

## William Perkins & His Homiletical Descendants: Reclaiming Our Heritage for Application in Preaching

By Russell St. John

### INTRODUCTION

Reformed preachers proclaim “the truth, which accords with godliness.”<sup>1</sup> The same gospel that saves the lost is also “training” the saints “to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.”<sup>2</sup> The LORD asked Jeremiah, “‘Is not my word like fire,’ declares the LORD, ‘and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?’”<sup>3</sup> His question contains his answer, and preaching ought therefore to fall upon God’s people like a hammer stroke, “in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.”<sup>4</sup> Even as “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ,”<sup>5</sup> so also sanctification

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1. Titus 1:1.
2. Titus 2:12.
3. Jeremiah 23:29.
4. 1 Corinthians 2:4.
5. Romans 10:17.
6. John 17:17.
7. Westminster Larger Catechism 151.
8. Westminster Confession of Faith 13:1.

9. While for many readers of this paper personal observations will offer sufficient evidence to prove a decline in the practical holiness of our churches, the Barna Group, Pew Research Center, Lifeway Research, Institute for Religious Research, Gallup, Center on American Life and other organizations regularly track the beliefs and practices of self-identifying Bible-believing Christians in America. The statistical evidence these organizations gather paints a bleak picture, and the front-row observations of pastors corroborates the research. In an August 26, 2024 article entitled, “Post-Pandemic Shift in Evangelical Church Engagement,” Mike Leake writes, “75% of pastors identified ‘people’s apathy or lack of commitment’ as a significant concern.” Accessed on August 31, 2024 at [www.lifeway.research.com](http://www.lifeway.research.com).

10. Hebrews 11:38.

still comes through the Word,<sup>6</sup> and especially through the Word preached:

The Spirit of God makes the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation.<sup>7</sup>

Our Reformed forebearers therefore testified that Christians should demonstrate ongoing sanctification, in which “the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof more and more weakened and mortified,” such that believers are “more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness.”<sup>8</sup> The Lord grows this holiness in his sheep in no small part through preaching.

Neither the Word nor the Spirit have lost any power to produce faith unto godliness in Christ’s people. We preach the same Word our fathers preached. But do you see the same holiness in our pews as in former generations? Declining Sunday school attendance, the demise of the evening service, stingy giving, pornography use, failure to hallow the Sabbath, uncharitable speech, trust in princes, identity politics, and runaway individualism testify to a shallowing of practical piety among American Christians.<sup>9</sup> Giants of the faith once strode the halls of our churches. But how many giants will this generation produce? Why does our preaching not seem to grow saints like those of old, “of whom the world was not worthy?”<sup>10</sup> What accounts for the change?

Some will blame the culture, social media, technology,

education, politics, or a whole host of other culprits. But the human heart has not changed.<sup>11</sup> Jesus taught that “from *within*, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, [and] foolishness.”<sup>12</sup> Reformed preachers of prior generations may have proclaimed the Word to people who faced different outward cultural challenges than those which our people face today, but the heart condition of humanity remains unchanged. The gospel of Jesus Christ remains the remedy for its need,<sup>13</sup> and the manner in which the Holy Spirit transforms and renews the human heart through the preaching of the Word endures. “There is,” after all, “nothing new under the sun.”<sup>14</sup> If the Word has not changed and the Spirit has not changed and the human heart has not changed, then why have our sheep changed?

#### *Anecdotal Observations*

I recently listened to a selection of sermons from confessionally-Reformed pastors. Each preacher serves a Reformed congregation, and I suffer no doubt that each man loves the Lord and seeks to honor him through faithful proclamation of the Word. But each sermon dealt almost exclusively with exegesis and explanation. The applications that were given fell into one of the following categories:

First, some men made almost no effort to apply the text. One closed his message by saying, “May the Holy Spirit grant you insight into how to apply this Scripture to your life.” Inasmuch as it is true that both preacher and listener rely on the Holy Spirit for insight, it is the preacher who is commanded to “reprove, rebuke, and exhort”<sup>15</sup> through his preaching of the Word, without which we might rightly ask whether what we just heard can properly be called “preaching.” When the Westminster divines asked, “What do the Scriptures principally teach?” they answered, “[W]hat man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man.”<sup>16</sup> To preach without application is not really to preach at all.

Second, other men offered broad principles of conduct absent specific duties. While Christian men need to hear their pastor say, “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loves the church,”<sup>17</sup> they also need to hear how to do that and what it looks like in daily life. They need to hear what to do about besetting sins of lovelessness toward their wives and how Christ empowers them for more consistent, self-sacrificial love. He needs more than a reiteration of a broad principle. He needs concrete instruction from his pastor, who “exhort[s] and rebuke[s] with all authority,”<sup>18</sup> and who points

him to the sanctifying power of the indwelling Spirit of Christ.<sup>19</sup>

Third, some men argued with hypothetical goats rather than feeding the actual sheep who sat in front of them. Their “applications” took the form of public, cultural apologetics from the pulpit, in which they more fully exhorted their sheep to understand the culture than to conform to the Christ. No doubt our sheep must stand “prepared to make a defense,”<sup>20</sup> and pastors must help believers to become “men who [have] understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do.”<sup>21</sup> But Paul never made it his ambition to produce the most culturally savvy disciples, but rather to “present everyone mature in Christ.”<sup>22</sup> He taught, in fact, that Christ gave “shepherds and teachers”<sup>23</sup> so that his sheep might grow to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.<sup>24</sup>

Lastly, some men trained their sheep in the culture wars, “applying” the Word by helping their sheep to see sin in the other political party, the other denomination, or the other person. But Jesus had hard words for religious people whose speck-hunting ignored their own “logs” in favor of finding sin in others.<sup>25</sup> Such “applications” often result in reinforcing rather than challenging the preexisting sins of the sheep.

Why, then, do we see declining practical holiness in our pews? This paper contends that while Reformed preachers today proclaim the same Word as our forefathers, we do not *apply* it in the same way. Contemporary Reformed preachers in fact think about, define, and practice sermon application very differently than did our forefathers, and our present manner of application does not and cannot foster the same practical holiness that flourished in prior generations.

#### *Where We Go from Here*

The first section of this paper therefore establishes the biblical relationship between healthy preaching and

11. Jeremiah 17:9.

12. Mark 7:21–22, emphasis added.

13. Acts 4:12.

14. Ecclesiastes 1:9.

15. 2 Timothy 4:2.

16. Westminster Larger Catechism 5 and Shorter Catechism 3.

17. Ephesians 5:25.

18. Titus 2:15.

19. Romans 8:13.

20. 1 Peter 3:15.

21. 1 Chronicles 12:32.

22. Colossians 1:28.

23. Ephesians 4:11.

24. Ephesians 4:13.

25. Matthew 7:3–5.

the practical holiness of God's people. The second section describes the applicatory methods and emphases of our Puritan forefathers, tracing them from William Perkins to his nineteenth century descendants, highlighting the differences between historically Reformed practices and ours. The third section offers modern Reformed preachers practical guidance about how to implement a Puritan pattern for sermon application, not only in terms of broad methods, but also in specific verbal techniques.

#### HEALTHY PREACHING, HOLY PEOPLE<sup>26</sup>

##### *A Biblical Barometer*

How would we know whether a particular method of preaching is healthy? Attendance? Parishioner satisfaction? Compliments? Ought we not identify a more biblical measure than these? I am convinced that the Scripture testifies that the holiness of the church offers the best barometer by which to measure the health of preaching. Simply put, when preaching falters, holiness fades. But when preachers rightly proclaim and apply the Word, holiness flourishes.

#### THE OLD TESTAMENT WITNESS

##### *The Priests*

Under the Mosaic Law, the priests and Levites shouldered responsibility to preach the Word of God.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, Judges 2:10 records that after the death of the conquest generation "there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel." In some way, the Word of the LORD failed to reach this new generation, preaching failed, and Judges 2:11 records the result of that failure: "[T]he people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD." The priests and Levites evidently neglected to preach the redemptive works of the LORD, and when preaching faltered, the holiness of God's people succumbed to rising immorality and wickedness.

26. The section that follows represents the substance of an unpublished paper, "Measuring the Health of Preaching," which the author presented at the 2023 Evangelical Homiletics Society conference.

27. Leviticus 10:11; Deuteronomy 33:10; Malachi 2:7.

28. 1 Samuel 2:12–17; 22–25.

29. 2 Chronicles 15:13; 36:14; Jeremiah 2:7–8; Hosea 4:4–6; Nehemiah 9:34; Malachi 2:7.

30. Ezekiel 22:26.

31. Malachi 2:10–16; 3:6–12.

32. Isaiah 42:21–25; 48:17–19; Nehemiah 9:29; Malachi 3:4.

33. Jeremiah 18:7–8; 26:3; 13.

Eli's fearlessness of the LORD, coupled with the blasphemies of his sons, Hophni and Phineas, testifies to the swift moral degradation of the priesthood, and of its failure to consistently fulfill its preaching function.<sup>28</sup> A dearth of faithful, priestly preaching of the Word continued as a pattern throughout the history of Israel,<sup>29</sup> and the LORD summarized the failed ministry of Israel's priestly preachers, saying:

Her priests have done violence to my law and have profaned my holy things. They have made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have disregarded my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them.<sup>30</sup>

Not surprisingly, moral decline and the profanation of holy things followed the decline of biblical preaching. Without accurate, applicatory preaching of the Law of Moses, holiness waned, while worldliness, immorality, and idolatry took further root in Israel.

Malachi 2:5–9 offers a bleak post-mortem to the poverty of the Old Testament priesthood, as the LORD excoriated Judah's priests for failing to faithfully preach the Law:

My covenant with [Levi] was one of life and peace, and I gave them to him. It was a covenant of fear, and he feared me. He stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But you have turned aside from the way. You have caused many to stumble by your instruction. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the LORD of hosts, and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you do not keep my ways but show partiality in your instruction.

