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CONSCIENCE CARE: AN ANALYSIS OF WILLIAM PERKINS' VIEW OF THE CONSCIENCE AND HIS PRACTICE OF SOUL CARE

O Cuidado da Consciência: uma análise da visão de William Perkins sobre a consciência e sua prática de cuidado da alma

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on William Perkins (1558–1602) and his pastoral practice. Specifically, the goal is to describe how Perkins' view of the conscience impacted and shaped his understanding and praxis of soul care within the church context. For Perkins, caring for souls involves ministering to and guiding the conscience to a restful assurance and an assured rest grounded in scriptural truth and proper godly affections, which in turn are supernaturally established and formed by the renewing grace applied by the Spirit. If a disturbed conscience is the closest thing to hell in this life, and a good conscience is a glimpse of paradise, then caring for souls fundamentally involves caring for the rest and assurance of the conscience. It is that rest and assurance that leads to a fruitful life.

Keywords: William Perkins. Conscience. Soul care. Pastoral care. Affections.

RESUMO

Este artigo enfoca William Perkins (1558–1602) e sua prática pastoral. Especificamente, o objetivo é descrever como a visão de Perkins sobre a consciência impactou e moldou a sua compreensão e prática do cuidado da alma no contexto da igreja. Para Perkins, cuidar das almas envolve ministrar e guiar a consciência para uma segurança tranquila e um descanso garantido baseado na verdade bíblica e em afeições piedosas adequadas, que por sua vez são sobrenaturalmente estabelecidas

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e formadas pela graça renovadora aplicada pelo Espírito. Se uma consciência perturbada é a coisa mais próxima do inferno nesta vida, e uma boa consciência é um vislumbre do paraíso, então cuidar das almas envolve fundamentalmente cuidar do descanso e da segurança da consciência. É esse descanso e segurança que leva a uma vida frutífera.

Palavras-chave: William Perkins. Consciência. Cuidado da alma. Cuidado pastoral. Afetos.

INTRODUCTION

An evil conscience is a little hell within man.² It can be compared to “a worm that never dies, but always lies gnawing and grabbling and pulling at the heart of man . . . and causes more pain and anguish than any disease in the world can do”.³ Its accusations are like “the flashings of fire of hell to torment”.⁴ A good conscience, however, humbled before the Lord, is unto man a “paradise of God”.⁵ Holding to this vivid view of the possible states of the conscience, William Perkins (1558–1602)—also known as “the Father of Puritanism”—ministered to the congregants of the Great St. Andrew’s Church in Cambridge from 1584 until the year of his death.⁶ For Perkins, caring for their souls meant caring for their consciences—“the most tender part of the soul”.⁷

The goal of this paper is to describe how Perkins’ understanding of the conscience impacted and shaped his view and practice of pastoral soul care. With this purpose in mind, I argue that, for Perkins, caring for souls entails the ministering to and guidance of the conscience to a restful assurance and an assured rest that are grounded in scriptural truth and proper godly affections, which are supernaturally established and formed by the renewing grace applied by the Spirit, leading to a fruitful life. If a disturbed conscience is the closest thing to hell in this life, and a good conscience is a glimpse of paradise, then caring for souls primarily involves caring for the rest and assurance of the conscience.

In order to make this case, I will first describe Perkins’ understanding of the conscience and its function in both evil and good states. Second, I will examine Perkins’ view of the dynamics between knowledge and affections (intellect and will), and his conscience care practices. Here, I will also explain his assessment of the work of the Holy Spirit and the participation of gospel ministers in the caring for the conscience. Third, I will provide an analysis of one of Perkins’ treatises, which will serve as a practical, corroborating example of a counseling conversation. In the end, it will be clear how Perkins’ understanding of the conscience influenced and shaped his pastoral practice and care for people.

1. WILLIAM PERKINS AND THE CONSCIENCE

Perkins held to a bipartite view of the soul. For him, God framed the soul to comprise two chief faculties: understanding and will.⁸ First, understanding is the faculty by which the soul reasons. This intellectual capacity is “the more principal part,” and it serves to rule and order the whole person, being

² See PERKINS, William. “A Discourse of Conscience”. In: *The Works of William Perkins*. Vol. 8. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019. p. 88. See also, PERKINS, William. “A Treatise Tending unto a Declaration Whether a Man Is in the Estate of Damnation or in the Estate of Grace”. In: *The Works of William Perkins*. Vol. 8. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019. p. 466, 504.

³ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 51, a.

⁴ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 90, a.

⁵ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 88, a.

⁶ See YUILLE, J. Stephen. Preface. In: *The Works of William Perkins*. Vol. 8. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019. p. xi.

⁷ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, 93, a.

⁸ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p.7. As Yuille observes, this view is paradigmatic in the Puritan movement (see YUILLE, 2019, p. xii). On this subject, Perkins followed the view held by John Calvin (see CALVIN, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Tans. Henry Beveridge. Vol. 1–4. Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1845. p. I.xv.2–8.).

“as the wagoner in the wagon”.⁹ Second, the will is the faculty by which the soul chooses or refuses anything. The affections, for Perkins, although distinct, are included in the will, since it is through them that the soul embraces or rejects good or evil.¹⁰ Given this bipartite view of the soul, Perkins placed the conscience in the first of these faculties, the understanding.

1.1 WHAT IS THE CONSCIENCE?

The conscience, for Perkins, is part of the understanding, and it is present in all reasonable creatures—humans and angels.¹¹ Understanding has two parts: first, the theoretical understanding by which truth and falsehood are viewed and contemplated; second, the practical understanding, by which every particular action is viewed and considered as good or bad. The conscience is comprehended in the second, given its property of judging the goodness or evilness of one’s actions.¹²

As part of the mind or understanding, Perkins understood the conscience as “a natural power, faculty, or created quality, from whence knowledge and judgment proceed as effects”.¹³ This view differed from the prevalent scholastic belief that the conscience is a bare knowledge or judgment of the understanding. Thomas Aquinas argued that because the conscience can be laid aside, and a power cannot be laid aside, then it follows that the conscience is not a power, or faculty, but an act—“a certain pronouncement of the mind”.¹⁴ Perkins, however, disagreed.

