

Church History (39): William Perkins and William Ames

Beginning with this lesson, we want to give brief biographical sketches of specific Puritans, who either possessed a unique influence in their day, or have had a lasting influence through their writings.

I. William Perkins and William Ames

1. *William Perkins* (1558-1602). "He was born to Thomas and Hannah Perkins in the village of Marston Jabbet (near Coventry) in Bulkington Parish of Warwickshire—the same county in which William Shakespeare was born six years later in 1564. Unfortunately, any details that might supply any insight into Perkins' formative years are lost to us" (Beeke).¹ When he was nineteen years old, his family enrolled him in Christ's College, Cambridge (1577). He received his Bachelor's degree in 1581 and his master's degree in 1584, and was ordained to the ministry (at Great St. Andrew's Church) and appointed Fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge. "For some time after his going to the university, he continued exceedingly profane, and ran to great lengths in recklessness" (Brook).² "At some point during these early years at Cambridge, God began to work on Perkins' conscience. He never shared any of the details of his conversion, but it seems safe to assume that his explanation of conversion as found in his writings reflects something of his understanding of what had happened to him personally" (Beeke).³ "In 1595, Perkins resigned his fellowship at Christ's College to marry a young widow. During their seven years of marriage, they conceived seven children—three of whom died in infancy. He continued to preach at Great St. Andrew's Church until his death in 1602, caused by complications arising from kidney stones, at age forty-four" (Beeke).⁴ "Perkins piety set the tone for the literature that would pour forth from the presses in the seventeenth century, thereby ensuring him a place in history as the Father of Puritanism" (Beeke).⁵ "Few men have been as influential in their lifetime as William Perkins, and few men of such fame have been so widely forgotten with the passing of time as Perkins. While living, he published twenty-one books. After his death, these were frequently reprinted. Moreover, friends and students published twenty-seven new books in his name. These were edited from his many manuscripts" (Beeke).⁶

(1) Theologian. "From the day of his conversion to the day of his death (a little over twenty years), Perkins devoted himself to the study of Scripture. He produced close to fifty books—either published by him or compiled and published by his friends after his death. These included expositions of Galatians 1-5, Matthew 5-7, Hebrews 11, Jude, and Revelation 1-3; discourses on various cases of conscience; and treatises on worship, preaching, assurance, predestination, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the errors of the Roman Catholic Church" (Beeke).⁷ As a theologian, Perkins wrote several polemical works against Catholicism and Arminianism. (a) Catholicism. Perkins wrote three treatises against Roman Catholicism: *A Reformed Catholic* (1597); *Problem of the Forged Catholicism* (1599); and *Warning Against Idolatry* (1601). "The three treatises together strike a helpful balance of emphases on theology, history, and practice. *A Reformed Catholic* exists as a systematic, theological presentation of Perkin's Reformed soteriology in contrast with the Church of Rome. *Problem of the Forged Catholicism* is an exercise in historical theology, proving from the primary source documents of church history that the Roman Catholicism articulated at Trent is not supported by the first twelve hundred years of the church's witness. *A Warning Against Idolatry* handles worship practices—including liturgies,

¹ Joel Beeke, *William Perkins*, 13

² Benjamin Brook, *The Lives of the Puritans*, 2:129

³ Joel Beeke, *William Perkins*, 19

⁴ Joel Beeke, *The Works of William Perkins*, 1: xv-xvi

⁵ Joel Beeke, *The Works of William Perkins*, 1: xxxii

⁶ Joel Beeke, *William Perkins*, 109

⁷ Joel Beeke, *William Perkins*, 23

ceremonies, customs, and rites—concluding that all the externals of worship must be regulated by Scripture" (Wright).⁸ (b) Arminianism. Perkins wrote several treatises in defense of the Augustinian view of sovereign grace in salvation. Among them were: *A Golden Chain* (1591); *The Manner and Order of Predestination* (1598); and *A Treatise on God's Free Grace and Man's Free Will* (1602). "By the time of his death, Perkins' writings in England were outselling those of Calvin, Beza, and Bullinger combined" (Beeke).⁹