As priestly preaching failed, the people fell into sin and immorality.<sup>31</sup>

##### *The Prophets*

In the face of the failed preaching of the priests and Levites, and the accompanying moral decline of his people, the LORD sent prophets to call Israel to repent of sin and to obey the Mosaic Law.<sup>32</sup> Ever decrying the sins of God's people, the prophets promised blessing to the repentant,<sup>33</sup> while proclaiming judgment to the

idolatrous.<sup>34</sup> If the people of God returned to the LORD and obeyed the Mosaic covenant, a revival of priestly preaching would necessarily comprise a part of their renewed obedience. Knowledge of the Law of Moses would again fill the land and idolatry would wane.<sup>35</sup> The prophets therefore represented a revival of preaching, which aimed, at least in part, to ignite a further revival of preaching among the priests.

But false prophets also arose, perpetuating the idolatry of the people,<sup>36</sup> polluting both streams of preaching, the priestly and the prophetic, such that the spiritual apostasy of God's people continued and accelerated.<sup>37</sup> Micah rebuked both priest and prophet, saying of Judah, "[I]ts priests teach for a price; its prophets practice divination for money."<sup>38</sup> The result was devastating. Despite possessing the Mosaic Law, and the ministry of priests and prophets charged to preach it, the Israelites whom the LORD exiled to Babylon wallowed in greater moral filth, greater personal and religious wickedness, and greater social godlessness than the Canaanites whom the LORD had destroyed from the land during the days of Joshua.<sup>39</sup> As preaching failed, practical holiness gave way to prolific wickedness among those who were supposed to be "a people holy to the LORD," a people for "his treasured possession."<sup>40</sup>

From the Conquest to the Exile, the moral life of God's people collapsed and reversed, such that far from pursuing holiness, they pursued evil with industry<sup>41</sup> and without remorse.<sup>42</sup>

#### *A Season of Fidelity*

But the opposite also proved true. A season of faithful preaching produced a season of renewed holiness.

In the days of Nehemiah, after the walls of Jerusalem had been rebuilt, Ezra the scribe brought the Book of the Law before the assembled people of Judah, and not only read "clearly," but also "gave the sense so that the people understood the reading."<sup>43</sup> In other words, Ezra preached the Word, and conviction of sin resulted, such that people wept and pursued renewed obedience.<sup>44</sup> Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levites gave specific application to the men and women present, telling them what to do and not to do in response to the Word that had been preached.<sup>45</sup> Then "all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them."<sup>46</sup> Healthy preaching produced a holy response among the people of God.

#### SUMMARY

I challenge you to read the Old Testament without noticing that the failure of preaching in Israel fostered the collapse of practical holiness among the people of God. But I also encourage you to see that brief moments of faithful preaching produced brief moments of revived holiness. Said differently, the holiness of the Church offers the best barometer by which to measure the health of preaching.

#### THE NEW TESTAMENT WITNESS

While the Old Testament therefore chronicles the failure of preaching in the Promised Land over a thousand-year period, the New Testament, from the earthly ministry of John the Baptist through the close of the apostolic era, covers roughly seventy years. It cannot offer the same kind of longitudinal testimony as the Old Testament. Instead, the New Testament offers a kind of theological testimony that the Old Testament rarely provides, opening a window into the purposes and intended results of preaching. This window reveals that the preachers of the New Testament purposed their preaching to produce practical holiness among the people of God.

#### *John the Baptist*

John the Baptist "came preaching," saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,"<sup>47</sup> and he demanded of those who listened to him, "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance."<sup>48</sup> John applied his preaching by describing specifically what his listeners must do to obey:

[T]he crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." Tax collectors also came to be baptized and

34. Jeremiah 22:8–9; 25:4–7.

35. 2 Chronicles 34–35.

36. Isaiah 8:19–20; Jeremiah 14:14; 23:9–31; 27:14–15; 29:16; Lamentations 2:14; Ezekiel 13:6; 9; 22:28.

37. Jeremiah 5:30–31; 23:11; Zephaniah 3:4.

38. Micah 3:11.

39. 2 Chronicles 33:9.

40. Deuteronomy 7:6.

41. Jeremiah 4:22; 23:14.

42. Jeremiah 5:3; 26:11.

43. Nehemiah 8:8.

44. Nehemiah 8:9.

45. Nehemiah 8:9–11.

46. Nehemiah 8:12.

47. Matthew 3:1.

48. Matthew 3:8.

said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”<sup>49</sup>

John the Baptist pursued the practical holiness of the people of Israel through his faithful, applicatory preaching.

### Jesus

Jesus also preached,<sup>50</sup> saying, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God . . . for I was sent for this purpose.”<sup>51</sup> No less than John the Baptist, Jesus expected the Word preached to produce holiness in those who heard it. His Sermon on the Mount carefully inculcated the demands of the Mosaic Law,<sup>52</sup> corrected Pharisaical errors,<sup>53</sup> and exhorted his listeners in the varied practices of kingdom holiness.<sup>54</sup> As he summarized his own sermon, Jesus contrasted the man who “hears these words of mine and does them” over against the man “who hears these words of mine and does not do them,” calling the former man “wise,” and the latter man a “fool.”<sup>55</sup> Jesus expected his preaching of the Word to produce practical, holy living in his listeners.

49. Luke 3:10–14.

50. Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:14; Luke 4:44.

51. Luke 4:43.

52. Matthew 5:17; Matthew 7:12.

53. Matthew 5:21–22; 27–28; 38–39, 43–44.

54. Matthew 6 & 7.

55. Matthew 7:24–26.

56. Acts 2:38–40; 3:16; 26.

57. Acts 10:34.

58. Acts 10:43.

59. Acts 7:51–53.

60. Acts 8:22; 35–36.

61. Acts 13:38–40.

62. Acts 14:15; 17:29–31.

63. Acts 26:29.

64. Acts 28:23.

65. Acts 20:21.

66. Acts 20:20.

67. Acts 20:27.

68. 2 Timothy 3:16.

69. Hebrews, which its author describes as a “word of exhortation” (Hebrews 13:22), as well as James, may have been adapted from sermonic material. See D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 391; 416.

70. 1 Timothy 6:3.

71. Titus 1:1.

### The Acts

The sermons and speeches recorded in the Book of Acts likewise reveal preachers who purposed their messages to produce holiness in their hearers.

Peter’s preaching called his listeners to repentance and a repudiation of their “wickedness.”<sup>56</sup> He also preached that “God shows no partiality,”<sup>57</sup> while extending salvation by faith in Jesus to God-fearing Gentiles.<sup>58</sup> Stephen preached to convict his listeners of their hard-heartedness and resistance to the Holy Spirit,<sup>59</sup> while Philip preached to lead the Ethiopian eunuch to repentance and ultimately to baptism.<sup>60</sup> Paul preached to set his fellow Jews free in Jesus,<sup>61</sup> to turn Gentiles from idolatry to Christ,<sup>62</sup> and to convert both a wicked king<sup>63</sup> and the Roman Jews.<sup>64</sup> In recounting his ministry in Ephesus, Paul not only reminded the Ephesian elders that he had preached Christ for their repentance and faith,<sup>65</sup> but also that he had held back nothing “profitable” from the Church,<sup>66</sup> instead proclaiming to them the “whole counsel of God”<sup>67</sup> for their benefit.

In each of these cases, the preachers of the New Testament sought the holiness of their listeners through their preaching. They expected their preaching not only to save, but also to teach, reprove, correct, and train in righteousness,<sup>68</sup> leading to the spiritual maturity and practical holiness of their listeners.

### The Epistles

Although the New Testament epistles are not sermons,<sup>69</sup> their respective authors clearly expected the Word of God faithfully preached to produce practical holiness among the people of God.

Paul exhorted Timothy to teach and urge “the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness.”<sup>70</sup> Sound preaching thus “accords with godliness,” that is, it yields the fruit of godly living in those who hear. Paul commended the same pattern to Titus, teaching that “knowledge of the truth” among the people of God “accords with godliness.”<sup>71</sup> In Titus 2:11–12, Paul directly linked the outpouring of God’s Word in the evangelistic preaching of the early Church with the holiness of that Church, writing:

[T]he grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.

Healthy preaching “trains” God’s people in holy living.

Paul likewise reminded the believers at Colossae not only that he preached Christ, but also the end toward

which he purposed his preaching, writing, “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.”<sup>72</sup> Paul purposed his preaching to mature the saints.

In a similar way, Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:12–13 that Christ gave preachers to his Church “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” Again, Paul expected preaching to produce spiritual maturity, increasing holiness, and even the “stature of the fullness of Christ” among the saints. Far from the exception, Paul expected that growth in personal, practical holiness among the people of God represents the normal result of faithful preaching of the Word of God.

James also expected God’s people to grow in holiness through his preaching, writing, “[B]e doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves,”<sup>73</sup> and he asked:

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.<sup>74</sup>

Not only did James expect hearers of the Word to grow as doers of the Word, but he also defined true faith against false faith by the practical holiness it produces in the lives of those who profess Christ.

Peter offers no difference from Paul or James in this expectation. Rather, he taught in 2 Peter 1:3 that preaching does not simply impart information, but also inculcates in God’s people “all things that pertain to life and godliness.” Peter expected biblical preaching to produce godly living among the saints.

John also expected his instructions to produce holy living, exhorting his “little children” not to “love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”<sup>75</sup>

Simply put, the New Testament epistles demonstrate the expectations of their authors that faithful preaching produces holy living.

#### *Negative Examples*

But the New Testament also provides negative examples, which demonstrate that unhealthy preaching produces unholy living.