The reason for Perkins’ view of the conscience as a faculty relies on the scriptural descriptions of its works. In other words, because the Bible ascribes to the conscience the actions of accusing, excusing, comforting, and terrifying, then to view the conscience itself as an action would be mistaken.¹⁵ Actions do not act. Thus, the conscience is more than the syllogistic exercise that the mind effects. Responding directly to Aquinas’ argument, Perkins argues that if the conscience could be lost, it would be only in respect of its use—just like a drunk man loses reason.¹⁶ For the conscience is a power, not a mere act of the mind.

In sum, the conscience for Perkins is a God-given capacity (or faculty), present in all reasonable creatures, and its purpose is to serve as an arbitrator between God and man—that is, setting judgment with or against the creature.¹⁷ The conscience is of a divine nature since it has been “placed by God in the midst between Him and man” to either “speak with God against the man in whom it is placed,” or to consent and speak with him before God.¹⁸ To support his argument, Perkins appeals to the etymology of *συνείδησις* (Latin, *conscientia*), which “is that thing that combines two together, and makes

⁹ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 7, a.

¹⁰ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 88, a. Perkins elsewhere summarizes his anthropology: “In a man there must be considered three things: (1) the substance of the body and soul, whereof a man is said to consist; (2) the faculties placed in the soul and exercised in the body, as understanding, will, [and] affections; [and] (3) the integrity and purity of the faculties, whereby they are conformable to the will of God, and bear His image” (PERKINS, William. “A Grain of Mustard Seed”. In: *The Works of William Perkins*. Ed. by J. Stephen Yuille. Vol. 8. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019. p. 643).

¹¹ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 7-8, a.

¹² PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 7, a.

¹³ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 7-8, a.

¹⁴ AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1921. I q.79 a.13. See also BAVINCK, Herman. *Reformed Ethics: Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*. Edited by John Bolt. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019, p. 195. After a helpful presentation comparing Perkins’ view of the conscience with that of Aquinas, Bavinck concludes *contra* Perkins: “The conscience is an act, a deed, an activity, flowing forth, however, from a disposition or habit.”

¹⁵ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 7, a. Although William Ames viewed Perkins as “the most graue Divine,” he embraced a Thomistic view of the conscience. He argues (*contra* Perkins) from Romans 2:15 that Scripture attributes effects to thoughts, which are also acts in themselves (see William Ames, *Conscience with the Power and Cases Thereof* [Leyden and London: W. Christiaens, E. Griffin, J. Dawson, 1639; Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership, 2011], 2, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A69129.0001.001/1:4.1?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>).

¹⁶ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 8, a.

¹⁷ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 9, a.

¹⁸ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 9, a. See also PERKINS, William. “Three Books on Cases of Conscience”. In: *The Works of William Perkins*. Ed. J. Stephen Yuille. Vol. 8. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019, p. 137.

them partners in the knowledge of one and the same secret.” Since this combination is only possible between God—who knows all of man’s doings—and man, Perkins concludes that the conscience is the divine gift by which the creature “knows together with God the same things of himself”.¹⁹ As constitutive part of the intellectual capacity, the conscience knows with God, thus being able to declare and execute judgment over one’s actions.

1.2 THE ACTIONS OF THE CONSCIENCE

The proper end of the conscience is to give a determination or sentence about one’s particular thoughts, affections, and actions. The conscience evaluates what was or was not done, what may or may not be done, and whether what was done was well or ill done.²⁰ God appointed the conscience for this: “to declare and put in execution his judgment against sinners; and as God cannot possibly be overcome by man, so neither can the judgment by conscience, being the judgement of God, be wholly extinguished”.²¹ The actions of the conscience are, therefore, twofold: it gives testimony, and it gives judgment.²²

First, the conscience is described in Scripture as a witness (Romans 2:15), as one that bears testimony (2 Corinthians 1:12). For Perkins, this witness continuously assesses one’s thoughts, affections, and outward actions by observing and taking notice of them, and secretly telling them all to the person from within the heart. Here, the conscience acts much like a notary that keeps the records of a court meeting, so that the things said and done may be remembered.²³

Second, the conscience acts as a judge, determining whether things were well or ill done. Perkins sees the conscience as “a little god sitting in the middle of men’s heart, arraigning them in this life as they shall be arraigned for their offenses at the tribunal seat of the ever-living God in the day of judgment”.²⁴ Based on passages such as 1 John 3:20 and 1 Corinthians 4:4, Perkins reasons that if the heart of man (the conscience) accuses him in this life, God will much more condemn him in the final day. In giving judgment, the conscience acts with eschatological anticipation, allowing the present assessment of one’s state and the opportunity for repentance before that possibility is no longer available.

Such judgment is caused by whatever holds power and authority over the conscience, which binds it either to excuse for the things well done or to accuse of sin. Since God is the Creator and final Judge of the conscience, the proper binder of the conscience is his Word, Scripture, which has absolute power and authority to constrain and urge the conscience through the moral law (i.e., the Decalogue) and the gospel (which commands faith as it promises righteousness and everlasting life).²⁵ Also, there are improper binders, such as human laws, oaths, and promises. They have no intrinsic power or virtue to bind the conscience, but they do so by virtue of God’s Word.²⁶

The conscience gives judgment through a practical syllogism. According to Romans 2:15, there are reasoning or disputing thoughts that accuse or excuse. Here, the conscience is assisted by the mind, which keeps the records of the law and principles, and the memory, which brings to mind particular actions that were done or not. Thus, with these assistances, judgment is pronounced by the conscience through a syllogistic argumentation. For example, (1) the mind says: “every murderer is cursed”; (2) the conscience assisted by memory says: “you’ve committed murder”; (3) *ergo*, “you are accursed,”

¹⁹ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 9, a; PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 230, e.

