

**WILLIAM PERKINS**  
Architect of Puritanism



# **WILLIAM PERKINS**

## **Architect of Puritanism**

Edited by  
Joel R. Beeke and Greg Salazar



**Reformation Heritage Books**  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

*William Perkins, Architect of Puritanism*  
© 2019 by Joel R. Beeke and Greg Salazar

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. Direct your requests to the publisher at the following addresses:

**Reformation Heritage Books**

2965 Leonard St. NE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49525  
616-977-0889  
orders@heritagebooks.org  
www.heritagebooks.org

*Printed in the United States of America*  
19 20 21 22 23 24/10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

---

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Beeke, Joel R., 1952- editor. | Salazar, Greg, editor.  
Title: William Perkins : architect of Puritanism / edited by Joel R. Beeke  
and Greg Salazar.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Reformation Heritage Books,  
[2019]. | Includes bibliographical references. | Summary: "Contains  
essays on the life, theology, and legacy of William Perkins"—Provided  
by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019028892 (print) | LCCN 2019028893 (ebook) |  
ISBN 9781601787088 (paperback) | ISBN 9781601787095 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Perkins, William, 1558-1602. | Puritans—England—  
Biography. | Puritans—Doctrines. | Reformed Church—Doctrines. |  
Puritan movements—Great Britain—History—16th century.

Classification: LCC BX9339.P43 W55 2019 (print) | LCC BX9339.P43  
(ebook) | DDC 285/.9092 [B]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019028892>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019028893>

---

*For additional Reformed literature, request a free book list from Reformation Heritage Books at the above regular or email address.*

## Contents

Preface — <i>Joel R. Beeke and Greg Salazar</i> .....	vii
1. Life and Ministry — <i>Sinclair B. Ferguson</i> .....	1
2. Pursuit of Godliness — <i>Geoffrey Thomas</i> .....	37
3. The Greatest Case of Conscience — <i>Joel R. Beeke</i> .....	55
4. The Wholesome Doctrine of Faith and Love <i>Stephen Yuille</i> .....	121
5. The Primacy of Scripture, Preaching, and Piety <i>Greg Salazar</i> .....	155
Conclusion — <i>Joel R. Beeke and Greg Salazar</i> .....	179



## Preface

Known by historians and theologians as the “the principal architect of Elizabethan Puritanism,” William Perkins (1558–1602) was one of the most significant figures of the entire Puritan movement. His many works were published and republished more than any other English author in the Reformation and post-Reformation period and his theology and practical divinity influenced subsequent generations of Reformed and Puritan divines.<sup>1</sup> Despite his widespread popularity and impact in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, he has until recently been a rather surprisingly neglected figure in the history of the church.

This volume of essays arises out of a series of addresses given at a conference that took place in May 2017 to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation at the Round Church—formerly the location of Great Saint Andrews Church in Cambridge, England, where Perkins ministered from shortly after his conversion until his untimely death at the age of 44. The essays address some of the most

---

1. Philip Benedict, *Christ's Church Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002), 319.

significant priorities that fueled Perkins's passion for gospel ministry. Given that William Perkins's complete works are currently being reprinted for the first time<sup>2</sup> since the early seventeenth century, it is hoped that this volume might help to reignite a passion for reading Perkins's works.

Sinclair Ferguson's essay explores Perkins's life and ministry—particularly as a “plain preacher” who heralded the great truths of the gospel by a clear and “open manifestation of the truth” (2 Cor. 4:2) rather than by sophisticated eloquence. In particular, Ferguson points out how Perkins emphasized the need to apply the Scripture to the range of spiritual conditions of his hearers—unbelievers, weak believers, mature believers, and those at various stages in-between. Perkins not only modelled this approach, but commended it to others through the publication of his *Art of Prophesying* (1592), a preaching manual that was used by generations of Puritan divines after him.

Next, Geoffrey Thomas's essay explores Perkins's much needed emphasis on the necessity of true holiness for the genuine believer. For Perkins, genuine repentance in conversion will produce a new, saving obedience and love for holiness that is rooted in faith in Christ.

Joel Beeke's essay explores Perkins's doctrine of assurance—particularly how a believer could know whether or not he is a child of God. A highlight of this essay is the explanation of Perkins's exposition of the absolute and conditional aspects of God's covenant with the believer through the personal saving work of Jesus Christ. Appended to this essay is Perkins's own *A Case of Conscience, the Greatest that Ever was: How a*

---

2. *The Works of William Perkins*, gen. eds. Joel R. Beeke and Derek W. H. Thomas, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014–2020).