In Matthew 23:3–4 Jesus said of the scribes and Pharisees, “[T]hey preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.” And he continued, saying:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.<sup>76</sup>

The scribes and Pharisees preached bad news and thus produced bad disciples.

As Paul rebuked the errant teaching of the circumcision party in his epistle to the Galatians, he reminded his Christian brothers and sisters of their freedom in Christ, cautioning them not to “bite and devour one another.”<sup>77</sup> Evidently, graceless preaching had produced graceless conduct in the Galatian churches.

Titus faced a similar challenge in Crete, and in Titus 1:10–11 Paul cautioned him, saying:

[T]here are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach.

Paul described the practical effects of such preaching in Titus 1:16, writing, “They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.” Bad preaching renders exactly the opposite result of good preaching. Good preaching equips the saints for “the work of ministry,”<sup>78</sup> while bad preaching leaves the saints “unfit for any good work.”<sup>79</sup>

Paul likewise urged Timothy to confront errant teachings in the Church, noting the way in which bad theology spreads godlessness: “[A]void irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene.”<sup>80</sup> Irreverent preaching both produces and spreads ungodliness, which further fuels bad preaching.

72. Colossians 1:28.

73. James 1:22.

74. James 2:14–17.

75. 1 John 3:18.

76. Matthew 23:15.

77. Galatians 5:15.

78. Ephesians 4:13.

79. Titus 1:16.

80. 2 Timothy 2:16–17.

Peter reminded the recipients of his second letter that “false prophets” in the Old Testament “arose among the people,” and he cautioned, “there will be false teachers among you.”<sup>81</sup> In describing their teachings and fruit, Peter warned that such preachers “will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them,” such that “many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed.”<sup>82</sup> When preaching departs from orthodoxy, Christians depart from orthopraxy.

#### SUMMARY

The Scriptures offer sufficient evidence to prove that in large measure, “As goes the pulpit, so goes the Church.” Presbyterian divine, Robert Dabney, said it well, noting, “Whenever the pulpit is evangelical, the piety of the people is in some degree healthy; a perversion of the pulpit is surely followed by spiritual apostasy in the Church.”<sup>83</sup> In other words, the holiness of the Church offers the best barometer by which to measure the health of preaching. Healthy preaching, by and large, produces holy people.<sup>84</sup>

Why go to such lengths to prove biblically a direct link between healthy preaching and the practical holiness of God’s people? To show that *if Reformed holiness in the pews has waned, then the Reformed pulpit is less healthy than it once was*. The remainder of this paper

81. 2 Peter 2:1.

82. 2 Peter 2:1–2.

83. Robert Lewis Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric: A Course of Lectures on Preaching* (New York, NY: Anson D. F. Randolph & Co., 1870), p. 27.

84. It might prove more accurate to say that the Lord *uses* healthy preaching to produce holy living in his people, for while a preacher may faithfully plant and water, only God gives the growth (1 Cor. 3:6).

85. John A. Broadus, *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York, NY: Sheldon & Co., 1871), p. 230. Broadus (1827–1895), a Reformed Baptist, served as one of the founding professors of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, teaching New Testament and preaching.

86. William Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying and The Calling of the Ministry* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 2011), p. 4. *The Art of Prophesying* was published in Latin in 1592 and in English in 1606.

87. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 3.

88. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 9.

89. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, pp. 24–25.

90. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, pp. 29; 49.

91. For a full treatment of the development, themes, and impact of Perkins’ homiletic, see Joseph A. Pipa, “William Perkins and the Development of Puritan Preaching” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1985).

92. 1 Corinthians 3:6.

93. Stephen J. Yuille, “A Simple Method’: William Perkins and the Shaping of the Protestant Pulpit,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 9, no. 1 (2017): 228.

offers a path toward restoring the robust health of the Reformed pulpit, and thus the holiness of the Church that depends on it.

#### WILLIAM PERKINS AND HIS HOMILETICAL DESCENDANTS

##### *The “Main Thing to be Done”*

John Broadus asserted that “[t]he application in a sermon is not merely an appendage to the discussion, or a subordinate part of it, but is the main thing to be done.”<sup>85</sup> Broadus’ conviction represents an understanding of preaching handed down to him through generations from our Puritan forefathers, a homiletical inheritance of sorts, which belongs to all who stand in the Reformed tradition. A careful study of William Perkins and his homiletical descendants can help contemporary Reformed preachers to understand this conviction, to reclaim it as our own, and to practice it in our pulpits.

##### *Invitation*

In his preface to *The Art of Prophesying*, William Perkins invited his readers to co-labor with him in the work of preaching, writing:

If you are persuaded of this style of preaching, walk on with me; if you have some doubts, inquire with me; if you begin to see points at which you have wandered, come back on to the right path with me; if you see that I have strayed, call me back to the road you are on.<sup>86</sup>

Acknowledging that “it is doubtful if there is a more difficult challenge in the theological disciplines than that of homiletics,”<sup>87</sup> Perkins strove to impart a homiletical method that was grounded in the Scriptures,<sup>88</sup> responsible in interpretation,<sup>89</sup> accurate in doctrine,<sup>90</sup> and, above all, practical in application.<sup>91</sup> While Perkins was fully aware that only the Holy Spirit produces holiness in God’s people through the instrument of human preaching,<sup>92</sup> he nevertheless “maintained that the Holy Spirit is more likely to bless a certain kind of preaching,”<sup>93</sup> and he therefore strove to impart a homiletical method most conducive to the Spirit’s use.

##### *Spiritual Conditions*

Perkins’ most foundational principle for sermon application is this: Identify the varying spiritual conditions of the men and women in the pews and apply the Word of God to those conditions. Writing, “There are basically

seven ways in which application should be made, in keeping with seven different spiritual conditions,”<sup>94</sup> Perkins listed those conditions as follows:

1. “Those who are unbelievers and are both ignorant and unteachable.”
2. “Those who are teachable, but ignorant.”
3. “There are those who have knowledge, but have never been humbled.”
4. “Those who have already been humbled.”
5. “Those who already believe.”
6. “Those who have fallen back.”
7. “Churches with both believers and unbelievers.”<sup>95</sup>

Of the first category, Perkins wrote, “These must first of all be prepared to receive the doctrine of the Word,” noting that “[t]his preparation should be partly by discussing or reasoning with them, in order to become aware of their attitude and disposition, and partly by reproving any obvious sin, so that their consciences may be aroused and touched with fear and they may become teachable.”<sup>96</sup> Until they are made teachable, such persons will not profit from the Word.

Of the second category, Perkins suggested, “We should instruct such people by means of a catechism.”<sup>97</sup> He thus counseled that a preacher should take care to distinguish between milk and strong meat. While both these types of spiritual food offer the listener the same doctrine or truth, “the difference between them lies in the manner and style of the teaching,”<sup>98</sup> which the preacher ought to adapt to his hearers accordingly.

Of the third category, Perkins advised, “Here we need to see the foundation of repentance stirred up in what Paul calls godly sorrow.”<sup>99</sup> Noting, “Godly sorrow is grief for sin simply because it is sin,” Perkins counseled, “To stir up this affection, the ministry of the law is necessary. This may give birth to a real sense of contrition in the heart, or to terror in the conscience.”<sup>100</sup> In this work, Perkins advised real caution, arguing that if the sinner “does not mourn for sin *as sin*, but only for the punishment of sin—he is not to be given immediate comfort. Such sorrow must first be transformed into godly sorrow.”<sup>101</sup> Perkins felt that this step was vital, for “in renewing men so that they may begin to will and to do what is pleasing to God,

the Spirit really and truly produces in them godly sorrow and repentance to salvation.”<sup>102</sup> Thus, “To the hard hearted the law must be stressed,” but “when the beginning of genuine sorrow appears they are to be comforted with the gospel.”<sup>103</sup>

Of the fourth category, Perkins urged, “Here we must carefully consider whether the humbling that has already taken place is complete and sound or only just begun and light or superficial. It is important that people do not receive comfort sooner than is appropriate.”<sup>104</sup> Thus Perkins advised preachers to “[e]xpound the law to them carefully tempered with the gospel, so that being terrified by their sins and the judgment of God they may at the same time find comfort in the gospel.”<sup>105</sup>

Of the fifth category, Perkins recommended that preachers must teach the gospel, but also the law. In teaching the law, however, the preacher must teach it “as it applies to those who are no longer under its curse,” but rather in order to help God’s people “to bear the fruit of a new obedience in keeping with their repentance.”<sup>106</sup> Perkins nevertheless encouraged preachers to continue to hold the law before the eyes of the congregation “as a father may show his sons what he will do as a punishment to induce a proper sense of fear of doing wrong,” so that “the remnants of sin may be destroyed.”<sup>107</sup>

Of the sixth category, Perkins counseled, “In this situation, the specific doctrine which counteracts their error should be expounded and taught. We need to stress its importance to them, along with the doctrine of repentance.”<sup>108</sup> The “diagnosis of a person’s spiritual status involves investigation,”<sup>109</sup> and Perkins advised:

[W]e must probe and question to discover from them whether they are displeased with themselves, because they have displeased God. Do they hate sin *as sin*? That is the foundation of the repentance which brings salvation. Then . . . we must ask whether they have or feel in

94. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 53.

95. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, pp. 54–60.

96. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 54.

97. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 54.

98. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 55.

99. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 55.

100. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 55.

101. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 56, emphasis original.

102. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 56.

103. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 56.

104. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, pp. 56–57.

105. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 57.

106. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 57.

107. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 57.

108. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 58.

109. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 58.

their heart a desire to be reconciled with God. This is the groundwork for a living faith.”<sup>110</sup>

Of the seventh category, Perkins noted that because most congregations are comprised of a spiritually mixed bag of people, a pastor must discern and address the various spiritual conditions of his listeners, for “[t]his is what the prophets did in their sermons, when they announced judgment and destruction on the wicked, and promised deliverance in the Messiah to those who repented.”<sup>111</sup> Such preaching addresses both the hardened conscience, equipping it with the law for accusation against sin, and also the afflicted conscience, equipping it with the gospel for acquittal from sin in the blood of Christ.<sup>112</sup> Reformed preaching must do both.

#### Varieties of “Uses”

When discussing the application of the Word to these spiritual conditions in the form of particular duties, which the Puritans called “uses,” Perkins described two fundamental kinds, mental and practical.<sup>113</sup> These proceeded from his understanding of 2 Timothy 3:16–17:

110. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, pp. 58–59, emphasis original.

111. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 60.

112. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 61.

113. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 61.

114. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 61.

115. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 61.

116. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 62.

117. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 62.

118. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 62.

119. Of this pattern of application, Joel Beeke writes, “[P]reaching is discriminatory. It clearly defines the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian, opening the kingdom of heaven to one and shutting it against the other. Discriminatory preaching offers the forgiveness of sins and eternal life to all who by a true faith embrace Christ as Savior and Lord, but it also proclaims the wrath of God and His eternal condemnation upon those who are unbelieving, unrepentant, and unconverted. Such preaching teaches that unless our religion is experiential, we will perish—not because experience itself saves, but because the Christ who saves sinners must be experienced personally as the foundation upon which our lives are built.” Joel R. Beeke, “Experiential Preaching,” in *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2008), p. 54.

120. In fact, Perkins advocates for the careful use of law and gospel in application, arguing that “the law and gospel operate differently. The law exposes the disease of sin, and as a side-effect stimulates and stirs it up. But it provides no remedy for it. However the gospel not only teaches us what is to be done, it also has the power of the Holy Spirit joined to it. When we are regenerated by him we receive the strength we need both to believe the gospel and to do what it commands. The law is, therefore, first in the order of teaching; then comes the gospel.” In Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 52.

121. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 65.

122. Pipa, “Perkins,” p. 217.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Paul’s mention of “teaching” and “reproof” suggested to Perkins a form of mental application, which “is concerned with the mind and involves either doctrine or reproof.”<sup>114</sup> Perkins explained that doctrine “is used to inform the mind to enable it to come to a right judgment about what is to be believed,” while reproof “is using biblical teaching to recover the mind from error.”<sup>115</sup> In a similar way, Paul’s mention of “correction” and “training” suggested to Perkins a form of practical application, which “has to do with life-style and behavior and involves instruction and correction.”<sup>116</sup> Perkins explained, “Instruction is the application of doctrine to enable us to live well in the context of the family, the state and the church. It involves both encouragement and exhortation,” while “[c]orrection is the application of doctrine in a way that transforms lives marked by ungodliness and unrighteousness. This involves admonition.”<sup>117</sup> Summarizing these four types of application under two kinds (mental and practical) Perkins noted, “These different kinds of application can be employed with respect to every sentence of the Scripture.”<sup>118</sup>

Perkins did not, therefore, so much discuss “rules” for application as much as he discussed people, that is, the various spiritual conditions of men and women whom the preacher might address by means of a given text,<sup>119</sup> offering biblical counsel to preachers on how to apply the Word to the particular spiritual condition in view.<sup>120</sup>

Perkins’ method for application might then be stated this way: *The preacher must identify the respective spiritual conditions of the people in the pews and apply the text by “teaching, reproof, correction, and training,” mentally and practically, as each spiritual condition requires.* Perkins did not, however, imagine that every sermon would include all four kinds of application directed to all seven spiritual conditions. Rather he cautioned that a preacher must select carefully the doctrines explained and the “uses” applied, “lest those who hear God’s Word expounded are overwhelmed by the sheer number of applications.”<sup>121</sup>

#### The Westminster Assembly (1643–48)

When the Westminster Assembly convened in 1643, *The Art of Prophesying* had been in print for over fifty years. During that time, it had provided “the blueprint for seventeenth century Puritan preaching,”<sup>122</sup> exerting

a profound shaping influence upon the men who gathered at Westminster. The documents they produced testify to the extent to which they agreed with and passed on William Perkins' method of preaching and its focus on application of the Scripture to the spiritual conditions of people.

In the Form of Presbyterian Church Government, the divines listed among the "ordinances" of the church "the word expounded and applied,"<sup>123</sup> and they stated that it belongs to the office of the pastor "[t]o feed the flock, by preaching of the word, according to which he is to teach, convince, reprove, exhort, and comfort."<sup>124</sup> In describing how a pastor should prosecute that work, the Directory of Public Worship insisted:

He is not to rest in general doctrine, although never so much cleared and confirmed, but to bring it home to special use, by application to his hearers: which albeit it prove a work of great difficulty to himself, requiring much prudence, zeal, and meditation, and to the natural and corrupt man will be very unpleasant; yet he is to endeavour to perform it in such a manner, that his auditors may feel the word of God to be quick and powerful, and a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart; and that, if any unbeliever or ignorant person be present, he may have the secrets of his heart made manifest, and give glory to God.<sup>125</sup>

These words carry forward Perkins' emphasis on discerning the spiritual conditions of the people in the pews and of applying the Word accordingly. The faithful Puritan preacher must not, then, simply tell the sheep what to do in response to the Word, but rather "[i]n exhorting to duties, he is, as he seeth cause, to teach also the means that help to the performance of them."<sup>126</sup> The divines thus united in the conviction that "[a] good preacher not only calls them to their duties but helps them to see how to get there."<sup>127</sup>

As the Larger Catechism likewise addresses how a pastor ought to preach, it does so in words that echo Perkins:

They that are called to labor in the ministry of the Word are to preach sound doctrine, diligently, in season, and out of season; plainly, not in the enticing words of man's wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power; faithfully, making known the whole counsel of God; wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers; zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people; sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation.<sup>128</sup>

The divines confessed that Christ has given "the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God" to the church, and that the ordinance of preaching ought to pursue the end for which preaching exists, namely, "the gathering and perfecting of the saints in this life to the end of the world."<sup>129</sup> It is thus insufficient merely to preach evangelistically to "gather" the saints. The faithful preacher must also strive to apply the Word with discernment to the spiritual conditions in the pews so that God's people might experience "perfecting . . . in this life to the end of the world."

The Westminster divines' affinity with William Perkins' homiletic might be seen most clearly in their teaching about repentance. Westminster Confession of Faith 15:5 states, "Men ought not to content themselves with a general repentance, but it is every man's duty to endeavour to repent of his particular sins, particularly." If particular repentance comprises a duty for every man, then preaching that particularizes sin for every man comprises a duty for every preacher. Puritan preachers therefore "named specific sins," and "asked pointed questions to press home the guilt of those sins on the

123. *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government* (Brooksville, FL: Westminster Society Press, 2023), p. 23.

124. *Presbyterian Church Government*, p. 17.

125. *The Westminster Directory of Public Worship* (Brooksville, FL: Westminster Society Press, 2023), p. 35.

126. *Directory of Public Worship*, p. 36.

127. Chad Van Dixhoorn, *God's Ambassador's: The Westminster Assembly and the Reformation of the English Pulpit, 1643–1653* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), p. 96.

128. Larger Catechism 159. A comparison of the exhortations about preaching in The Directory of Public Worship with the same in Larger Catechism 159 displays similarity but not identity. Both documents list three identical adverbs—plainly, faithfully, and wisely—although the Directory begins with the word "painfully," in the sense of severe attention to the task, in place of the Larger Catechism's use of "diligently." The Directory then inserts an adverb the Larger Catechism lacks, "gravely," in antithesis to flippantly, or in a manner unsuited to the subject matter and calling. Whereas the Larger Catechism next lists the adverb, "zealously," describing such zeal as "fervent love to God and the souls of his people," the Directory substitutes the phrase, "loving affection," which demonstrates for the people the preacher's "godly zeal" and his desire to edify them. Finally, whereas the Larger Catechism uses the adverb, "sincerely," the Directory describes a sincere ministry without using the word, writing that such a minister speaks as one who is, "[T]aught of God, and persuaded in his own heart, that all that he teacheth is the truth of Christ; and walking before his flock, as an example to them in it; earnestly, both in private and publick, recommending his labours to the blessing of God, and watchfully looking to himself, and the flock whereof the Lord hath made him overseer: So shall the doctrine of truth be preserved uncorrupt, many souls converted and built up, and himself receive manifold comforts of his labours even in this life, and afterward the crown of glory laid up for him in the world to come."

129. Westminster Confession of Faith 25:3.

consciences of men, women, and children,” seeking to drive sinners out from their hiding places to repentance of sin and faith in Christ.<sup>130</sup>

William Perkins left his fingerprints on the documents the Westminster Assembly produced, for his method of preaching had shaped the thinking and practice of the divines themselves.

*John Jennings (1687–1723)*

John Jennings was born nearly a hundred years after Perkins published *The Art of Prophesying*, and nearly forty years after the Westminster Assembly concluded its work, but Jennings reveals that Perkins’ method of preaching had lost no sway over Puritan pastors. From 1715–1722 Jennings operated a dissenting academy at Kibworth in Leicestershire, and among his surviving works is a brief article<sup>131</sup> that captures his method of preaching. It bears striking resemblance to *The Art of Prophesying*.