²⁰ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 9, a.

²¹ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 5, a. This is how Perkins describes the conscience in the Epistle Dedicatory written to William Piriam.

²² See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 230, e.

²³ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 10–11, a.

²⁴ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p.12, a.

²⁵ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 13–26, a.

²⁶ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 50, 88, a; PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 137, e.

sentences the conscience.²⁷ In this manner, the conscience judges things past (what was done) and things future (what may be done), accusing and condemning, or excusing and absolving.²⁸

The conscience, for Perkins, is either good or evil. The evil conscience is the one defiled and corrupted by original sin. Moreover, it is evil because it inflicts pain and trouble upon the senses and feelings of man. The evil conscience is widespread over mankind, following the proliferation of original sin. Whoever is touched by original sin also suffers naturally with an evil conscience, which accuses and condemns the natural man with all of its power—although some level of general goodness remains in the conscience insofar it serves as an instrument of the execution of God's justice. As Perkins explains, the evil conscience can be either dead or stirring.²⁹ First, the dead conscience is able only to accuse, yet it lies quiet, without accusing much, if at all. This dead conscience varies in two degrees: the slumbering conscience, which accuses man only for grievous or capital sins, and the seared conscience, which does not accuse at all, not even for great sins.³⁰ Second, the stirring conscience is that which sensibly accuse or excuse, yet inappropriately. This stirring conscience may inadequately accuse for something well done or even excuse evil. Also, it may excuse based on some good works—which are beautiful sins (*splendida peccata*), filled with carnal “righteousness”.³¹

The good conscience, on the other hand, rightly exercises the actions for which God purposed it to perform by excusing and comforting in accordance with Scripture. The most excellent state of the conscience is when it stands in excusing, not in accusing. When sin takes place, the conscience accuses and condemns as it is wounded and offended. The good conscience is a clear conscience, “without offense” (see Acts 24:16).³²

The goodness of the conscience comes by creation or by regeneration. First, as a human faculty, the conscience is already present in Adam before the fall. In his state of innocence, his good conscience could not accuse him of ill deeds, and would only excuse. Not that the ability to accuse was absent, but that such aptness did not find occasion for such since no sin had been committed. Thus, Perkins sees the accusing as “a defect in the conscience” “in respect of the excellent state in which man was created;” accusing is a fruit of “a dissent and disagreement and division between the conscience and the man himself”.³³

Second, in regeneration, the conscience is renewed and purged by faith in Christ's blood. The result is that this conscience, formerly corrupt by nature, is transformed to serve the living God (see Hebrews 9:14). Hence, the regenerated conscience is good in that it provides spiritual and holy freedom, assurance of salvation, pardon, and eternal life within the Christian person.³⁴ This good conscience testifies approvingly about the new obedience of the regenerate man, producing “certain sweet motions” that “stir men forward” to continue in obedience.³⁵ Plus, this good conscience excuses, clears and defends a man—even before the divine Judge based, and against all earthly and spiritual enemies—based on the Christian's knowledge of his faith in the satisfaction provided by the substitutionary work of Christ. The conscience of the regenerate person is guided and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, who continuously enables the confession: “I know that I believe”.³⁶

Nonetheless, before glorification, the conscience is only regenerated in part—and this explains

²⁷ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 50, a.

²⁸ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 50-55, a.

²⁹ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 82, a.

³⁰ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 82-83, a.

³¹ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 82-83, a.

³² See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 56, a.

³³ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 56, a.

³⁴ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 56-57, a.

³⁵ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 80, a.

³⁶ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 81, a.

why it continues to accuse after conversion. In this way, the conscience excuses by assuring the Christian of his righteousness in Christ before God and his general endeavor to please God in life, while it also accuses him of particular sins of commission or omission, thus preventing him from more grievous and dangerous sins.³⁷

In sum, the good conscience to be pursued by the Christian person is that which only excuses—not because it is dead or improperly sensitive, but because the person knows and loves God and his Word and acts accordingly. Since the conscience functions as an eschatological anticipation of divine judgment, the grace of God is visible in the opportunity for repentance. The glimpses of the flames of hell experienced with an accusing conscience are like warnings to the unregenerate man so that he would escape from his damnable state by trusting in Christ and his work. For the Christian man, a troubled conscience serves God's purpose of leading him once again to repentance, and thus to a life of rest and assurance that is filled with the fruit of obedience.³⁸ It is on this trajectory—from an evil to a good conscience in the Christian life—that Perkins focused as he cared for souls in his pastoral ministry.

2. ASSURANCE AND REST FOR THE TROUBLED CONSCIENCE

If the conscience is not an act but a faculty of the soul (a part of the understanding), then to care for souls entails care for consciences. In this section, I will show that Perkins' conscience care aimed at a restful assurance and an assuring rest, and it involved the proper apprehension of truth and the reorienting of affections. In general terms, the care of consciences involves the proclamation of the truth of Scripture so that the mind, as an assistant of the conscience, can adequately provide the initial premise comprised in the practical syllogism, and reveal to the will that which is worth choosing. Also, the affections, by which the will exercises its choices, not only underlie the actions for which the conscience can accuse or excuse, but they also inform the witness of the conscience for assurance and rest. Ministering to the conscience involves, therefore, the heralding of the truth that assures the mind and the all-satisfying worthiness of Christ that brings the affections of the will to rest. By the work of the Spirit and the rightful administration of the means of grace, Christians minister to others so that they may obtain and keep a good conscience, and thus enjoy assurance and rest in Christ.