---

*Man May Know Whether He be the Child of God or No*, which should be beneficial to every reader.

Stephen Yuille's essay looks at Perkins's "wholesome doctrine of faith and love" through the lens of his commentary on the book of Jude, exploring fifteen ways in which contemporary readers could benefit from this treatise. A highlight is his explanation of how "Perkins's portrayal of Christ our Righteousness provides timely relief to the weary sinner who is conscious of his sin, mindful of his desperate condition before a holy God, and aware of his need for a Savior."

Finally, Greg Salazar's essay examines Perkins's legacy through the lens of his impact on the later Puritan movement. In particular, he traces how subsequent generations of Puritans drew on Perkins and followed him as they defended the authority of Scripture alone, prioritized experiential preaching, and kindled a vibrant piety.

Throughout the volume the authors' desire to situate Perkins's life, priorities, ministry challenges, and influence within their original seventeenth-century context. They seek to help readers "to peer behind the veil" to see the real Perkins as he contended for the faith and attempted to shepherd God's people in the midst of profound challenges. In this way, we trust that this volume will be both a reservoir of theological and practical truth and will foster a greater experiential knowledge of and love for the great God who William Perkins proclaimed and served.



## **Life and Ministry**

*Sinclair B. Ferguson*

If we could ask William Perkins what he thought about his calling in life, he might well reply, “I am a plain preacher.”

To understand what he might have meant by this self-description, we need to set Perkins not only within his late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century context, but in the older framework within which he interpreted his own life, namely the patterns and precepts governing the ministry of the gospel found in the New Testament. He saw these as providing the blueprints for every generation of preachers.

Two passages in Paul’s letters stand out here:

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. For

we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to *give* the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:1–6).

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers (2 Tim. 3:16–4:3).

Second Corinthians 3–6 constitute an extended defense and exposition of Paul's ministry and its apostolic character. It is a *defense* in the sense that his ministry was being both demeaned and attacked by false "super-apostles." It is an *exposition* in the sense that his argument is, in part, that the personal weaknesses and rhetorical inadequacies of his ministry constituted the groundwork on which Christ was building His church. He uses the weak to show His strength (2 Cor. 11:16–12:10); He uses impoverished preachers to communicate His word (1 Cor. 1:27). And while He fills preachers with thankfulness as the gospel advances through their ministry, He makes sure that no flesh will glory in His

---

presence, nor will another share the glory that is exclusively His (2 Cor. 4:15; 1 Cor. 1:29). Weakness and humility are the characteristic marks of genuine apostolic ministry, not position and pride in natural human giftedness. Its hallmark is that through it Christ alone is preached as Lord, and because of this, preachers approach their hearers with the disposition of willing bond-servants (2 Cor. 4:5).

Unfortunately, the thrust of Paul's words to Timothy has been weakened by one of the least helpful chapter breaks in our New Testaments. For it is clear both in terms of theme and even vocabulary that there is an intimate connection between the end of chapter 3 and the opening words of chapter 4. *Because* Scripture is "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness," *therefore* when expounding it the preacher should "convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching" (2 Tim. 3:16; 4:2). The Word should be preached in accordance with the purposes for which it was breathed out by God.

These words deeply informed the ministries of the Protestant Reformers who had flourished a generation before Perkins. They help explain why Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, Heinrich Bullinger, and others constantly devoted themselves to preaching—five, six, sometimes seven or more times every week. They had a similar influence on the later Puritans in England for many of whom Perkins became a significant model. They also have tremendous relevance today. For Paul is saying to Timothy, "My son, the days will come soon enough when people will not want to hear preaching. What is your response to be? What is the remedy? Timothy, I charge you before God to understand that the remedy is...*preaching*."

Clearly what is in view here is not just “preaching” as a formal action. Paul is thinking of a specific kind of preaching that is aligned with the fact that Scripture is God’s Word and brings people to faith in Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 3:15). What is this kind of preaching? If we can see the principles enshrined in the way William Perkins exemplified it in the sixteenth century, then reflecting on his practice as a preacher will be of more than merely antiquarian or historical interest. It will encourage and challenge those who are preachers to pursue their task with fresh zeal; and it should similarly challenge those who care about and listen to preaching to pray that we will see similarly fruitful ministry in our own day.