(2) Professor. Perkins served as a fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge, from 1584-1594. "The fellows were elected for an indefinite period of time, and were responsible for preaching as well as conducting lectures. He also served as a tutor who acted as guides to learning as well as guardians of finances, morals, and manners. In addition to tutoring, Perkins catechized students at Corpus Christi College on Thursday afternoons, and worked as an adviser on Sunday afternoons, counseling the spiritually distressed. In these various roles, he left an indelible mark on a generation of young men, including Richard Sibbes, John Cotton, John Preston, and William Ames" (Beeke).¹⁰ Perkins was deeply concerned over the state of pastoral ministry in the Church of England (as he never left the Church but sought to purify it from within). Thus, as a professor, one of his chief concerns was to raise up qualified and effective pastors/preachers. In his treatise, *The Art of Prophesying*, Perkins laid out "the sacred and only method of preaching" in four steps. "The first is to read the text distinctly out of the canonical Scriptures. Secondly, you must give the sense and understanding of the text. This entails the opening of the words and sentence of the Scripture, so that one entire and natural sense may appear. Thirdly, the preacher must collect a few and profitable points of doctrine; fourthly, the preacher is to apply the doctrines rightly collected to the life and manners of men in a simple and plain speech."¹¹

(3) Pastor. "From 1584 until his death, Perkins served as lecturer, or preacher, at Great St. Andrew's Church, Cambridge, a most influential pulpit across the street from Christ's College. Perkins had exceptional gifts for peaching and an uncanny ability to reach common people with plain preaching and theology. He pioneered Puritan casuistry—the art of dealing with 'cases of conscience' by self-examination and scriptural diagnosis" (Beeke).¹² While Perkins wrote several treatises on the conscience, perhaps his most popular were *A Discourse of Conscience* (1596) and *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience* (1606). "The first contained four major sections, which established the framework within which Perkins developed his pastoral theology" (Yuille).¹³ Its full title was: *A Discourse of Conscience: Wherein is Set Down the Nature, Properties, and Differences Thereof, as Also the Way to Get and Keep a Good Conscience*. (1) Of the Nature of Conscience. "Conscience is a part of the understanding in all reasonable creatures, determining of their particular actions either with them or against them. The proper end of conscience is to determine of things done. It determines or gives sentence of things done by saying unto us: 'This was done; this was not done. This may be done; this may not be done. This was well done; this was ill done.'"¹⁴

The things that conscience determines of are a man's own actions. His own actions, I say. To be certain what another man has said or done is commonly called knowledge, but for a man to be certain what he himself has done or said, that is conscience. The manner of conscience's determination is to set down its judgment either with the creature or against it. Conscience is of a divine nature, and is a thing placed by God in the midst

⁸ Shawn Wright, *The Works of William Perkins*, 7: xxxv

⁹ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 473-474

¹⁰ Joel Beeke, *William Perkins*, 63-64

¹¹ William Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins*, 10:287-354

¹² Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 471-472

¹³ J. Stephen Yuille, *The Works of William Perkins*, 8: xii

¹⁴ William Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins*, 8:7-8

between Him and man, as a go-between to give sentence, and to pronounce either with man or against man unto God. God knows perfectly all the doings of man, though they are ever so hidden and concealed, and man by a gift given him of God, knows together with God the same things of himself, and this gift is named conscience. It gives testimony by determining that a thing was done or not done. *Their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, or else excusing them* (Rom.2:15). *Our rejoicing is the testimony of our conscience* (2Cor.1:12). The conscience bears witness of our thoughts, our affections, and our outward actions. It also gives judgment of things done. To give judgment is to determine that a thing is well done or ill done. Herein conscience is like a little god sitting in the middle of men's hearts, arraigning them in this life as they shall be arraigned for their offences at the tribunal seat of the ever-living God in the day of judgment. Wherefore, the temporary judgment that is given by the conscience is nothing else but a beginning (or a forerunner) of the last judgment.¹⁵