Jennings, like Perkins, divided listeners according to their spiritual conditions, writing that “there might properly arise in the application of most subjects thoughts distinctly proper to the converted and unconverted; to notional hypocrites and mere moralists; to mourners, backsliders, and lazy Christians, and at various times to a much greater variety of character and persons.”<sup>132</sup> He therefore argued that “the true way of addressing an audience [is] to divide them into several classes and distinctly speak to each,”<sup>133</sup> noting that if we look to the Scripture, “We shall find that both the prophets and apostles frequently take care to distinguish the holy and the vile, the converted and the unconverted.”<sup>134</sup>

But Jennings’ discernment of spiritual conditions did not simply mimic Perkins’ list. Instead, he elaborated upon it, adding precision, and addressing how a pastor might apply the Word to “scoffers” and “gainsayers,” “carnal, stupid sinners,” “convinced sinners,” “the

moralist,” “pretending hypocrites,” “Christians who have but little strength,” “distempered Christians,” “those of too rigid a temper,” “[d]eclining Christians,” “those who are in danger of sinning and falling back into perdition,” “the persecuted and afflicted,” “strong Christians,” “those who are groaning under corruption,” the “humble and penitent,” those “who lack direction,” “the deceiver and the deceived,” and “those of the house of Israel in desertion,”<sup>135</sup> by which Jennings meant those who “labor under the hidings of God’s face,”<sup>136</sup> uncertain of their status in reference to God. Each of these conditions elaborates upon Perkins’ original list of spiritual conditions, opening the door for fruitful application based on precise spiritual discernment.

Absent the type of keen discernment Jennings advocated, application necessarily devolves into a one-size-fits-all prescription, which Jennings likened to the faulty remedies of an incompetent physician:

If a man, professing to be a physician, should administer or prescribe one constant medicine for fevers, and another for consumptions, and so for other distempers, without considering the age, constitution, strength, and way of living of his patient, and not vary his methods and medicines as those vary, we would hardly call this the regular practice of medicine. Nor can I think this general and undistinguishing way will be more safe or likely to answer its end in divinity than in medicine.<sup>137</sup>

Jennings thus argued, “Preachers of the Word are to distinctly explain and enforce particular duties, and oppose particular sins,”<sup>138</sup> and to do so in reference to the particular spiritual conditions they have identified in their pews. Not unlike Perkins, Jennings therefore excoriated preaching that failed rightly to apply the Word, for he recognized that “they who sit under it are too frequently low, imperfect, and partial in practical goodness.”<sup>139</sup> Preachers who fail to apply the Word should not be surprised to find that their sheep fail to live it.

*Phillip Doddridge (1702–1751)*

Phillip Doddridge, who was born one hundred years after Williams Perkins died, studied under the aged John Jennings, one of the last students to do so before Jennings’ own death. Doddridge served as head of Northampton Academy for independent ministers from 1723, and pastored an independent church in Northampton from 1729.

Not unlike Perkins, the Westminster Divines, and John Jennings before him, Doddridge exhorted his

130. Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), p. 688.

131. John Jennings, “Particular and Experimental Preaching,” in *The Christian Pastor’s Manual: A Selection of Tracts on the Duties, Difficulties, and Encouragements of the Christian Ministry, Compiled by John Brown of Haddington*, ed. Don Kistler (1826; Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2023), pp. 49–65.

132. Jennings, “Particular and Experimental,” p. 55.

133. Jennings, “Particular and Experimental,” p. 55.

134. Jennings, “Particular and Experimental,” p. 55.

135. Jennings, “Particular and Experimental,” pp. 55–60.

136. Jennings, “Particular and Experimental,” p. 60.

137. Jennings, “Particular and Experimental,” p. 61.

138. Jennings, “Particular and Experimental,” p. 53.

139. Jennings, “Particular and Experimental,” p. 50.

students to “[c]onsider the various cases of souls,” and to “[d]eal much in the description of Christian tempers.”<sup>140</sup> He thus urged them to apply the Word to:

[T]he converted and the unconverted,—the ignorant, the careless, the luxurious and the profane,—the moralist and the hypocrite,—the wavering and irresolute,—the doubting, tempted, and dejected in spirit,—the backsliding—the confirmed, zealous, and joyful.<sup>141</sup>

To this point, Doddridge walked lockstep with the Puritans who preceded him. But along with addressing this list of overtly spiritual conditions, Doddridge also exhorted his students to apply the Word of God to “the aged and the young,—the prosperous and afflicted,—the rich and poor;—the healthy and infirm,—those who have lost friends.”<sup>142</sup> By so doing, Doddridge recognized that life circumstances affect spiritual conditions.

Take, for example, the aged and the young. In Isaiah 46:3–4 the LORD declares to the “remnant” that “even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you,” and he likewise promises in Psalm 92:13–14 that the righteous will “still bear fruit in old age; they are full of sap and ever green.” The aged evidently need reassurance, both of the LORD’s continual care, and also of their own spiritual vitality in the face of physical decline. The young also face challenges, for along with exhorting the young to “honor your father and mother,”<sup>143</sup> the Scripture also exhorts the young to “flee youthful passions.”<sup>144</sup> Ecclesiastes 12:1 even pleads, “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth.” The young face multiple spiritual dangers, which the Scriptures address accordingly.

Consider, likewise, the healthy and the infirm. Moses cautions the healthy when he says, “The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away,”<sup>145</sup> while Isaiah 40:6–7 declares, “All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass.” Health ends, and all people must reckon with the spiritual reality of death. Those who are already infirm need the reassurance of 1 Corinthians 15:49, in which Paul teaches, “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven,” for surely, “Death is swallowed up in victory.”<sup>146</sup> No one escapes the spiritual consequences of his or her health or infirmity.

And what of those who are grieving? Believers who suffer a friend’s death need to know that Jesus wept over the death of his friend, Lazarus,<sup>147</sup> and that Jesus now

reigns as our sympathetic High Priest,<sup>148</sup> the very “man of sorrows,”<sup>149</sup> who understands the pain of loss. Grief and death create spiritual conditions and offer spiritual lessons to those who endure them.

Preachers who address these life circumstances gain entrance into the spiritual conditions of their listeners through an experiential ground floor window, for the Scripture attests that each of the life circumstances Doddridge cites lies pregnant with spiritual implications.

#### Charles Bridges (1794–1869)

Charles Bridges was an evangelical Anglican who served various churches in Suffolk and Dorset. Noted for his preaching ministry, Bridges published expositions on several books of the Bible,<sup>150</sup> and helpfully, a pastoral theology that described his homiletical commitments.<sup>151</sup>

Bridges carried forward the Puritan pattern of distinguishing between various classes of listeners, most fundamentally the saved and the lost. Writing, “Practical preaching is needed to sift the false professors of religion, and to quicken sincere Christians,”<sup>152</sup> Bridges believed that “[o]ne great end of our preaching is, distinctly to trace the line of demarcation *between the Church and the world.*”<sup>153</sup> In helping preachers to do this, Bridges offered a list of couplets describing the ways in which these two classes of people differ: their state before God, their knowledge or ignorance of the gospel, their regard to Christ, their interest in the Spirit, their habits of life, their rules of conduct, the masters whom they respectively obey, the different roads which they travel, and the opposite ends toward which their respective roads ultimately lead.<sup>154</sup>

140. Philip Doddridge, *Lectures on Preaching, and the Several Branches of the Ministerial Office* (LaVergne, TN: Nabu Public Domain Reprints, 2013), p. 47. Reprinted from Andover, MA: Flagg, Gould & Newman, 1833. Originally published posthumously in 1804.

141. Doddridge, *Lectures on Preaching*, pp. 65–66.

142. Doddridge, *Lectures on Preaching*, p. 66.

143. Exodus 20:12.

144. 2 Timothy 2:22.

145. Psalm 90:10.

146. 1 Corinthians 15:54.

147. John 11:35.

148. Hebrews 4:15.

149. Isaiah 53:3.

150. Bridges’ excellent commentary on Proverbs has been on my bookshelf for decades. Charles Bridges, *A Commentary on Proverbs* (1846; Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 1998).

151. Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry, With an Inquiry into the Causes of Its Inefficiency* (1830; Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth, 1976).

152. Bridges, *Christian Ministry*, pp. 268–69.

153. Bridges, *Christian Ministry*, p. 277, emphasis original.

154. Bridges, *Christian Ministry*, p. 277.

But Bridges also pressed preachers toward finer spiritual distinctions than merely dividing the saved from the lost. He also cautioned pastors who regularly preach to professing Christians, advising them:

[I]t is important to ascertain the stage of Christian life; the degree of strength or weakness, of faintness or overcoming in spiritual conflict; of advancement or retrogression in evangelical holiness; or growing distinctness or obscurity in the apprehensions of truth; of decided separation from the world, or remaining conformity to it; of increasing glow or decline of love of Christ in the soul.<sup>155</sup>

Stating, “It is only by this minute accuracy, that each class will be brought to stand on his own side of the line laid open before him,”<sup>156</sup> Bridges insisted on careful analysis of the spiritual conditions of listeners. This practice, along with giving power to the preacher’s applications, also prevents the listener from a false sense of security in a false faith. Arguing, “Misconception, indistinctness, or indecision, greatly encourages the self-deceiving of the heart on the one side, and scrupulosity of unbelief on the other,”<sup>157</sup> Bridges noted, “A defect in this discrimination<sup>158</sup> must greatly impede our success.”<sup>159</sup>

Likening the preacher to a physician of souls, Bridges, like Jennings before him, exposed the folly of too-broad applications, writing, “[I]t is not in the general virtue of medicine, but its suitable application to the disease,

that heals.”<sup>160</sup> In order to apply the Word of God as a precise spiritual medicine, the preacher must first isolate the precise spiritual condition of the soul in view.

#### SUMMARY

This manner of careful analysis of the spiritual conditions of listeners, even addressing such conditions through spiritually pregnant life circumstances, formed the basis for convicting, specific, conscience-rending sermon applications from the Puritans through the middle of the nineteenth century and beyond.<sup>161</sup> Somewhere along the way, however, this understanding of preaching, and especially the discerning of spiritual conditions as the basis for sermon application, began to fade. A vital piece of our Reformed homiletical heritage was lost. The difference that loss produced in Reformed pulpits did not go unnoticed by those who listened with educated ears.