A roadmap may prevent us from losing our way as we consider the various facets of Perkins’s life and ministry. He was born in 1558, and he died in 1602; his life therefore spanned almost exactly the Elizabethan era (Elizabeth I reigned from 1558–1603). We will think of him as the great exemplar of Puritan preaching in four stages, by (1) introducing him and the impact of his ministry; (2) noting his understanding of the task of the preacher; (3) considering his emphasis on the “plain style” of preaching which he both illustrated and commended; and finally (4) reflecting on how Perkins’s approach can continue to serve as a guide to preachers in every age.

### **Impact of His Ministry**

In the autumn of 1990 I found myself sitting in the office of a seminary professor in Seoul, South Korea. He left briefly for an appointment. Glancing over his packed bookshelves my eyes fell on a set of three hefty tomes. I immediately guessed what they were. But, I thought, how is it possible? But yes,

there stood the massive three-volume folio set of *The Works of William Perkins*. They looked as though they had been freshly re-bound. I did not dare open them for fear of being caught snooping! But how could a set of Perkins have found its way to South Korea?

My friend soon returned to be greeted by the question: "How on earth did you manage to obtain a folio set of Perkins?" He responded with a slight smile, "Would you like a set?" That is a dangerous question to be asked in the Far East when you have just admired someone's possessions—you may find yourself being immediately presented with the admired object! To admire a tie would be one thing—but not a set of Perkins! I tried to respond in as unnuanced a tone as possible, "Like a set'?" (It would be insane *not* to like a set!). He said, "I can get you a set for ninety dollars." He paid a mysterious visit somewhere near the seminary, and I returned home with a newly minted reproduction of the three folio volumes. All for ninety dollars. Had I thought of it I could have set myself up as "Perkins Exports, Inc." and made an attractive profit as an importer! I mention this to illustrate the enduring and even expanding impact of the ministry of William Perkins. In a part of the world far distant from Cambridge, England, four centuries after his death, he is still speaking.

In some ways, however, this is by no means the best illustration of the impact of Perkins's ministry. The best illustrations come from a period much more proximate to his life. The "heavenly doctor" Richard Sibbes (1577–1635), for example, said:

When he heard the bell toll for the funeral of Mr. Perkins, his mind secretly rejoiced in his deliverance from

that powerful ministry by which his conscience had been so oft beleaguered: the remembrance of which things afterwards did break his heart exceedingly.<sup>1</sup>

Sibbes would later come to faith in Christ through the preaching of Perkins's successor Paul Baynes (1573–1617). In one way or another many of the “Puritan Brotherhood” could trace their roots back to the minister of St. Andrews. When Robert Bolton (1572–1631) came to Cambridge from Oxford to hear Perkins, he thought he was “a barren, empty fellow and a passing mean scholar.” But it was not long before he would be able to write that he was “as learned and godly a divine as our church hath for many years enjoyed in so young a man.”<sup>2</sup>

But perhaps the most striking (and the best known) testimony comes from Thomas Goodwin (1600–1679). In 1613, almost a decade after Perkins's death, he came up to Cambridge and noted, “The town was then filled with the discourse of the power of Mr. Perkins' ministry still fresh in most men's memories.”<sup>3</sup> That is not something that is often said.

---

1. Richard Sibbes, *Memoir of Richard Sibbes D.D.* in *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes*, 7 vols. (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1862–1864), 1. xxxvii–xxxviii.

2. E. B., *Mr Bolton's Last and Learned Worke of the Foure Last Things... Together with the Life and Death of the Author*, 4th ed. (London: George Miller, 1639), 13–14. Bolton's works were published by E. B., his one-time student Edward Bagshaw (1590–1662). Bagshaw was a lawyer and member of Parliament (he is not to be confused with his namesake, the controversial Puritan minister, Edward Bagshawe (1630–1671), who, in his earlier days as a student at Christ Church, Oxford, transgressed seventeenth-century etiquette by refraining from removing his hat in the presence of John Owen!).

3. Thomas Goodwin, *Memoir of Dr. Thomas Goodwin D.D. Composed Out of His Own Papers by His Son* in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, 12 vols. (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1861–1866), 2. lviii.

