means for the cutting off of the lock of our sins, whereby alone Satan has the advantage [over] us” through “the duties of humiliation, invocation, and true repentance.”<sup>81</sup> In both passages, Perkins is not directly illustrating our ethical duties by the details contained in relevant narratives. Rather, he is indirectly illustrating the nature of our duties, by appealing imaginatively to the vividness of passages that are not as directly relevant.

#### *Confirmations to Prove a Debatable Point*

A third category that I will call “confirmations” may be distinguished from both examples and illustrations. In two passages, Perkins cites narratives to give evidence to *confirm* a point that is debated. This is slightly different from how Perkins uses “examples,” which

prove the point in themselves. In a confirmation, the operative word is “thus,” identifying that what we see in a narrative happens *because*, or *as a result*, of the ethical duty in view. The first confirmation arises when Perkins commends Aaron regarding our duty “to have and to keep faith and a good conscience’ (1 Tim. 1:19)”: “*Thus*, it is said of Aaron that when God had destroyed his sons for offering up strange fire before Him, ‘he held his peace’ (Lev. 10:3).”<sup>82</sup> In the second confirmation, Perkins cites Joseph and military chiefs to confirm the lawfulness for rulers of wearing fine garments and ornaments:

*Thus* we read that Joseph, being by Pharaoh set over all the land of Egypt, was arrayed “with garments of fine linen, and had a golden chain put upon his neck, to put a difference between him and the inferior princes of Pharaoh” (Gen. 41:42). *Thus*, in ancient times the captains and chief of the armies did wear fine garments of divers colors of needle work, to distinguish them from others (Judges 5:30).<sup>83</sup>

In both examples, Perkins is not drawing an arbitrary ethical point from the details of the narratives. Rather, he is using the details of the narratives to confirm the accuracy of underlying ethical principles in view.

#### *Principles Drawn Directly from Narratives*

In many cases, narratives must be interpreted before discerning the ethical import of particular actions within the narrative. In two cases, however, Perkins draws general ethical principles directly from narratives. While these principles are embedded within specific contexts, Perkins recognizes their broad applicability and applies them as such. First, Perkins argues that we must meditate on “the comfortable doctrines that are set down in the Word of God touching afflictions,” citing the confessions of Joseph and David as evidence of God’s power to correct all his people through suffering:

Thus, God is said to correct His people “in judgment” [Jer. 30:11]; that is, so as He will have the whole ordering of the correction in His own hand. Joseph tells his brethren that, when they intended evil against him in selling him to the Ishmaelites for silver, “God disposed it for good” (Gen. 50:19–20). When Shimei cursed David, he forbade his servants so much as to meddle with him. And why? Because, says he, “the Lord bade him to curse, and who then dare say unto him, Why hast thou done so?” (2 Sam. 16:10).<sup>84</sup>

79. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 174.

80. Perkins, “Treatise,” *ibid.*, p. 187, emphasis added.

81. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 187.

82. Perkins, “Treatise,” *ibid.*, p. 149, emphasis added.

83. Perkins, “Treatise,” *ibid.*, p. 409, emphasis added.

84. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 177.

Perkins applies these principles about the ethical response of faith from the suffering of Joseph and David directly to the suffering of modern readers. Second, Perkins applies God's prophetic warning to Eli directly to his readers:

If we would truly honor ourselves, we must honor God in all our ways. For God "will honor them who honor him" (1 Sam. 2:30). Now to honor God, is to honor Him according to His will and Word, in the duties of [a] good conscience and [a] good life. On the contrary, they who dishonor God, God will dishonor them before all the world. And this must teach us even to dedicate ourselves to God and His providence in the whole course of our callings, whether in the church or commonwealth.<sup>85</sup>

Many of the details of God's message to Eli are specific to Eli (e.g., regarding the Levitical priesthood or the cutting off of Eli's house; 1 Sam. 2:27–33). While Perkins does not attempt to apply the entirety of that message to readers, he isolates this single principle that God "will honor them who honor him" for application, according to its general nature.