#### A HERITAGE LOST

##### *Archibald Alexander’s Lament*

Archibald Alexander (1772–1851) was an American Presbyterian pastor and theologian who served as the founding professor at Princeton Seminary in New Jersey. Alexander taught preaching and pastoral theology for thirty-nine years, influencing an entire generation of American Presbyterian pastors.<sup>162</sup>

In October of 1844, Alexander preached at Duane Street Church in New York, addressing the importance of “rightly dividing the word of truth.”<sup>163</sup> Lamenting the state of Reformed preaching during his day, Alexander noted, “In much of preaching, there is a vague and indiscriminate application of the special promises of the covenant of grace, as though all who heard them were true Christians, and had a claim to the comfort which they offer. This is not a skillful division of the word of truth.”<sup>164</sup> Rather, Alexander argued that in a skillful dividing of the Word “the saint and the sinner are clearly distinguished by decisive scripture marks; so that everyone may have a fair opportunity of ascertaining to which class he belongs, and what prospects lie before him.”<sup>165</sup> He continued, stating:

It is much to be regretted that this accurate discrimination in preaching has gone so much out of use in our times. It is but seldom that we hear a discourse from the pulpit which is calculated to afford much aid to Christians in ascertaining their own true character; or which will serve to detect the hypocrite and

155. Bridges, *Christian Ministry*, p. 279.

156. Bridges, *Christian Ministry*, p. 278.

157. Bridges, *Christian Ministry*, p. 278.

158. While the word “discrimination” today holds an almost exclusively negative connotation, generations of preachers used it to describe the positive act of discerning different spiritual conditions among listeners in order to preach accordingly.

159. Bridges, *Christian Ministry*, p. 280.

160. Bridges, *Christian Ministry*, p. 280.

161. Charles Spurgeon, Martin Lloyd-Jones, William Still, and John Stott in Great Britain, as well as Ebenezer Porter, J.W. Alexander, Robert Dabney, and others in America each carried forward something of a Puritan understanding and practice into his respective preaching ministry.

162. While Alexander clearly lamented the loss of Perkins’ manner of sermon application, it appears that he did not use *Art of Prophesying* to train his preaching students. See James M. Garretson, *Princeton and Preaching: Archibald Alexander and the Christian Ministry* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 2005), p. 81.

163. Archibald Alexander, “Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth,” in *The Princeton Pulpit*, ed. John T. Duffield (New York, NY: Charles Scribner, 1852), pp. 29–47.

164. Alexander, “Rightly Dividing,” p. 40.

165. Alexander, “Rightly Dividing,” p. 40.

formalist, and drive them from all their false refuges. In the best days of the reformed churches, such discriminating delineation of character, by the light of Scripture, formed an important part of almost every sermon.<sup>166</sup>

Alexander was describing nothing less than the death of Perkins' understanding and practice of sermon application among his own homiletical descendants.

#### *A Tradition Adrift*

Not only do Reformed preachers today fail to preach as though "application is the main thing to be done,"<sup>167</sup> but our applications now frequently proceed from theological convictions that neither William Perkins nor our Reformed forefathers would recognize.

Contemporary preaching resources tend to exhort preachers to pursue demographic or cultural analysis, and to apply the Word of God to the personal, social, intellectual, and cultural traits of their listeners rather than to their spiritual conditions.<sup>168</sup> This trend toward cultural application has accelerated in recent years, pressing greater demands upon preachers to engage in cultural analysis of social, ethnic, and national groups and their belief systems as the proper foundation from which to pursue application.<sup>169</sup> The preacher's own perception of the dynamics of each cultural group increasingly drives contemporary sermon application.

This pattern for application exerts pressure on preachers to "contextualize" their sermons for the cultural groups in the pews, and inadvertently inculcates in preachers the sneaking suspicion that if they don't present the content of Scripture in "culturally accessible" ways, then their preaching won't "work." Still worse, this manner of application teaches preachers to trust their own cultural analysis to reach their listeners. But are cultural observations, or the cultural savvy of a preacher, necessary for "the Spirit of God" to make "the preaching of the Word an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation?"<sup>170</sup>

Some preachers hold up Paul's address at the Areopagus as an example of, and a call to pursue, cultural analysis in preaching. But what did Paul actually say? He said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious,"<sup>171</sup> after which he quoted a couple of reasonably well-known Greek poets. Now, imagine I walk around downtown Green Bay, Wisconsin prior to speaking to a group of civic leaders. I eat the food, rub shoulders with the locals, and see the sights. When the

time for my speech arrives, I say, "Men of Green Bay, I perceive that in every way you are very devoted to the Packers," after which I quote Vince Lombardi and Aaron Rodgers. Would my mention of the Packers be so vital that I would have failed to communicate without it? To ask the question is to answer it. So also, Paul's mention of the religious plurality of Athens was never vital to his preaching of the resurrected Christ, but rather formed a thoughtful rhetorical device by which to introduce his subject. His Athenian listeners would still have understood the content his preaching apart from his cultural segue, and the power of his message had nothing to do with their culture and everything to do with his Savior. For it is the gospel, not the preacher's cultural savvy, that "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."<sup>172</sup> If preachers expect cultural analysis to form the foundation from which to make powerful sermon applications, they're elevating a rhetorical strategy to source of spiritual power, which it is not and cannot be.

#### *A More Stable Way*

Culture, moreover, always changes. Individual and congregational, ethnic and national cultures proceed from

166. Alexander, "Rightly Dividing," p. 41.

167. Broadus, *Preparation and Delivery*, p. 230.

168. Exemplary of this pattern is Haddon W. Robinson, "Preaching to Everyone in Particular: How to Scratch Where People Niche," in *Making a Difference in Preaching*, ed. Scott M. Gibson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), pp. 118–128. Originally published in *Leadership* 15:4 (Fall 1994): 99–103.

169. William E. Hull, "The Contemporary World and the Preaching Task," in *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, ed. Michael Duduit (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), pp. 571–87; Ramesh Richard, *Preparing Expository Sermons: A Seven-Step Method for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), pp. 180–83. Originally published as *Scripture Sculpture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995). Wayne V. McDill, *The Moment of Truth* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1999), pp. 46–49; Graham Johnson, *Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-First Century Listeners* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001); Rick Richardson, "Cross-Cultural Preaching: How to Connect in Our Multicultural World," in *The Art & Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today's Communicators*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), pp. 171–73; *Art & Craft* offers essays about how specifically to apply the Word of God to postmoderns, women, men, Hispanic-Americans, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and single adults; Zack Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World: Crafting Biblical Sermons that Connect with our Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008); Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York, NY: Viking, 2015).

170. Westminster Shorter Catechism 89.

171. Acts 17:22.

172. Romans 1:16.

and represent the products of human hearts,<sup>173</sup> and “culture” is therefore enormously complex and ever-evolving. But spiritual conditions are both timeless and culturally universal, for they reflect a stable theology that transcends cultural distinctions.

173. In Matthew 12:33–35, Jesus taught, “[T]he tree is known by its fruit,” for “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.” Jesus also taught in Mark 7:21–22 that “from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, [and] foolishness.” But Proverbs 16:23 teaches that “[t]he heart of the wise makes his speech judicious,” while 1 Peter 2:22 notes that “sincere brotherly love” flows “from a pure heart.” All the bad and good products of mankind—physical, spiritual, intellectual, emotional, artistic, political, familial, social, and moral—and even our motivations, proceed from the heart. Nothing a person thinks, says, accomplishes, seeks, creates, feels, endorses, sings, desires, disparages, champions, or ignores bypasses his heart. Biblically, then, we might define “culture” as the heart products of an individual person or group of people. Each generation transmits forward some heart products from its own time, and some from previous generations. If, then, a preacher must analyze “the culture” of his listeners in order to apply the Scripture to various cultural groups, then he is striving to analyze their individual and collective heart products. But Jeremiah 17:9 insists that the human heart “is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick,” asking, “[W]ho can understand it?” In Jeremiah 17:10 the LORD answers, “I the LORD search the heart.” Moreover, every preacher can confess along with Paul his inability to understand his own heart: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Romans 7:15). How, then, can a preacher trust his insights into the culture, that is, the heart products, of others for power in application?

174. Genesis 1:27. Shorter Catechism 10 affirms that God created man “after his own image, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness.”

175. Acts 17:26.

176. Romans 3:23.

177. Titus 3:3.

178. Westminster Shorter Catechism 84.

179. 1 Timothy 2:5–6.

180. Titus 3:4–5.

181. John 16:13–16.

182. Ezekiel 36:27.

183. Ephesians 2:14–15.

184. The phrase “direct address” represents the author’s own attempt to summarize patterns of speech that rouse a slumbering conscience to action.

185. For an insightful exegetical study of the conscience, see C. A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament* (London, UK: SCM Press, 1955).

186. Robert L. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric; Or, A Course of Lectures on Preaching* (New York, NY: Anson D. F. Randolph, 1870), p. 174. Dabney (1820–1898), a Presbyterian, taught preaching at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia from 1856–83.

187. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 259.

188. Ebenezer Porter, *Lectures on Homiletics and Preaching, and on Public Prayer; Together with Sermons and Letters* (Andover, MA: Flagg, Gould, and Newman, 1834), p. 56. Porter (1772–1834), a Congregationalist, taught preaching at Andover Theological Seminary in Massachusetts from 1812 until his death in 1834.