Given the sober task of conscience, Perkins makes clear only "the Word of God written in the books of the Old and New Testaments have absolute and sovereign power in itself to bind the conscience."¹⁶ He then says "God's Word is either law or gospel." "The law of God is threefold: moral, judicial, and ceremonial. The ceremonial law are those laws that pertained to Israel's religion, whereas the judicial law are laws that pertained to Israel's government."¹⁷ "According to Perkins, the moral law differs from the ceremonial and judicial laws, in that God did not give it exclusively to Israel, but to all humanity" (Beeke).¹⁸ "It was written in Adam's mind by the gift of creation, and the remnants of it are in every man by the light of nature."¹⁹ According to Perkins, "the gospel is that part of the Word of God which promises righteousness and everlasting life to all who believe in Christ, and withal commands this faith."²⁰ While Perkins allows that other things may "improperly bind" the conscience, "such as human laws, an oath, or promise," only God's Word has authority to "properly" bind the conscience. "The consideration of this point should make every man most careful to seek for knowledge of God's Word, and daily to increase in it, that he may in all his affairs have God's laws to be the men of his counsel (Ps.119:24)."²¹

(2) Of the Kinds of Conscience. "Conscience is either good or bad. (a) Good conscience is that which rightly excuses and comforts, according to God's Word. Good conscience is either good by creation or by regeneration. Good by creation was the conscience of Adam, which in the estate of innocence did only excuse and could not accuse him for anything. Regenerate conscience is that which being corrupt by nature, is renewed and purged by faith in the blood of Christ."²² (b) Bad conscience. "A bad conscience is either dead or stirring. Dead conscience is that which, though it can do nothing but accuse, yet commonly it lies quiet, accusing little or nothing at all. This is due to searing and hardening. Stirring conscience is that which does sensibly either accuse or excuse. While this may have a good effect in restraining outward actions, it is no good conscience. If all the virtues of natural men are indeed beautiful sins, and their righteousness but a carnal righteousness, then the conscience also of a carnal man, though it excuses him for well doing, is but a carnal conscience."²³

¹⁵ William Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins*, 8:8-10

¹⁶ William Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins*, 8:13

¹⁷ William Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins*, 8:14-18

¹⁸ Joel Beeke, *William Perkins*, 90

¹⁹ William Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins*, 8:14

²⁰ William Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins*, 8:18

²¹ William Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins*, 8:55

²² William Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins*, 8:56

²³ William Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins*, 8:85

(3) Of Man's Duty Touching Conscience. "Man's duty concerning conscience is twofold. The first is, if we lack a good conscience, above all things to labor to obtain it, for it is not given by nature to any man, but comes by grace." "After a man has gotten a good conscience, his second duty is to keep it. And as in governing the ship on the sea, the pilot, holding the helm in his hand, has always an eye to the compass, so we likewise, in the ordering of our lives and conversations, must always have a special regard to the conscience."²⁴ Perkins then provides two helps to keep a good conscience: "avoid the impediments thereof; and use convenient preservatives." (a) Avoid the impediments thereof. "The impediments of a good conscience are either in us or forth of us. In us, our own sins and corruptions. These are especially three: ignorance, unmortified affections, and worldly lusts." (b) Use convenient preservatives. "The preservatives of a good conscience are two: The first is to preserve and cherish that saving faith whereby we are persuaded of our reconciliation with God in Christ, for this is the root of a good conscience. This faith is cherished and confirmed by the daily exercises of invocation and repentance, which is to humble ourselves, to bewail and confess our sins to God, to condemn ourselves for them, to pray for pardon and strength against sin, to praise God and give Him thanks for His daily benefits." "The second preservative is the maintaining of the righteousness of a good conscience. This righteousness is nothing else but a constant endeavor and desire to obey the will of God in all things. That this righteousness may be kept to the end, we must practice three rules. First, we are to carry in our hearts a purpose never to sin against God in anything. Second, we are to walk with God as Enoch did (Gen.5:24), which is to order the whole course of our lives as in the presence of God, desiring to approve all our doings even unto Him. Third, we must walk carefully in our particular callings, doing the duties thereof to the glory of God, to the good of the commonwealth and the edification of the church."²⁵