2.1 A RESTFUL ASSURANCE

The care of consciences involves the proclamation of the truth of Scripture so that the mind can properly function as a faithful assistant to the conscience, providing the initial premise comprised in the practical syllogism, and revealing to the will that which is worth choosing. For Perkins, human ignorance is inexcusable, and it is twofold: "ignorance of the law or of the thing the law requires".³⁹ The first is when a man does not know the law of God, written or of nature. Since every man is bound to God's law, this ignorance excuses no one. If, however, the mind is ignorant of the law, its assistance to the conscience will consequently be deficient, and the conscience will not be able to properly sentence one's actions. As Perkins writes, "God alone, by His Word does bind the conscience by causing it in every action either to excuse for well doing or accuse for sin".⁴⁰ If the first premise of the practical syllogism through which the conscience processes its judgments is faulty (i.e., not in accordance with God's law), the conclusion will be deficient as well.

Second, the ignorance about that which the law requires concerns the second premise of the practical syllogism. This is the ignorance of the act performed. This ignorance can entail fault on the

³⁷ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 81-82, a.

³⁸ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 504, c.

³⁹ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 123-124, e.

⁴⁰ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 137, e.

part of the doer, such as when a man is drunk and commits a crime. But there are also cases of faultless ignorance, such as when a man involuntarily kills another in a construction accident that could not be known or avoided beforehand.⁴¹ While the conscience might rightly excuse the individual in the second scenario, in the first, the conscience is unable to render a proper sentence of the actions since they are unknown to the mind.

Thus, Perkins concludes that ignorance is “a great and usual impediment of good conscience”.⁴² He adds, “when the mind errs or misconceives, it does mislead the conscience and deceives the whole man”.⁴³ The solution he proposes is an increasing knowledge of the Word of God:

The way to avoid this impediment is to do our endeavor that we may daily increase in the knowledge of the Word of God, so that it may dwell in us plentifully. To this end, we must pray with David that God would open our eyes, that we might understand the wonders of His law. And withal we must daily search the Scriptures for understanding, as men used to search the mines of the earth for gold ore (Prov. 2:4). Lastly, we must labor for spiritual wisdom, that we may have the right use of God’s Word in every particular action; that being by it directed we may discern what we may with good conscience do or leave undone.⁴⁴

In other words, the way to a good conscience necessarily depends on the knowledge of God’s revealed Word. Caring for consciences involves the ministry of God’s law to rightly inform the mind so that it can faithfully assist the conscience with the truth. It is worth noting that such knowledge is to be sought and ministered prayerfully—that is, dependently—for divine revelation is out of human reach and requires God to open one’s eyes.

Nonetheless, Perkins calls for persistent and continual labor for spiritual understanding and spiritual wisdom. For him, the sanctification of the mind happens as it is enlightened by the true knowledge of the Word of God. He understands this God-given enlightening of the mind as being of two kinds: spiritual understanding and spiritual wisdom. First, spiritual understanding is a *general* comprehension of Scripture regarding the things that are to be done or not. Second, spiritual wisdom is the gracious enablement by God that allows the person to understand, also from God’s Word, how to act and behave in any *particular* circumstance.⁴⁵ Therefore, the sanctified mind is empowered by the truth of God’s Word to work preventively, guiding the believer on what to do or not to do, and by rendering adequate sentencing to specific actions in harmony to God’s law.

In fact, when the mind of man is enlightened, he comes to see—and bewail—his own blindness, ignorance, and vanity.⁴⁶ The truth of Scripture, illumined by the Holy Spirit, shines forth on the mind, which assists the conscience to denounce one’s sins, and leads one to hunger and thirst in faith after Christ and his perfect righteousness.⁴⁷ It is through the ordinary means of the ministry of the Word that “God does offer and apply Christ with all His benefits to the hearers, as if He called them by their names”.⁴⁸ Thus, standing on the meditation of Scripture and prayerful dependence for mercy and pardon in Christ, faith is to be exercised in deeds and repentance—and then “God gives the sense and increase of His Grace”.⁴⁹ As the truth of Word of God is ministered, the conscience is confronted by the law, which binds and damns the conscience, and comforted by the gospel, which loses it, leading to resting assurance.⁵⁰

⁴¹ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 124, e.

⁴² PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 91, a.

⁴³ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 91, a.

⁴⁴ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 91, a.

⁴⁵ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 484, c.

⁴⁶ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 484, c.

⁴⁷ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 146, e.

⁴⁸ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 146, e.

⁴⁹ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 146, e.

⁵⁰ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 510, c.

In general, the Christian must labor to obtain and maintain a good conscience. To care for souls, therefore, is to assist others with these two duties. First, the obtaining of a good conscience requires a preparation, the application of the proper remedy, and the reformation of the conscience. Through the ministry of God's Word, the preparation involves (1) knowledge of the law and its commandments, (2) knowledge of the judicial sentence of the law, which declares curse for every sin, (3) serious examination of the conscience by the law, with a just assessment of one's state before God, and (4) a consequent sorrow that arises from the other three actions.⁵¹ As one recognizes one's need to be healed, what follows is the application of the remedy—namely, the blood (or the merits) of Christ. This application involves two things: the preaching of the gospel and one's response in faith. The faith that receives Christ and his benefits is characterized by the humility of self-denial and repentance, and a resolving, by God's grace, to resist natural doubts and distrust, but to embrace God's promises of salvation in Christ as belonging particularly to the believing person.⁵² Thus, with the proper remedy applied, the conscience is reformed, hence ceasing to accuse and terrify, and beginning to excuse and testify by the Holy Spirit about the believer's adoption and the forgiveness of his sins.⁵³

Second, the maintenance of a good conscience requires the avoidance of the impediments and the use of suitable preservatives. Ignorance, as described already, is the cognitive impediment that needs to be avoided through the persevering search of Scripture for understanding.⁵⁴ For the proper cognitive preservation of the good conscience, Perkins points to the protection and cherishing of the saving faith, by which one is convinced of one's reconciliation with God in Christ. For Perkins, "this is the root of [a] good conscience".⁵⁵ This saving faith is treasured and confirmed by the continuous exercise of invocation and repentance, with humble and sorrowful confession of sins to God, prayerful supplication for his pardon and strength to resist sin, along with thanksgiving and praises.⁵⁶