#### Taxonomies

When Perkins evaluates the severity of various kinds of sin, he does not deal so much with the question of *what* constitutes good and evil, obedience and rebellion, or faithfulness and sin. Rather, he classifies the varying *degrees* of heinousness in different kinds of sin, laying a clear foundation for *Westminster Larger Catechism* Question #151, "What are those aggravations that make some sins more heinous than others?" Since Old Testament narratives provide a wide range of material for comparison and contrast, they feature prominently in Perkins's taxonomies on the varying categories of sin. First, Perkins points to Cain's murder of Abel, the pride of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Egypt's oppression of Israel as sins that cry out for justice: "Crying sins, I call those which are so heinous, and in their kind so grievous, that they hasten God's judgments, and call down for speedy vengeance upon the sinner."<sup>86</sup> Second, when he is distinguishing between the three kinds of "sins of toleration," he speaks of "secret, unknown, and hidden sins in the regenerate," and cites David's ongoing "sin of polygamy, without any particular repentance that we hear of. In like manner did the patriarchs, who may not altogether be excused, yet they were not condemned therefor."<sup>87</sup> As evidence for another kind

of sin of toleration, Perkins cites the cases of Moses, Zipporah, and Ahab:

The third kind of sins of toleration are certain particular acts of men not approved of in Scripture, and yet remitted in respect of punishment. Such was the act of Zipporah [Ex. 4:25] in circumcising her child in [the] presence of her husband, he being able to have done it himself, and she having no calling to do that which she did... Thus, God accepted of Ahab's humility [1 Kings 21], though it were in hypocrisy, because it was a show of obedience, and for that [He] deferred a temporal punishment till the days of his posterity. God sent lions to destroy the Assyrians that dwelt in Samaria for their idolatry [2 Kings 17].<sup>88</sup>

In this context, the question is not *whether* God approved of the idolatry of the Assyrians in Samaria, but *why* God tolerated their idolatry after they began to honor God's law in part. For Perkins, this is evidence that God tolerated those sins to a greater degree than "crying sins."

Third, Perkins applies a general principle from a narrative to establish a distinction that sins against God are more heinous than sins against other men: "This distinction is grounded upon a place in Samuel: 'If one man sin against another, the judge shall judge it: but if a man sin against the Lord, who shall plead for him?' (1 Sam. 2:25)."<sup>89</sup> Fourth, Perkins cites two Old Testament narratives where some sin indirectly by their "communication" with the sins of others. In this regard, David "sinned in the murder of Uriah" by commanding it (since he did not carry out the murder himself), and Eli "by winking at sins, or passing them over by slight reproof... in rebuking his sons."<sup>90</sup> Fifth, as Perkins considers that "in sin there are sundry steps and degrees whereby one and the same sin may be lessened or increased and so become more or less heinous before God," he raises the possibility of aggravating sins by addition, "by committing one sin in the neck of another, as David sinned when he added murder to adultery."<sup>91</sup>

#### Triangulations

On a few occasions, Perkins judges what is right by evaluating the reactions of certain people. Because

85. Perkins, "Treatise of The Cases of Conscience," p. 440.

86. Perkins, "Treatise of The Cases of Conscience," p. 128.

87. Perkins, "Treatise of The Cases of Conscience," p. 129.

88. Perkins, "Treatise of The Cases of Conscience," p. 130.

89. Perkins, "Treatise of The Cases of Conscience," p. 130.

90. Perkins, "Treatise of The Cases of Conscience," p. 131.

91. Perkins, "Treatise of The Cases of Conscience," pp. 132, 134.

Perkins focuses more on the reaction of a third party than on the original action itself, I will call this technique “triangulation.” So, to argue that the “temporary and ceremonial” Jewish law concerning the Sabbath forbade the carrying of burdens, Perkins not only cited an express command in Jeremiah 17:21, but he also noted that “Nehemiah charged the men of Judah with the profanation of the Sabbath in that kind (Neh. 13:15–17).”<sup>92</sup> Then, when he argues that “holy” works are lawful on the Sabbath, he cites the reasoning of the Shunamite’s husband:

Of this kind [pertaining to God’s worship] is the Sabbath day’s journey (Acts 1:12), allowed among the Jews to the people, to go and hear the Word preached. Thus, we read that the Shunamite went ordinarily upon the Sabbath and new moon to the prophet, to hear him. For when she demanded leave of her husband to go to the prophet, he asks her, “Why wilt thou go, seeing it is neither new moon, nor Sabbath day?” (2 Kings 4:23).<sup>93</sup>

This is subtle logic. Here, Perkins cites a narrative that does not concern a journey on an actual Sabbath day, but a husband’s curiosity as to why his wife would travel on a day other than the Sabbath, when her travel would be customary and, therefore, lawful. From this, Perkins triangulates what kind of travel would have been lawful on the Sabbath day.

### Analogy

In one instance Perkins draws a moral rule from an analogous, yet unrelated, text. So, in the case of card playing, he acknowledges that dealing cards is a casual act in itself, but that card games rely not so much on the wit, skill, and will of the players, but the uncertainty of chance. Therefore, on the basis that playing card games are like casting lots, Perkins argues that they must be abolished entirely, “because in common experience many abuses and inconveniences attend upon them. And things unnecessary, when they are much abused, because they are abused, they must not be used, but rather removed, as the brazen serpent was (2 Kings 18:4).”<sup>94</sup> There is not a direct line from the brazen serpent to card-playing, but only an analogous line:

92. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 345.

93. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 353.

94. Perkins, “Treatise of The Cases of Conscience,” p. 420.

95. Perkins, “Treatise,” *ibid.*, p. 168, emphasis added.

96. Perkins, “Treatise,” *ibid.*, p. 418, emphasis added.

the latter must be removed for similar reasons that drove the removal of the former.

### Disputable Interpretations

Finally, while modern readers may disagree with some of the ethical applications that Perkins drew from the passages listed above, it would be hard to fault much of his interpretation of those passages. In other cases, however, Perkins makes interpretive choices that are debatable even in terms of their interpretation. Even though we may learn much from his methods, it is important that we do not read him uncritically. Perkins’s debatable points may be classified into two categories: (1) readings that contradict the text; and (2) disputable interpretations. In the first category of readings that contradict the text, Perkins urges believers not to isolate themselves from the company of other believers, since Satan loves to tempt people when they are vulnerable and alone. To prove this doctrine, Perkins offers a confirmation (note the word “thus”) from Genesis 3: “He tempted Eve *thus*, when she was apart from her husband.”<sup>95</sup> This assertion, however, seems to conflict with the text of Genesis 3:6, which suggests that Adam had been with Eve during the temptation: “she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also *unto her husband with her*” (KJV). The doctrine may be correct, but Genesis 3 does not seem to confirm the doctrine as Perkins suggests.

In a second instance, Perkins widely reproves dancing, but acknowledges exceptions in a couple of examples:

We read indeed of a kind of dancing commended in Scripture, which Moses, Aaron and Miriam used at the Red Sea (Ex. 15:20), and David before the ark (2 Sam. 6:14), and the daughters of Israel when David got the victory of Goliath (1 Sam. 18:7–8). But this dancing was of another kind. *For it was not mixed but single, men together and women apart by themselves.* They used not in their dancing wanton gestures, and amorous songs, but the psalms of praise and thanksgiving. The cause of their dancing was spiritual joy, and the end of it was praise and thanksgiving.<sup>96</sup>

While David’s dancing certainly arose from spiritual joy, and while the context makes it almost certain that he intended nothing unseemly from it, Michal’s charge against David contradicts Perkins’s denial that David’s dancing was unmixed: “How glorious was the king of Israel to day, who uncovered himself to day

in the eyes of the handmaids of his servants, as one of the vain fellows shamelessly uncovereth himself!" (2 Sam. 6:20).