Four theological truths ensure that the one gospel of Jesus Christ naturally addresses every cultural group. First, the image of God in man<sup>174</sup> is common to every culture, and all humans share the same basic nature, faculties, needs, and desires.<sup>175</sup> Second, every human is fallen,<sup>176</sup> and our fallenness leads all people in every culture to rebel against the LORD, to suffer spiritual blindness, and to pass “our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another,”<sup>177</sup> incurring God’s wrath and curse.<sup>178</sup> Third, men and women of every culture, nation, language, skin color, political affiliation, ideology, and every other demographic identification imaginable, need Jesus. He alone saves.<sup>179</sup> Fourth, the Holy Spirit regenerates hearts,<sup>180</sup> illumines the Word to believing minds,<sup>181</sup> and empowers believers to walk in obedience.<sup>182</sup> These four universal theological truths create a handful of predictable spiritual conditions in human beings across time and across cultures. Rather than attempting to address the ever-moving goal posts of “culture,” Reformed preachers would be better served by addressing the spiritual conditions that are present in every church in every age, regardless of culture.

Unfortunately, cultural analysis has displaced these theological truths as the primary lens through which many preachers pursue sermon application, and this displacement hides an important truth: Christ has “broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” between Jew and Gentile, “creat[ing] in himself one new man.”<sup>183</sup> This did not happen because Paul or others preached in “culturally accessible” and “contextualized” ways but because the gospel is built to work across cultures, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, it does.

## DIRECT ADDRESS TO THE CONSCIENCE

### *Introduction*

But how, practically, in terms of verbal nuts and bolts, can a preacher address the spiritual conditions he has identified in his congregation? Our Reformed forefathers did so by using direct address<sup>184</sup> to speak to the conscience of the listener. The conscience is a faculty of the soul, a moral colander of sorts, which filters a person’s thoughts, words, and actions, accusing or acquitting of sin.<sup>185</sup> Based on this understanding, Robert Dabney taught, “The object of the application is to bring the truth which has been established in the [exposition] to bear immediately upon the conscience.”<sup>186</sup> He therefore noted, “The . . . aim of the sacred orator must be at the conscience alone,”<sup>187</sup> while Ebenezer Porter cautioned, “If [the preacher] does not mean to press the conscience, most certainly he will not.”<sup>188</sup> No preacher stumbles into a man’s conscience.

But how ought a preacher to address the conscience when he intends to do so? By speaking with direct address. Direct address speaks to listeners in the second-person. Direct address uses the imperative mood. And direct address pursues specificity in the application of duty.

#### *Speak in the Second-Person*

Charles Bridges counseled that every preacher “should endeavor to . . . turn the eyes of every one of his hearers upon himself,”<sup>189</sup> while Dabney stressed that the powerful preacher “individualizes the hearer and address him in the second person.”<sup>190</sup> Noting the power of Nathan’s address to King David, Dabney insisted, “Speak not of them, but to them, and that in the second person and in the singular. Say, ‘You are the man!’”<sup>191</sup> Bridges agreed, writing, “Preaching, in order to be effective, must be reduced from vague generalities, to a tangible, individual character—coming home to every man’s business.”<sup>192</sup>

Too often contemporary preachers say things like, “We all struggle with sin. Sometimes our hearts are hard, and we don’t love our neighbor like we should. We can ask the Holy Spirit to help us.” What happens? Heads nod up and down, like a dashboard bobble-head. Why? Each listener hides in the “we” crowd, theoretically acknowledging his responsibility for neighbor-love, but feeling no personal conviction. If “we” need to love “our” neighbor, then no one in particular needs to love his neighbor. As J.C. Ryle cautioned, “Many people, I am sure, do not understand what the preacher’s ‘we’ means. The expression leaves them in a kind of fog.”<sup>193</sup> By using first-person speech (we, us, and our), preachers invite a listener’s conscience to remain inactive. Ryle therefore warned, “[I]f you begin to talk in the vague plural number of what ‘we’ ought to do, many of your hearers do not know what you are driving at.”<sup>194</sup> Bridges therefore counseled that a preacher “who aims at doing good, will endeavor above all things to insulate his hearers, to place each of them apart, and render it impossible for him to escape by losing himself in the crowd.”<sup>195</sup> In short, preachers must use the second-person, addressing their hearers as “you.”

When a preacher does so, saying, “You sin, and sometimes you nurse a selfish, self-oriented heart, refusing to love your neighbor as you ought,” each person hears the preacher addressing him or her personally. The individual listener’s conscience immediately compares his or her personal lovelessness toward neighbor over against the biblical command to love neighbor as self. “You” speaks to everyone in particular, targeting every

conscience, requiring it to judge its owner in light of the Scripture. Ryle ruefully notes, however, that “many preachers are never direct,” for they think it “humble and modest, and becoming, to say, ‘we.’”<sup>196</sup> In the face of such modesty, Ryle admonishes every preacher to “use a direct style,”<sup>197</sup> while Charles Spurgeon stated, “We do not stand up in our pulpits to display our skill in spiritual swordplay, but we come to actually fight: our object is to drive the sword of the Spirit through men’s hearts.”<sup>198</sup> Such fighting requires not modesty, but direct, second person application of the Word of God to the men and women in the pews.

None of this prohibits first-person address. “We” might be appropriate, especially if the preacher addresses a known, congregational sin, or if he calls for congregational action, such as a gathering for prayer. It might also be wise for the preacher to begin an application by referring to his own need to repent, to believe, or to obey God’s Word, especially when he corrects or reproves others. William Perkins suggested, “Whenever possible the minister should include himself in his reproofs. In this way his preaching, teaching, and counseling will be expressed in a mild and gentle spirit.”<sup>199</sup> A preacher who says, “I need to trust Jesus,” not only joins the congregation as one who sits under the Word of God, but also shows his eagerness to obey it. In the main, when you apply the Word, say, “You.”

#### *Use the Imperative Mood*

Some preachers struggle to command their sheep. But biblical preaching confronts. It steps on toes and forces unpleasant self-evaluation. Biblical preaching tells people what to do, often commanding them to do something that they, in their flesh, simply do not want to do. Bridges insightfully noted, “We must not expect our hearers to apply to themselves . . . unpalatable truths.”<sup>200</sup> Our sheep possess deceitful hearts, which

189. Bridges, *Christian Ministry*, p. 273.

190. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 127.

191. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 274.

192. Bridges, *Christian Ministry*, p. 271.

193. J.C. Ryle, *Simplicity in Preaching*, ed. Bennett W. Rogers (Peterborough, Canada: H&E Publishing, 2019), p. 46.

194. Ryle, *Simplicity*, p. 46.

195. Bridges, *Christian Ministry*, p. 272.

196. Ryle, *Simplicity*, p. 45.

197. Ryle, *Simplicity*, p. 45.

198. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Spurgeon’s Lectures to his Students: A Condensation of the Addresses Delivered to the Students of the Pastor’s College, Metropolitan Tabernacle*, ed. David Otis Fuller (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1945), p. 182.

199. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 62.

200. Bridges, *Christian Ministry*, p. 270.

shift the blame,<sup>201</sup> rationalize sin,<sup>202</sup> and avoid self-application.<sup>203</sup> Dabney therefore insisted, “The end . . . of every [sermon] is *to make men do*.”<sup>204</sup> Preachers must tell people what to do.

Recall that both the Larger and Shorter Catechisms ask, “What do the Scriptures principally teach?” They answer, “The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.”<sup>205</sup> In other words, the Bible teaches what is true and what to do about it. When the preacher’s exposition shows his sheep what is true, his application must then tell them what to do about it. In that work, the preacher must say “must.” He should say “should.” He ought to say “ought.” These verbs of obligation stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the imperative mood, and they place the demands of Scripture upon listeners—direct, personal, specific, obligation-laced, biblical demands.

When Peter preached at Pentecost, he commanded his listeners, saying, “Repent and be baptized every one of you,”<sup>206</sup> and, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.”<sup>207</sup> When Paul spoke to the elders of Ephesus, he commanded them, saying, “Pay careful attention to

yourselves and to all the flock,”<sup>208</sup> and “be alert.”<sup>209</sup> In each case, the apostle used the imperative mood, commanding his listeners to pursue a particular action.

Consider the commands Paul issued in the latter half of his Epistle to the Ephesians. Among other commands, he says, “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.”<sup>210</sup> “[D]o not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.”<sup>211</sup> “[W]alk in love.”<sup>212</sup> “[S]exual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you.”<sup>213</sup> “[D]o not associate with them.”<sup>214</sup> “[T]ake no part in the unfruitful works of darkness.”<sup>215</sup> “[D]o not be foolish.”<sup>216</sup> “[D]o not get drunk.”<sup>217</sup> “Children, obey your parents.”<sup>218</sup> “Fathers, do not provoke your children.”<sup>219</sup> “Put on the whole armor of God.”<sup>220</sup> Paul commanded specific duties, in each case speaking in the imperative mood. In the same way, he exhorted Timothy, writing, “Command and teach these things,”<sup>221</sup> and, “[R]eprove, rebuke, and exhort.”<sup>222</sup> He told Titus, “Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you.”<sup>223</sup> Preachers proclaim an authoritative Word and must do so authoritatively.

In our egalitarian culture, any claim to authority, even if legitimate, raises suspicion and possibly accusation. In the face of such concerns, Ryle advised, “Never mind what people say of you.”<sup>224</sup> The world may scorn, but sheep need their preacher to tell them to do what the Word says to do. When speaking of weak application, in which the preacher gives no real command to obey, Dabney said, the people “go away with the vague feeling that they have been only listening to a strain of goodish but aimless talk.”<sup>225</sup>

Speaking in the imperative mood does not require you to speak angrily or look angry as you speak. Just before Jesus used direct address to expose the sin of the rich young man, Mark 10:21 records that “Jesus, looking at him, loved him.” Jesus then spoke directly, saying, “[G]o, sell all that you have and give to the poor.”<sup>226</sup> Jesus used verbs in the imperative mood, saying, “go,” “sell,” “give.” But nothing suggests he shouted, furrowed his brow, or wagged his finger. Rather, Jesus employed imperative verbs while speaking out of love for the young man to whom he spoke.