Furthermore, the ministry of the truth of Scripture that leads to a good conscience also informs the guidance that the conscience provides to the Christian, thus enabling the avoidance of the impediments and the preservation of the faith. The Christian with a good conscience not only knows whether what was done was ill or well made but also enjoys guidance for future actions, so that they may be done in faith. Accordingly, the good conscience excuses the Christian based on his obedience, when God's law is known and practiced, and—most importantly—on the forgiveness and righteousness gained by faith in Christ, by which the believer enjoys communion with God. Ultimately, the good conscience of the Christian finds its restful assurance in the supremacy of Christ and the sufficiency of his work on his behalf, through which he—particularly—is reconciled to God, by faith, just as promised in Scripture.⁵⁷

Hence, by enjoying fellowship with God, the mind of the believer is brought to find delight in the truth. God becomes the refuge of the faithful, and God's truth becomes the object of continual meditation, to which the mind of the Christian runs and in which it is daily occupied (Psalm 1:2).⁵⁸ The sanctified mind is then prepared to function adequately in nesting godly affections by which the will can act faithfully, and in which the Christian can find an assuring witness of the supernatural, salvific work of the Holy Spirit in his life. For, "where the mind reveals not, the will affects not".⁵⁹ To the analysis of these affections, I now turn.

⁵¹ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 86-88, a.

⁵² See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 88-89, a.

⁵³ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 89-90, a.

⁵⁴ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 91, a.

⁵⁵ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 92, a.

⁵⁶ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 92, a.

⁵⁷ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 479-480, c.

⁵⁸ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 484, c.

⁵⁹ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 647, b.

2.2 AN ASSURING REST

The care of consciences involves ministering to the affections through the proclamation of Scripture, and assistance with probing and discerning them as underlying motives of the heart.⁶⁰ While ungodly affections underlie sinful actions for which the conscience should inflict the pain of accusation, godly affections have the power to inform the conscience of an assuring rest—that what was done was well made, with proper love for God and his Word. Hence, caring for one's conscience entails leading one to repent from the unrighteous affections that have led or could lead to sinful behavior for which the conscience will condemn. It also involves the affirmation of those affections that can only be produced by the supernatural work of the Divine Spirit, thus assisting the troubled conscience to find an assuring rest in its love for God and the heavenly things.

Besides the impediment of cognitive ignorance, Perkins highlights two other impediments to the good conscience that are related to the affections. First, those pursuing a good conscience should avoid “unstayed and unmortified affections”.⁶¹ Perkins compares these affections to wild horses who can overturn the chariot, loading the conscience and over-carrying it with judgment. To avoid unmortified affections, the Christian must incline the heart to love God and Christ. In Perkins' words, “Our love set upon the world is hurtful to the conscience, but when we once begin to set our love on God in Christ, and to love the blood of Christ above all the world, then contrariwise it is a furtherance of good conscience”.⁶²

Second, Perkins mentions the need to avoid the impediment of worldly lusts. The disordered desire of riches, honors, and pleasure are prohibitive to the good conscience. At this point, Perkins provides a helpful explanation on the effect that the affections have on the conscience:

Every man is as Adam, his good conscience is his paradise; the forbidden fruit is the strong desire of these earthly things; the serpent is the old enemy the devil, who if he may be suffered to entangle us with the love of the world, will straight way put us out of our paradise, and bar us from all good conscience. The remedy is to learn the lesson of Paul, which is, in every estate in which God shall place us, to be content, esteeming evermore the present condition the best of all for us (Phil. 4:11–12). Now that this lesson may be learned, we must further labor to be resolved of God's special providence toward us in every case and condition of life. And when we have so well profited in the school of Christ that we can see and acknowledge God's providence and goodness, in sickness as well as in health, in poverty as in wealth, in hunger as in fullness, in life as in death, we shall be very well content, whatsoever any way befalls unto us.⁶³

In sum, the desire for worldly things cannot yield a good conscience. Yet, when the affections are satisfied in Christ, in whom the Christian can experience contentment even through the most difficult trials, then the peaceful paradise of an excusing conscience is preserved.

Perkins categorizes two kinds of sins that have their ground or source in the affections. First, the sins of infirmity or weakness proceed from strong, abrupt passions of the heart, such as hatred, grief, anger, and sorrow. Second, the sins of presumption proceed from man's prideful, arrogant, willful, and haughty heart, and they are found in three degrees: (1) when man erroneously presumes God's mercy and his own future repentance so that he willfully sins, (2) when man high-handedly and willfully violates God's law, (3) when man sins out of malice and spite against God and Jesus. In all these presumptions man's affections are elevated above God's will and law, taking the priority and the control of one's will; love of self takes precedence over love of God and neighbor.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ As Yuille points out, Perkins's view of the affections was Augustinian. For him, “the affections are the soul's inclination toward a particular object. The soul loves whatever it perceives as good and, therefore, is inclined toward it” (YUILLE, 2019, p. xvi).

⁶¹ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 91, a.

⁶² PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 92, a.

⁶³ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 92, a.

⁶⁴ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 146, e.