In the second category, we may consider disputable points of Perkins's interpretation. The prime example could be Perkins's lengthy consideration of the story of Jephthah's daughter. After extensive consideration, Perkins concludes "that Jephthah did not offer up his daughter in sacrifice, but only set her apart to live a single life to the honor and service of God."<sup>97</sup> This may be true, but it is a point on which scholars have long disagreed. On this basis, Perkins could have drawn his ethical conclusions more tentatively. Another time, Perkins cites the flight of Moses into Midian in Exodus 2 as proof of the lawfulness fleeing persecution under certain circumstances. As evidence that Moses was justified, Perkins writes, "And this was no rash flight, but a work of faith (Heb. 11:27)."<sup>98</sup> In context, however, Hebrews 11:27 seems to refer to Moses's defiance of the king in forsaking Egypt during the exodus, and not to Moses's flight after murdering an Egyptian. Relatedly, Perkins justifies the killing of that Egyptian on the basis that "Moses took upon him public revenge in this action, as a magistrate, and not private, as a private man."<sup>99</sup> Again, while this could be a possibility from the fact that Moses was brought up by the king's daughter, the text of Exodus gives us no direct confirmation of this possibility. Another time, Perkins understands David to be condemning his three mighty men in 2 Samuel 23:16 for going beyond their ability (Rom. 12:3): "Their act was a rash enterprise, and such a one as David himself condemns, because they went beyond their strength to encounter with a whole garrison of men, they being themselves but few, namely three in number."<sup>100</sup> While this interpretation is possible, David does not condemn the actions of the men but only refuses to drink the water they bring him. Is it possible that he is not condemning their risk, but honoring it by pouring out the water as a holy drink offering to the Lord? Perkins does not seem to account for other possibilities.

#### CONCLUSIONS FOR THE PCA'S SCRIPTURAL, REFORMED ETHICS

What, then, should we conclude from this study of Perkins for the PCA's efforts to remain faithful to the Scriptures and true to the Reformed faith in the area of ethics? Primarily, Perkins clarifies the PCA's constitutional emphases on the Reformed doctrine of the conscience and the Reformed method of casuistry in "cases of conscience" (*WCF* 31.2) and in the *Westminster Larger*

*Catechism's* teaching on the Ten Commandments. While the PCA has a strong understanding of the importance of foundational Reformed doctrines such as predestinarian soteriology, covenant theology, and the regulative principle, it does not seem that there is the same level of understanding and appreciation in the PCA for the foundational Reformed ethical insights of conscience and casuistry. Perkins, then, can help the PCA to recover these foundational emphases in two ways.

First, Perkins models how a right emphasis on the conscience prevents distance between scholarly ethics and the soul of the individual believer. Perkins did not write ethics for the ivory tower, but ethics for the wounded conscience. Accordingly, he labored to show sinners how to gain a good conscience by the regeneration of the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ, and then to keep that good conscience by living in a way that (by grace and through faith) pleases God. The value of Christian obedience is not for the sake of demonstrating one's righteousness before others, or of meriting anything from God. Instead, Christian obedience is for the sake of a clear conscience. The current cultural context in which believers are increasingly forced to decide between obeying the conscience as it is bound by God's Word, or the world according to its desires, puts even greater importance on clear teaching about the conscience.

Second, Perkins's skill with casuistry suggests that more work is needed to recover the Reformed method for determining cases of conscience (*WCF* 31.2; *PCA BCO* 11-2). Many valuable studies on Perkins already exist, but one hopes that the current scholarly attention on Perkins after the recent publication of his full works will lead to more attention to his casuistry. Even where we disagree with Perkins's final conclusions, he models a method of interpretation that shows us how to avoid arguing against his views on the basis of our own, subjective, ethical tastes.<sup>101</sup> Rather, we may use Perkins's own tools of casuistry either to confirm his conclusions or to show where, how, and why he may have misinterpreted the passage(s) in question.