What explains such a ministry? Perkins was born in 1558 in Marston Jabbet, in Warwickshire, a few miles north of Coventry. We know relatively little about his upbringing. In his youth he may have suffered an accident, resulting in a degree of lameness on his left side, perhaps only in his left arm. He came up to Christ's College, Cambridge, and graduated in 1581, becoming and remaining a fellow until his marriage in 1595.<sup>4</sup> But of greater significance for posterity was his appointment as lecturer in Great St. Andrews in 1584.

A lectureship—to be distinguished from a college or university post bearing that description—was a form of ministry developed by the Puritans to establish and advance the preaching and teaching of the Word of God outside of the restraints of the ordinary clerical appointments and worship services of the Church of England to which many of them belonged. This helped both to guarantee an evangelical preaching ministry where there was none, and at the same time helped to fill vacant pulpits where the stipend was so low as to be virtually unmanageable. Thus, without possessing the advowsons for parishes,<sup>5</sup> the burgeoning Puritan movement effectively created its own.<sup>6</sup>

The lecturer gave regular “lectures,” expositions of the text of Scripture. Thus the Puritan agenda was advanced by

---

4. Under the University laws at the time, a fellowship had to be resigned upon marriage.

5. The advowson was the title to appoint a resident minister. Appointments were made under a patronage system. In one sense, these lectureships were a shrewd way of creating a parallel (and sometimes rival) patronage system of their own for the Puritan movement.

6. For a comprehensive account of these lectureships see Paul S. Seaver, *The Puritan Lectureships, The Politics of Religious Dissent, 1560–1662* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970).

creating a detour around the *via media* of the Elizabethan church settlement, which sought to temper the more radical biblical reformation encouraged by Edward VI on the one hand and the Roman Catholicism of the reign of “Bloody” Mary on the other. The funding and multiplying of these lectureships provided the opportunity for people to hear gospel preaching and to sit under a genuine biblical ministry.

Perkins continued in this ministry in Cambridge until his death in 1604—a remarkable longevity in the exposition of Scripture, and strategically placed to influence young men going into the ministry because it was set in one of only two university cities in England. Expressions of his preaching fill the three volumes of his *Works*. Here was powerful, passionate, sharply pointed gospel ministry, and clearly its impact lingered on for years to come.

Few people, however, would have predicted William Perkins’s destiny. The story has often been retold that what helped to awaken him spiritually was overhearing a woman say to her recalcitrant child, “Hold your tongue or I’ll give you over to drunken Perkins yonder.” Evidently, as a young man, he had a reputation for wild living (and rumors of that past life persisted).

In God’s providence, in the latter half of the sixteenth century Cambridge University was graced with men of high spiritual caliber, including the remarkable Laurence Chaderton. He came up to Cambridge as a Roman Catholic, experienced a radical conversion, and became a fellow at Christ’s College.<sup>7</sup> He had both longevity (c. 1536–1640!)

---

7. Difficult though it may be in our time to imagine, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries the influence of a tutor was potentially

and a correspondingly vast influence. He served as lecturer at St. Clement's Church for fifty years, and was for thirty-eight years (1584–1622) the first Master of Emmanuel College—a “seed-bed of Puritanism” founded by Sir Walter Mildmay. When he resigned his lectureship at St. Clement's dozens of ministers signed a testimonial to him in appreciation of the way their own ministries had grown out of his mentoring. It is impossible to doubt that Chaderton had a significant influence on Perkins.

Whatever the instruments, Perkins was brought to a living faith in Christ, and began to evangelize zealously. He brought the gospel to the poor, to the prisoners in the Cambridge jail, and even to the condemned. And at the relatively tender age of twenty-six, as discerning people saw the maturity of his life and biblical understanding, he was appointed to the lectureship at Great St. Andrews.

Just as Chaderton belonged to a lineage of grace (he himself had been deeply influenced by the godly Edward Dering [1540–1576]), Perkins's own influence flowed into the burgeoning Puritan brotherhood. He would become tutor to “the learned Doctor” William Ames (1576–1633) who, while professor at Franeker in the Netherlands, in turn influenced the covenant theologian Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669). Then there was his influence on Richard Sibbes who would in turn have an impact by the publication of his preaching on men like Richard Baxter (1615–1691). This chain of influence would touch John Cotton (1584–1652) who in turn, with

---

immense on an undergraduate. Apparently students could live “in close contact with such men, often sleeping in trundle beds at their tutor's feet.” M. M. Knappen, *Tudor Puritanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), 219. It was not unusual in those days for servants to sleep near their masters.