However, the sanctified mind, illumined by the Holy Spirit, reveals to the will the supreme value of God, who is the proper object of human desire. While human desire can be natural, that is, having its source in the natural will of man and its object in the natural things, Perkins argues that the sanctified heart is leaned toward supernatural desires. As Perkins describes, “Supernatural desires are such as, both for their beginning and object, are above nature. For their beginning is from the Holy Spirit, and the object (or matter about which they are conversant) are things divine and spiritual, which concern the kingdom of heaven”.⁶⁵ These holy affections are moved and inclined to what is good in order to embrace it and avoid what is evil.⁶⁶ Of the sanctified affections, Perkins highlighted four: first, a zeal for God’s glory; second, the fear of God; third, a hatred of sin; and fourth, a joy in consideration of the proximity of the judgment day.⁶⁷ As he elsewhere explains in more general terms, the affections of the Christian are to be “tempered and allayed with the fear of God”.⁶⁸

Accordingly, for Perkins, the presence of supernatural, sanctified affections provides an assuring rest for the troubled conscience.⁶⁹ Since these spiritual motions can only be the result of the Spirit’s work, Perkins defended that “the desire of reconciliation with God in Christ is reconciliation itself. The desire to believe is faith indeed, and the desire to repent [is] repentance itself”.⁷⁰ And he adds, “if we, being touched thoroughly for our sins, do desire to have them pardoned, and to be at one with God, God accepts us as reconciled”.⁷¹ Perkins does not equate the desire to believe with faith, as if they were conceptually the same. Instead, Perkins’ argument is grounded in the intimate connection between proper affections for God and his blessedness, and his salvific work within the soul, which cannot be frustrated. In sum, holy affections are given by God and, as such, provide a solid ground for assurance. Moreover, God himself continually satisfies these holy desires, for he promised blessedness and everlasting life to those who desire his grace (cf. Matthew 5:6; John 7:38; Revelation 21:6).⁷² To desire God’s grace truly is to receive it and enter his satisfying rest.

Therefore, the work of those caring for souls through the offering of scriptural truth is not aimed only to inform the mind, but also to see the affections transformed and changed in the heart of the elect.⁷³ It is through the ministry of the Word of God (in the law, but especially in the gospel) that the nature of man is converted, and the heart turned, for “this Word of God is of force to move and incline our affections”.⁷⁴ Thus, as God’s Word creates root in the heart, it provides adequate ground in which the affections can find satisfaction and rest. Perkins systematizes:

But [as for] the elect, he receives the Word, not only into his mind, lest it should be only an imagination, but it is deeply rooted in his heart. For, (1) in sure confidence he rests himself on God’s promise (Rom. 8:38; Heb. 10:22). (2) He hopes and longs to see the accomplishment of it (1 Thess. 1:10). (3) He heartily loves God for making such a promise to him in Christ (1 John 4:10). (4) He rejoices in it, and therefore does meditate on it continually (Luke 10:20; Rom. 5:2). (5) He hates all doctrines which are against it. (6) He is grieved when he does anything that may hinder the accomplishment of it (Matt. 26:75). (7) He uses the means to come to salvation, but with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12). (8) He burns with zeal of the Spirit, etc.⁷⁵

⁶⁵ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 647, b.

⁶⁶ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 484, c.

⁶⁷ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 486-487, c.

⁶⁸ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 421, e.

⁶⁹ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 643, b.

⁷⁰ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 647-678, b. Or, as he writes elsewhere, “they who seriously desire [remission of sins, reconciliation, and sanctification], have a promise of blessedness and everlasting life. And hence it follows that desire of mercy, in the want of mercy, is mercy itself, and [that] a desire of grace, in the want of grace, is grace itself” (PERKINS, 2019, v.8 p.166, e.)

⁷¹ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 678, b.

⁷² See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 678, b.

⁷³ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 462, c.

⁷⁴ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 238-239, e.

⁷⁵ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 462, c.

Then he concludes: “And so, the rest of the affections are exercised about the promises of God in Christ, and by this means is the deep rooting of the Word in the heart”.⁷⁶ Hence, resting on the revelation of God’s glory, the sanctified affections are only susceptible to the conscience’s excusatory activity. More, they provide a solid foundation for confident assurance of salvation, as the conscience witnesses about the internal reality of the Holy Spirit’s work by observing the supernatural fruits of these holy affections.

2.3 THE CAREGIVERS

The work of caring for consciences is both divine and divinely-empowered. It involves the direct action of God, by the Holy Spirit. It also involves the instrumental work of those God principally calls and gifts as pastors and teachers, but it does not exclude the gospel ministry for which every believer is responsible and commissioned to accomplish.

The way towards a good conscience necessarily involves the action of the Holy Spirit. It is he who testifies and illumines the truth that assures. Based on Romans 8:16, Perkins viewed the testimony of the Spirit coupling with the conscience’s testimony to establish assurance of one’s adoption by God.⁷⁷ The Holy Spirit indwells believers and testifies unto them that they are God’s children. This divine internal work does not take place through any sort of extraordinary revelation, but through the particular application to one man’s heart of the promise of remission of sins and eternal life by Christ. As Perkins explains, the true testimony of the Spirit is wrought by the preaching, reading, and meditation of God’s Word, as well as by prayer and the rightful use of the sacraments. Also, the Spirit’s testimony I wrought by the effects and fruits he produces, stirring up the heart to depend on and invoke God when in distress, making it desirous of his mercy and grace.⁷⁸ Then, the testimony of the sanctified and renewed conscience ratifies what the Divine Spirit internally witnesses by producing grief and godly sorrow when sin is present, yielding a resolute purpose of heart to faithful obedience, and favoring the things of the Spirit with joy (see Romans 8:5).⁷⁹

Moreover, it is the Holy Spirit who transforms and satisfies the affections by the application of Christ’s work to the elect. As Perkins writes, “the Spirit of God, first of all, does testify to some men, namely true believers, that they are sons of God, and afterwards confirms the same unto them”.⁸⁰ This confirmation takes place with the transformative indwelling presence of the Spirit, who is the very “sealing” of redemption and the “earnest of our inheritance” (see Ephesians 4:30; cf. 1:13–14).⁸¹ Because of the Spirit’s presence, Perkins could conclude: “there are certain fruits of God’s children which I find in me, by which I am confirmed in God’s favor.”⁸² These fruits are essentially comprised of holy affections—love for God and brethren, and hate and sorrow for sin.⁸³ As the Spirit works his application of Christ’s redemptive accomplishments, the affections are transformed and inclined toward God.