Additionally, much research is needed to trace the use of casuistry in the Reformed tradition after Perkins

97. Perkins, "Treatise of The Cases of Conscience," pp. 329–30.

98. Perkins, "Treatise of The Cases of Conscience," p. 310.

99. Perkins, "Treatise of The Cases of Conscience," p. 378.

100. Perkins, "Treatise of The Cases of Conscience," p. 366.

101. On the philosophical origin and contemporary prevalence of moral claims on the basis of subjective taste, see Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), pp. 160–61.

and the Puritans. For example, future studies might profitably analyze the way that biblical proof texts were used in the *Westminster Larger Catechism's* exposition of the Ten Commandments.<sup>102</sup> Also, it would edify the church to publish and organize more conveniently the determinations on cases of conscience that have already been written by the courts of the church (i.e., the decisions of the PCA's Standing Judicial Commission, as well as some judicial decisions of Presbyteries and Sessions). While many of these documents are publicly available, they are often buried in General Assembly minutes and organized chronologically rather than topically. Any work to organize these determinations on cases of conscience to improve their discoverability for study by other courts and individuals who are dealing with similar issues would be a great blessing for the denomination. Furthermore, while determinations of cases of conscience belong "jointly" to the courts of the church, individual elders should recognize that many of their "several" duties such as "preaching the Gospel" and "reproving the erring" (PCA BCO 3-2) relate directly to conscience and casuistry.<sup>103</sup> Accordingly, Perkins is a valuable resource both to individual elders and to joint courts as they exercise their duties in the course of the full range of ordinary ministry in the church.

Finally, as an observation, the report of the recent Ad Interim Committee on Human Sexuality provided an outstanding model for combining sharp, casuistical reasoning with warm, pastoral comfort for the conscience in the two paragraphs of each of the "Twelve Statements."<sup>104</sup> This report met with wide approval and did much to unify the PCA on contentious ethical issues related to human sexuality, and I would suggest that one reason for its success is that it utilized the method of casuistry to give satisfactory answers to ethical questions while also attending to the consciences of sinners wrestling with the implications of biblical ethics. Future ethical work within the PCA would be wise to follow this pattern laid down in the "Twelve Statements" to embrace both aspects of a self-consciously Reformed approach to conscience and casuistry.

The Word of God contained in the Scriptures of the

Old and New Testaments teach not only what doctrine to believe concerning God, but also what ethical duty God requires (WLC #5). As the PCA continues to wrestle with ethical questions, a better grasp of the principles that undergird her constitutional system of ethics would benefit the entire church. Perkins made a singular impact on defining the Reformed approach to ethics to shape the subsequent Reformed tradition of ethics, and his writings model how to care for the conscience while also reasoning clearly from the Scriptures to discern the full requirements of obedience for every facet of life. This study has suggested, then, that Perkins's work could serve as an important resource in the years to come not only to clarify the provisions about the conscience and cases of conscience in the PCA's constitution, but also for improving denominational unity in the PCA surrounding both the goals and the methodology for doing ethics. It is my hope that this article can make a small contribution toward a wider recovery of the Scriptural heritage of the Reformed faith for ethics in the PCA. ■

102. Some work has been done to explore the use of proof texts from the Westminster Assembly; e.g., Peter F. Jensen, "Making Good the Truth: The Proof Texts of the Westminster Confession," *The Reformed Theological Review* 52, no. 3 (1993): 98–109. Nevertheless, the path from proof text to doctrine is somewhat different from the path to the ethics in the *Larger Catechism's* exposition on the Ten Commandments.

103. On the work of individual Puritan ministers for helping to advise individuals on cases of conscience, see Thomas, "Cases of Conscience in Seventeenth-Century England," p. 53.

104. *M48GA* (2021), pp. 877–86.