No preacher should only and always command when he applies the Word to his sheep. To the contrary, wise preachers pose probing questions<sup>227</sup> and offer sage counsel,<sup>228</sup> and the Scripture testifies that preachers warn,<sup>229</sup> caution,<sup>230</sup> comfort,<sup>231</sup> implore,<sup>232</sup> and persuade<sup>233</sup> as well as command. But do not neglect the imperative mood. Faithful preaching tells God’s people to do that which God’s Word commands.

201. Genesis 3:12–13.

202. Proverbs 30:20.

203. 2 Samuel 12:5–6.

204. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 34, emphasis original.

205. Westminster Larger Catechism 5 and Shorter Catechism 3.

206. Acts 2:38.

207. Acts 2:40.

208. Acts 20:28.

209. Acts 20:31.

210. Ephesians 4:26.

211. Ephesians 4:30.

212. Ephesians 5:2.

213. Ephesians 5:3.

214. Ephesians 5:7.

215. Ephesians 5:11.

216. Ephesians 5:17.

217. Ephesians 5:18.

218. Ephesians 6:1.

219. Ephesians 6:4.

220. Ephesians 6:11.

221. 1 Timothy 4:11.

222. 2 Timothy 4:2.

223. Titus 2:15.

224. Ryle, *Simplicity*, p. 46.

225. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, pp. 127–28.

226. Mark 10:21.

227. Acts 7:52.

228. Germane to the present work is the Preacher’s counsel in Ecclesiastes 12:12.

229. Galatians 5:21.

230. Acts 13:40–41.

231. Isaiah 40:1–2.

232. 2 Corinthians 5:20.

233. 2 Corinthians 5:11.

*Pursue Specificity in the Application of Duty*

Dabney complained, “[I] remonstrat[e] against vagueness in the application of obligations to duty upon the conscience.”<sup>234</sup> Why? The conscience requires specific acts, words, thoughts, or attitudes to judge. Abstractions, broad principles, and generalizations fail to rouse the conscience to action.

If a preacher says to his congregation, “Husbands, love your wives,” he should expect little conviction to follow. The conscience compares how a person actually speaks, feels, and acts over against what that person believes to be right and wrong. That requires specificity. A preacher must move beyond the general principle to say, “Husbands, love your wives. That means put your dirty laundry in the hamper rather than throw it on the floor next to the hamper!” When a preacher says such things, the conscience of every husband in the room immediately compares his specific dirty laundry habits over against his belief that he must love his wife. By so doing, you show your listener that he fails, how he fails, and what he must do instead. James Hoppin suggested that after the preacher has explained a principle of conduct or a Christian duty flowing from the Scripture, he should tell his sheep “how to perform that duty,” and should help them “to overcome its difficulties.”<sup>235</sup> Specific examples, like laundry tossing, expose to a listener that he does not in fact practice the biblical principle of conduct that he claims to believe. When, therefore, a preacher applies the Word with specificity, he equips his listener’s conscience with specific actions by which to judge his conduct biblically.

Simply put, abstractions, broad principles, and generalizations will not rouse a conscience to condemnation or acquittal. Specificity will.

*Summary*

Reformed preachers who desire their applications to disturb the oft-slumbering consciences of their listeners will employ direct address, speaking in the second person, using the imperative mood, and pursuing specificity in the application of graces and duties.

## CONCLUSION

*Putting It All Together*

In Matthew 19:17, Jesus said to a rich young man, “If you would enter eternal life, keep the commandments,” and the man asked, “Which ones?”<sup>236</sup> In reply, Jesus listed the commandments about murder, adultery, theft, false witness, and honoring one’s parents, and he summarized them by quoting Leviticus 19:18: “You shall love your

neighbor as yourself.”<sup>237</sup> The man replied, “All these I have kept.”<sup>238</sup>

To this point, Matthew offers a perfect picture of much Reformed preaching today. The preacher proclaims, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” and each person, in the quiet of his own heart, says, “This I have kept.” The preacher has commanded a principle of conduct with which the majority of his listeners already agree. But they also possess deceitful hearts. They apply the command only to their outward actions, neglecting their minds, hearts, and attitudes. Worse yet, a man thinks to himself, “My wife really needs to hear this,” while the wife thinks the same of her husband. Most of the people in the pews already believe in the principle of neighbor-love, but they also falsely believe they’re fulfilling it. Their consciences do not rise to accuse them, for the preacher has stopped short of conscience-rousing application, which requires specificity. But Jesus didn’t stop short.

When the young man said to Jesus, “All these I have kept,” he believed in the principles of conduct the law requires. But he also believed that he was already fulfilling those principles. So, Jesus said, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.”<sup>239</sup> The young man “went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.”<sup>240</sup>

The young man experienced no sorrow when Jesus preached broad principles of conduct. To the contrary, he experienced self-righteous self-justification. But then Jesus told him specifically what neighbor-love entails, demanding a costly, concrete act of obedience from him. It is as though Jesus said:

You say you love your neighbor as yourself. If you do so, then you’ll have no problem parting with your wealth, for you love your neighbor more than your wealth, right? Moreover, you’ll have no problem taking the proceeds of the sale of everything you own and giving it to the poor, for you love the poor more than yourself, right? That is what loving your neighbor looks like.<sup>241</sup>

234. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 63.

235. James M. Hoppin, *The Office and Work of the Christian Ministry* (New York, NY: Sheldon and Company, 1869), p. 184. Hoppin (1820–1906), a Congregationalist pastor and theologian, taught preaching and pastoral theology at Yale from 1861–79.

236. Matthew 19:18.

237. Matthew 19:18–19.

238. Matthew 19:20.

239. Matthew 19:21.

240. Matthew 19:22.

241. I have tried to capture the impact of Jesus’ words on the rich

Do you see what Jesus did? He moved past broad principles of conduct to demand specific acts of neighbor-love. Only then did the young man go away “sorrowful,” for only then did his conscience rise to accuse him of loving his wealth more than his neighbor.

Jesus therefore applied the Word of God in such a way that the young man was made aware, firstly, that he sinned, secondly, how he sinned, and thirdly, what obedience actually required of him. In that moment, the young man had to choose to repent and to obey or to harden his heart.<sup>242</sup> He both refused to repent and also refused to accept grace of the Savior, who loved him and said to him, “[C]ome, follow me.”<sup>243</sup> He could no longer falsely see himself as a keeper of the Law, and when he walked away, his absence increased the holiness of the Church, for he took his unrepentant sin with him. Jesus’ preaching was eminently healthy.

#### Summary

What was that young man’s spiritual condition? According to William Perkins, he was among “those who have knowledge, but have never been humbled.”<sup>244</sup> What spiritually pregnant life circumstance did he face? According to Phillip Doddridge, the possession of riches.<sup>245</sup> And how did Jesus convict him? According to the Westminster Divines, by refusing “to rest in general doctrine, although never so much cleared and confirmed, but to bring it home to special use, by application to his hearers.”<sup>246</sup> What did that require? According to John Jennings, it required that Jesus “distinctly explain and enforce particular duties, and oppose particular sins.”<sup>247</sup> According to Charles Bridges, it required that Jesus provide a “suitable application to the disease,”<sup>248</sup> not offering a general prescription in the face of specific spiritual malady. What manner of speech did Jesus then use to apply the Word of God to the rich young man in such a way that his conscience was roused to action? According to Ebenezer Porter, J.C. Ryle, Robert Dabney, James Hoppin, and Charles Spurgeon, Jesus

used direct address. He spoke to the young man in the second-person, used verbs in the imperative mood, and moved past the principle of the law to show with specificity what obedience requires.

#### CONCLUSION

William Perkins crafted an enduring homiletic that guided Reformed preaching from the Puritans down through their nineteenth century homiletical descendants. It stressed the importance of identifying and applying the Word of God to the various spiritual conditions of the people in the pews, and even to the spiritually pregnant life circumstances they faced. This manner of preaching refused to rest in general application of broad principles, instead prescribing precise spiritual remedies to particular spiritual maladies. It therefore produced detailed, searching, conscience-rending applications of God’s Word that pressed concrete graces and duties upon God’s sheep for hundreds of years. The application really was “the main things to be done,”<sup>249</sup> and the practical holiness of the men and women in the pews proved the health of Reformed preaching.

What was lost can be found again. Contemporary Reformed preachers who rediscover and treasure anew our Reformed homiletical inheritance can look with confidence for an increase of Spirit-wrought power in our preaching and Spirit-wrought holiness in our pews. Determine, then, to accept William Perkins’ timeless invitation:

If you are persuaded of this style of preaching, walk on with me; if you have some doubts, inquire with me; if you begin to see points at which you have wandered, come back on to the right path with me; if you see that I have strayed, call me back to the road you are on.<sup>250</sup>

The preacher who walks with William Perkins and with his homiletical descendants walks in very good company. ■

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young man, but I in no way suggest that my paraphrase represents a faithful translation.

242. “[P]reaching is not always for the good of the hearers. Sometimes it is used for the hardening of unbelieving hearts.” In Van Dijkhoorn, *God’s Ambassadors*, p. 20.

243. Matthew 19:21.

244. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 55.

245. Doddridge, *Lectures on Preaching*, p. 66.

246. *Directory of Public Worship*, p. 35.

247. Jennings, “Particular and Experimental,” p. 53.

248. Bridges, *Christian Ministry*, p. 280.

249. Broadus, *Preparation and Delivery*, p. 230.

250. Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, p. 4.