Perkins then provides five reasons "to induce us" to maintain a good conscience:²⁶ "First, God's straight commandment. 'Keep faith and good conscience' (1Tim.1:19)." "Second, the good conscience is the most tender part of the soul like to the apple of the eye; which being pierced by the least pin that may be, is not only blemished, but also loses its sight. Therefore, as God does to the eye, so must we deal with the conscience. God gives to the eye certain lids of flesh to defend and cover it from outward injuries. And so we must use means to avoid whatsoever may offend or annoy conscience." "Third, manifold benefits redound unto us by keeping a good conscience. A good conscience enables us to enjoy all other gifts of God's Spirit; it gives boldness in calling on God's name. 'If our heart condemns us not, we have boldness towards God' (1Jn.3:21); it makes us patient in affliction and comforts us greatly; and when none can comfort us, it will be an amiable comforter and a friend speaking sweetly unto us in the very agony and pang of death." "Fourth, to fail to preserve the conscience is the way to desperation. It is the policy of the devil to use means to cast the conscience into the sleep of security, so that he may the more easily bring men to his own destruction. For as diseases, if they are long neglected, become incurable, so the conscience much and often wounded admits no comfort." "Fifth, they who shall neglect to keep a good conscience procure many hurts and dangers and judgments of God to themselves. When a ship is on the sea, if it is not well governed, or if there is a breach made into it, it draws water and sinks; and so both men and wares and all in likelihood are cast away. Now we all are as passengers, and the world is a huge sea through which we must pass. Our ship is the conscience of every man. The wares are our religion, and salvation, and all other gifts of God. Therefore, it stands us in hand to be always at the helm, and to carry our ship with as even a course as possibly we can to the intended port of happiness, which is the salvation of our souls: 'having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck' (1Tim.1:19).

²⁴ William Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins*, 8:88-91

²⁵ William Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins*, 8:92-93

²⁶ William Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins*, 8:93-94

But if, so be it, we grow careless, and make breaches into the ship of the conscience by suffering it to dash upon the rocks of sin, it is a thousand to one that we in the end shall cast away ourselves and all we have."

2. *William Ames* (1576-1633). "Few men had as much influence over Reformed theology on either side of the English Channel and Atlantic Ocean as William Ames. Today his name is little known outside academic circles, but in his day, his writings were deemed fundamental for ministerial training in New England, and they were greatly admired in England and the Netherlands for generations after his death" (Beeke).²⁷ "From the landing of the Pilgrims through the American Revolution, American religious thought was strongly influenced by the Puritan theologian William Ames. Quoted more often in the New World than either Luther or Calvin, Ames, was read in Latin by undergraduates at Harvard and Yale as part of their basic instruction in divinity" (Eusden).²⁸ "William Ames was born in 1576 in the chief city of England's Suffolk County, then a center of robust Puritanism (the same place John Winthrop was born). Since both parents died when he was young, Ames was reared by his maternal uncle, a Puritan from nearby Boxford. From childhood Ames was steeped in a vigorous form of doctrinal and practical Christianity" (Beeke).²⁹ He entered Christ's College, Cambridge University in 1593/1594, where he was converted under the influence of William Perkins. "In 1601, he received a master of arts degree, and was elected fellow at Christ's College and ordained to the ministry. In 1610, Ames decided to seek the freer academic and ecclesiastical climate of the Netherlands. There he remained in exile for the rest of his life" (Beeke).³⁰ Ames held several positions while in the Netherlands. These included serving as a military chaplain to the English forces from 1611-1619, tutor to students in Leiden from 1619-1622, and professor of theology of the English-speaking university at Franeker from 1622-1632. "In 1632, Ames accepted an invitation from his friend Hugh Peters (1598-1660) to join him in co-pastoring the English-speaking Congregational Church at Rotterdam. In late summer 1633, Ames finally headed south to Rotterdam. His tenure there was brief. In the fall, the Maas River breached its banks, and Ames, who was already unwell, took a turn for the worse after his house was flooded. He died of pneumonia on November 11 at the age of fifty-seven. To the end he remained firm in faith and triumphant in hope" (Beeke).³¹

The Marrow of Theology was first published in fragmentary form in Latin in 1623. It was largely the result of his theological lectures given from 1619-1622 as tutor to students in Leiden. In 1627 he was able to republish the book in its full and final form. "It immediately earned recognition and acclaim in scholarly and ecclesiastical circles and was quickly translated into many languages. The first English translations were published in 1642 and 1643" (Beeke).³² It's divided into two Books. Book 1 has 42 chapters and Book 2 has 22 chapters. "The *Marrow* is organized from the perspective that theology, the doctrine of living to God, consists of, first, 'faith' (Book 1), or what one believes, and second, 'observance' (Book 2), or how one practices faith and does good works in obedience to God. Those two major categories—faith and observance—comprise the fountainhead from which Ames' entire theological system flows" (Beeke).³³ "The two parts of theology are faith and observance. 2 Tim.1:13, *Hold the express form of the sound words which you have heard from me with faith and love*. It is characteristic of this division (as is required in any art) that it follows from the nature of the object. Since the beginning or first act of the spiritual life, which is the proper concern of theology, is faith and the