Sibbes, would influence John Preston (1587–1628). He in due course would touch Thomas Goodwin's life just as Cotton's *Keyes of the Kingdom* would awaken his friend and colleague John Owen (1616–1683) to the congregational way.

Here we find a pattern that seems to appear frequently when God purposes to do a fresh work of grace. Often in retrospect only one prominent individual is remembered, and he is perhaps seen as virtually the only instrument of blessing. But there is always a brotherhood. Men like Moses are always part of a network of brothers—they have an Aaron and a Hur, a Joshua and a Caleb. An Elijah will always have an Elisha and a school of the prophets. A Paul will always have a Timothy and a Titus and Silas. There is always a fellowship of burdened people, lovers of God's kingdom, praying towards its advancement and encouraging one another. They are strengthened by the knowledge that they are being caught up in a work of God that is far bigger than themselves or their own ministry. William Perkins stood within such a stream and at the center of such a network.

The fruit of this ministry abides in his *Works*. He is, of course, best known for only some of them. His great work *The Greatest Case of Conscience* deals with what he saw as the fundamental question—how do you know that you really are a Christian believer? Then there is his exposition of *The Sermon on the Mount*, that well-loved but often misunderstood part of Scripture. (Most people who say “I don't have much time for Paul, but I love the Sermon on the Mount” give clear enough evidence that they have either not read it to the end, or they have not understood the words they have read.) Then, in addition, there is his exposition of Galatians and the book

whose title has become so closely associated with his name, *The Golden Chain*.

But in those segments of the scholarly world critical of the evangelical tradition, William Perkins is known for one thing only—a diagram! He called it an *ocular catechism*. In its own way, it was a stroke of genius, a teaching tool that built on the work of Theodore Beza. It was a visual representation of how the gospel works, tracing the patterns of salvation and damnation from eternity to eternity.<sup>8</sup> In its own way, it was a sixteenth-century PowerPoint presentation of the gospel.

This “chain of salvation” was regularly demeaned in the neo-orthodoxy of the middle part of the twentieth century because of its focus on the divine decrees, and has been critiqued by Barthian theologians because (a priori in their thinking) it lacked genuine Christo-centricity. But one only need look at Perkins’s ocular catechism to see that this is not the real issue. The spine of Perkins’s diagram is his representation of Jesus Christ Himself, the one person, in His two natures—divine and human, in His two states—humiliation and exaltation, and in His three offices of prophet, priest, and king. Thus, every aspect of salvation is related to Him. In this sense we can be confident in saying that William Perkins was a profoundly Christ-centered preacher.<sup>9</sup>

---

8. It is described in William Perkins, *The Works of that Famous and VVorthy Minister of Christ in the Vniuersitie of Cambridge, Mr. William Perkins*, 3 vols. (London: John Legatt, 1612–13), 1:95 (insert), as *A Survey, or Table declaring the order of the causes of salvation and damnation, according to God’s word. It may be instead of an ocular catechism to them which cannot read: for by the pointing of the finger they may sensibly perceive the chief points of religion, and the order of them.*

9. The underlying issue here is the neo-orthodox and Barthian view of the sovereignty of God and the nature of the atonement. English-speaking

Perhaps unexpectedly, if there is any force to these criticisms of Puritan theology they are more relevant to John Bunyan's version of the same idea. His "Map of Salvation" is surprisingly lacking in the focus on Christ that is present in Perkins—a fact that perhaps Bunyan himself overlooked simply because his interest was in plotting the various elements in the *ordo salutis*. We think about Bunyan as Christ-centered, yet it is Perkins's ocular catechism that focuses attention on Jesus Christ.