Accordingly, the work of the Holy Spirit in assuring and satisfying the conscience happens as he unites believers to Christ. Perkins helpfully summarizes:

This sanctification is wrought in all Christians after this manner. After they are joined to Christ, and made mystically bone of His bone and flesh of His flesh, Christ works in them effectually by His Holy Spirit, and His works are principally three. First, He causes His own death to work effectually the death of all sin, and to kill the power of

⁷⁶ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 462, c.

⁷⁷ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 62-63, a; PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 481-482, c.; PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 154, e.

⁷⁸ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 153-154, e.

⁷⁹ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 154, e.

⁸⁰ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 62, a.

⁸¹ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 63, a; PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 481-482, c.

⁸² PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 462, c.

⁸³ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 511, c.

the flesh [Rom. 6:3–4; Col. 2:12; 3:3–5]. For it is a corrosive, which being applied to the part affected, eats out any venom and corruption. And so the death of Christ, by faith applied, frets out and consumes the concupiscence and the corruption of the whole man. Second, His burial causes the burial of sin, as it were in a grave. Third, His Resurrection sends a quickening power into them, and serves to make them rise out of their sin, in which they were dead and buried, to work righteousness and to live in holiness of life [Phil. 3:10; Rom. 6:4]. ... And this sanctification is throughout the whole man: in the spirit, soul, and mind (1 Thess. 5:23). And here the “spirit” signifies the mind and memory, [and] the “soul” [signifies] the will and affections.⁸⁴

Therefore, the care of conscience necessarily involves the divine work of the Holy Spirit. Unless the Spirit of God unites believers to Christ mystically, the conscience can find no assurance or rest. Nonetheless, his indwelling presence efficaciously illumines the mind and reorients the affections in such a drastic way that leads the conscience to testify about this supernatural recreation of the soul.

Beyond the inward operations of the Spirit, God appointed ordinary means for the care of the conscience. As pointed above, the conscience is cared for through preaching, reading, and the meditation of God’s Word, as well as prayer and the sacraments.⁸⁵ For such ministry, God especially calls and gifts pastors and teachers. As Perkins points out, comforting distressed consciences was one special duty of Christ’s prophetic office, which now he has dispensed to the ministers of the gospel.⁸⁶ Perkins’ focused on pastors and teachers as the ministers (caregivers) of the conscience. One reason for this is that Perkins viewed the administration of the sacraments (i.e., baptism and the Lord’s Supper) by “true and lawful ministers” as a matter of outward worship that concerned the conscience.⁸⁷ However, there is good reason to believe he would follow Luther in affirming the priesthood of all believers, thus including lay people in the mission of caring for each other’s consciences.⁸⁸ For example, distancing himself from Roman Catholic practices, Perkins taught that “though confession may be made to any kind of man (‘confess one to another,’ says James), yet it is especially to be made to the prophets and ministers of the gospel. For they in likelihood, of all other men, in respect of their places and gifts, are the fittest and best able to instruct, correct, comfort, and inform the weak and wounded conscience”.⁸⁹ Hence, although all Christians are to care for the conscience of others, pastors and teachers of the gospel are best prepared and gifted for this task.

The general remedy to cure the wounded and distressed conscience is the application of God’s promise of everlasting life in and by Christ’s blood—that is, the application of the gospel promises. Christian ministers are stewarded with the gospel message, which they must seek to apply to particular people with specific distresses and circumstances.⁹⁰ For such, Perkins points out three things that are necessary for this process. First, the particular distress must be disclosed so that the remedy may be better applied. Second, once the cause of distressed is known, a trial must be made so that the minister can judge whether or not comfort is fitting. In other words, comfort is only adequate for those who are genuinely humbled and repentant of their sins. This should be assessed through “a friendly and Christian talk and conference whereby he must first be brought to see, and well to consider his own sins; second, to grieve and be sorry for them”.⁹¹ Third, the minister is to apply the remedy by offering and conveying comfort to the mind of those who confess their sins and are humbled for them, “bringing

⁸⁴ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 483, c.

⁸⁵ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 146, 154, e.

⁸⁶ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 115, e.

⁸⁷ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 277, e.

⁸⁸ For more on Luther’s view on the priesthood of all believers, see the direct correlation established in his comments on 1 Peter 2:9 [LUTHER, Martin. “The Catholic Epistles.” In: **Luther’s Works**. Edited by Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Lehmann, Helmut T. Vol. 30. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999, p. 64].

⁸⁹ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 117, e.

⁹⁰ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 162, e.

⁹¹ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 163, e.

the troubled party within the compass of the promise of life,” as established in Scripture.⁹²

In this application of the promise of life to the conscience, Perkins suggested six rules for successful ministry. First, the minister must allay comfort with law content, so that the heart may not be comforted “too soon or too much”.⁹³ Second, the distressed party which is taken by great grief must not be left alone but should be attended at all times with good company. Third, the party in distress must be willing to submit and content to be advised by wise and discerning men. Fourth, the distressed person must not hear the telling of worse cases so that the conscience may not be quickened and drawn to deeper grief or despair. Fifth, the minister of comfort must bear with the distressed all of his needs and wants, being affected by his misery and touched with compassion as if those needs and wants were his own. Sixth, the minister must not be discouraged if his long labors are not followed by great comfort to the distressed; God is the one ultimately in control of how open one’s heart may be to receive the comfort of his promises.⁹⁴

In sum, caring for souls entails the care of conscience through the application of the merits of Christ to specific people in their particular circumstances. This care essentially involves the ministry of the truth of God’s Word, which assures the mind and satisfies the affections. Such ministry takes place through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, who directly illumines the understanding and reorients the affections, and the instrumentality of divinely gifted pastors and teachers, as well as all believers, who are called to offer the promise of everlasting life in Christ through the means established by God.