²⁷ Joel Beeke, *A Puritan Theology*, 41

²⁸ John Dykstra Eusden, *The Marrow of Theology*, 1

²⁹ Joel Beeke, *A Puritan Theology*, 42

³⁰ Joel Beeke, *A Puritan Theology*, 42-43

³¹ Joel Beeke, *A Puritan Theology*, 45

³² Joel Beeke, *A Puritan Theology*, 46

³³ Joel Beeke, *A Puritan Theology*, 49

second act or operation of that principle is observance. It follows that these two are the genuine parts of theology and that no others are to be sought" (Ames).³⁴ "The book is fundamentally a teaching document about the Christian life in the Puritan style. Ames wrote it in simple, late Renaissance Latin so that it could be read by anyone with a basic seventeenth-century education, be he English, French, Dutch, or German" (Eusden).³⁵

(1) BOOK ONE. Ames began the *Marrow* by defining theology as "the doctrine or teaching of living to God."³⁶ "Theology, therefore, is to us the ultimate and the nobliest of all exact teaching arts. It is a guide and master plan for our highest end, sent in a special manner from God, treating of divine things, tending towards God, and leading man to God. It may therefore not incorrectly be called, a living to God, or a working towards God, as well as theology."³⁷ He then described the nature of faith, God and His essence, the Subsistence of God, the Efficiency of God, the Decree, Creation, Providence, the Fall of Man, Original and Actual sin, Bodily Death, The Person and Work of Christ, Predestination, the Application of Salvation (calling, justification, adoption, sanctification, glorification), the Church, Holy Scripture, the Sacraments, the Administration of the Covenant of Grace before and after the Coming of Christ, and the End of the World. Ames' Covenant Theology is nicely developed and clearly stated. For Ames, while there is only one saving covenant (which he equates with the NC), this covenant was variously administered in the Old and New Testaments. "Although the free, saving covenant of God has been one and the same from the beginning, the manner of the application of Christ or the administration of the new covenant has not always been so. It has varied according to the times during which the church has been in process of being gathered."³⁸ The OT promised Christ, whereas the NT provided Christ. "The Old and New Testaments are reducible to these two primary heads, The Old promises Christ to come and the New testifies that He has come."³⁹ "From Adam to Abraham, redemption by Christ and the application of Christ was promised in general. From the time of Abraham, the benefits of the new covenant were all more clearly and distinctly witnessed to than before. From the time of Moses to Christ, redemption was adumbrated even more clearly through types and shadows."⁴⁰ "Redemption is administered differently in the New Testament both in quality and quantity. Its difference in quality is in clarity and freedom. Its difference in quantity is in intensity and extensiveness. The application of the Spirit is more effectual and the gifts of the Spirit more perfect than they were ordinarily in the OT, and it's now no longer confined to any one people or place as before."⁴¹

(2) BOOK TWO. Ames began Book 2 with a description of observance or obedience. "Observance is the submissive performance of the will of God for the glory of God. It holds the will of God as a pattern and a rule. This means that our will is Submissive. Observance applies our will to accomplish the will of God. It is called obedience when will is made ready to bring the command of God, which has been heard or in some way perceived, into execution. It is connected with service towards God, whence it is that Obeying God and serving Him are one and the same thing."⁴² He then described various practical topics such as Virtue, Good Works, Faith, Hope, Love, Hearing the Word, Prayer, Taking Oaths, Lots, Testing God, Worship, Justice and Charity toward our Neighbor, Chastity, Telling the Truth, and Contentment.

³⁴ William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 1.2.1, 3

³⁵ John Dykstra Eusden, *The Marrow of Theology*, 3

³⁶ William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 1.1.1

³⁷ William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 1.1.13

³⁸ William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 1.38.1

³⁹ William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 1.38.5

⁴⁰ William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 1.38.1-41

⁴¹ William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 1.39.1-13

⁴² William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 1.1.1-6