### **The Task of the Preacher**

Against this background we turn now to Perkins's understanding of the task of the preacher. Elsewhere in this volume consideration is given to Perkins the theologian. It would be wrong to create a dichotomy between Perkins the theologian

---

followers of Barth have been particularly enamored by the work of the Scotsman John Macleod Campbell (1800–1872), especially his major work *The Nature of the Atonement* (London: Macmillan, 1873). In order to deny the integrity of the Reformed view of the saving work of Christ, Campbell realized that it was necessary to re-theologize its very nature (hence the title of his *magnum opus*) to defend a universal atonement. While the "domino effect" may not be a logical necessity in the development of doctrine, it usually holds over consecutive generations. The universalism implicit in a universal atonement was certainly implied in Barth and his earliest followers, although not (to my knowledge) *explicitly* taught. Indeed, on occasion it seemed to be denied on the grounds that this would be to argue *logically* rather than *biblically* from a universal atonement. But it has become increasingly clear that succeeding generations have followed what was implicit to draw the explicit conclusion of universalism (and thus, paradoxically have followed the "logic" which was demeaned in the previous generation). At the end of the day the issue here, then, is not Perkins's lack of a Christology, but the Orthodox Reformed view of the person and work of Christ in general and the nature of the atonement in particular.

and Perkins the preacher. But here we are not thinking so much of Perkins in the architect's office (drawing up the theological blueprints as it were), but of Perkins in the hard-hat area of the construction site, in the practical ministry of the word to men and women in the upbuilding of the church.

Perkins belongs to the middle period between the initial recovery of biblical preaching by the Reformers in the first decades of the sixteenth century—think of Zwingli astonishing the people of Zurich by preaching consecutively through books of the Bible—and the writing of the Confession, Catechisms, and the Directories for Public Worship, and Church Government by the Westminster Assembly in the 1640s. He is thus an heir of the *lectio continua* style of Reformation preaching and a forerunner of the later Puritan approach. This came to mature expression in the Westminster *Directory for Public Worship* which included several pages detailing what the divines believed was “best practice” in biblical exposition. They clearly harvested the fruit of Perkins's approach.

We can illustrate this from *The Larger Catechism*:

Question 155: *How is the word of God made effectual to salvation?*

Answer: The Spirit of God maketh 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.

Notice particularly the words, “the Spirit...maketh the reading, *but especially the preaching* of the word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners.”

In Presbyterian churches, candidates for licensing and ordination are normally asked if they take any exceptions to the Westminster Standards. Not infrequently men do—usually because they believe the *Confession of Faith* teaches that creation took place in six twenty-four-hour days and they are not necessarily convinced that Scripture requires this understanding of the “days” of Genesis 1. Then, some have reservations about the wording of the doctrine of the Lord’s Day when, according to *The Confession*, people should rest “from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations” and be “taken up the whole time, in the public and private exercises of His worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.”<sup>10</sup> But I have never heard a candidate take an exception to the answer to *Larger Catechism* Question 155, and have sometimes wondered why. Do preachers today believe that the Spirit makes *especially the preaching of the Word* effectual for salvation? Why would one not? “Because,” it might be honestly said, “that does not tally with my experience as a preacher. I have seen people converted through personal witness, yes; and at evangelistic Bible studies, yes—but not often through *preaching*.”

Perkins and those who traced their lineage from him almost certainly spent more time with individuals and studying Scripture with small groups of people than most contemporary ministers; they were constantly using Scripture in such contexts. But they believed, and had experience to confirm, that God uses preaching in a unique way.

Yet preaching is discounted today; it was discounted in Paul’s day, and certainly in Perkins’s day. But we are told that

---

10. *The Confession of Faith*, 21.8.

today we live in a visual era. Drama is needed. It does not seem to register that *drama* is a Greek word and belongs to the Hellenistic culture into which Paul *preached* the gospel. Or that William Shakespeare (1564–1616) was a younger contemporary of William Perkins. Preaching the gospel has always been an act of cultural folly (1 Cor. 1:18). But Perkins and those who followed him believed it was the divinely chosen, God-honoring means of salvation. They would have been inclined to respond to comments that preaching is no longer effectual by saying, “You mean *your* preaching is no longer effectual.” Is it true, as it seems, that the frequency and fervency of prayers for others’ conversion under the ministry of the Word—very characteristic of Christians of an earlier generation—has been replaced by what Derek Thomas has called “organ recitals” in which we are interceding for the restoration of bodily parts more than for the eternal salvation of people through the preaching of the gospel? If so we need to learn to pray with Perkins that God will send His Spirit on the preaching of the Word to make it effectual once more to enlighten, convict, humble, and convert sinners to Christ.

*Larger Catechism* Question 159 then very clearly echoes the notes that Perkins sounded: “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.” This is pure Paul, and it is also Perkins, pure and simple.

What made Perkins distinctive—although others shared his convictions—was not only that he illustrated these principles in his own preaching ministry, but that he also wrote a manual to help others develop in this style of humbling,