3. CONSCIENCE CARE: A PRACTICAL ILLUSTRATION

In a treatise concerning the “Consolations for the Troubled Consciences of Repentant Sinners,” Perkins provided a transcript of a possible conversation between a minister and a Christian. This dialogue illustrates his practice in the caring of souls. He addresses the troubled conscience intending to bring assurance and rest by ministering the truth of Scripture and probing the affections.⁹⁵

The conversation starts with a person with a troubled conscience, then identified as “sinner,” seeking the help of a minister, who is acknowledged as having received from God the ability to speak adequately and timely: “*Sinner*. Good sir, I know the Lord has given you the tongue of the learned, to be able to minister a word in time to him who is weary. Therefore, I pray you help me in my misery. ... [M]y poor heart has been troubled. My corruption so boils in me, and Satan will never let me alone”.⁹⁶ The sinner points out that such troubling of his mind started after God’s mercy have touched his heart, and Jesus, the good Shepherd, took hold of him. The response of the ministers highlights the underlying truth that only the conscience of a true believer accuses properly: “*Minister*. Your case is a blessed case. For not to be troubled of Satan is to be possessed of him. . . for as long as the strong man keeps the hold, all things are in peace [Col. 1:13; Luke 11:24]”.⁹⁷ From then on, the person seeking help is referred to as *Christian*.

The minister compassionately avails himself to help, inviting Christian to continue the conversation with honesty and openness: “[I]n your misery, I will be a Simon unto you, to help you to carry your cross, so be it you will reveal your mind unto me”.⁹⁸ Christian then willingly answers a series of questions asked by the minister, who carefully searches for the motives of Christian’s troubling of

⁹² See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 163, e.

⁹³ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 168, e.

⁹⁴ See PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 168-169, e.

⁹⁵ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 571, c.

⁹⁶ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 571, c.

⁹⁷ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 571, c.

⁹⁸ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 572, c.

the mind. In Christian's answers, his doubts concerning his salvation are revealed as lying behind his fears; his weak faith leads him to think about the possibility of cutting himself off of God's favor. In light of this, the minister first brings the truth of Scripture to show Christian that true saving faith is not safe from doubts:

What will you then say of the man who said, "Lord I believe, Lord help my unbelief"? [Mark 9:24]. And of David who made his moan after this manner: "Is his mercy clean gone forever? Doth his promise fail forevermore? Hath God forgotten to be merciful? Hath he shut up his tender mercy in displeasure?" [Ps. 77:8-9]. Yea, he goes on further, as a man in despair: "And I said, this is my death" [v. 10]. Hereby it is manifest that a man endued with true faith may have not only assaults of doubting, but of desperation. This further appears in that he says in another place: "Why art thou cast down, my soul? Why art thou disquieted within me? Wait on God, for I will yet give thanks, he is my present help and my God" [Ps. 42:11].⁹⁹

Because Christian seemed hesitant in comparing himself with David, the minister began probing his affections, as to use them as evidence of the inclinations of Christian's heart: "Let me know but one thing of you. These doubts which you feel, do you like them? Or do you take any pleasure in them? And do you cherish them?"¹⁰⁰ As one would expect, Christian denied vehemently.

After a theological survey regarding man's state by nature and grace, in order to contextualize eschatologically the possibility of Christian's doubts in his earthly life, the minister moved to provide practical suggestions for the suppressing of the doubts. His recommendation was the use of three meditations. First, Christian is to meditate in the fact that God commands belief in Christ (1 John 3:23). Second, Christian is to consider that the promises of salvation in Christ are general and excludes no one who believes. Here, the minister calls Christian to conclude by plain logic that because he believes nothing would exclude him from God's mercy. Also, he invites him to remember his baptism and participation in the Lord's Supper as pieces of evidence of God's saving grace for him. Thirdly, Christian must remember that doubting and despairing offend God as much as other sins.¹⁰¹ And to these three meditations, the minister adds this practice: "When your heart is toiled with unbelief and doubts, then in all haste draw yourself into some secret place, humble yourself before God, pour out your heart before Him. Desire Him of His endless mercy to work faith, and to suppress your unbelief, and you shall see that 'the Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon his name' [Rom. 10:12]".¹⁰² It is clear for the minister that his work is insufficient; God must intervene to strengthen Christian's faith. The three meditations and the practical exercise he recommends are not a mere mechanical, therapeutic method. They are focused on God; Christian must seek to please and depend on him in order for his troubling doubts to be removed.

The minister, nonetheless, does not shy away from engaging him confidently, so much so that he calls Christian to approach God in humble prayer and with a holy desire for his endless mercy. Once again, the minister appeals to Christian's affections so that they, being inclined toward God, may serve as confirmation of saving faith:

Minister. Tell me one thing plainly, you say you feel no assurance of God's mercy?

Christian. No indeed.

Minister. But do you desire with all your heart to feel it?

Christian. I do indeed.

Minister. Then doubt not, you shall feel it.

Christian. O blessed be the Lord, if this is true.

Minister. Why, it is most true, for the man that would have any grace of God tending to

⁹⁹ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 572, c.

¹⁰⁰ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 573, c.

¹⁰¹ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 573-574, c.

¹⁰² PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 574, c.

salvation, if he does truly desire it, he shall have it. For so Christ has promised, "I will give to him that is athirst of the well of the water of life freely" [Rev. 21:6]. Whereby I gather that if any wants the water of life, having an appetite after it, he shall have enough of it. And therefore fear you not. Only use the means which God has appointed to attain faith by, as earnest prayer, reverent hearing of God's Word, and receiving of the sacraments. And then, you shall see this thing verified in yourself.¹⁰³

Recognizing his desire for God's mercy, Christian finds comfort in the truths presented by the minister. He acknowledges his hunger for righteousness and the heavenly kingdom. Thus, the minister invites him to thank God for those things, for they are "motions of the Spirit of God dwelling in [him]".¹⁰⁴

However, as the conversation continues, Christian's fears are again a troubling issue in his mind. Because of his continual awareness of being displeasing to God in his actions, Christian fears that he has not truly repented and that his profession of faith is hypocritical. To this, the minister responds by appealing to the grace of the gospel: "You need not fear. 'For where sin aboundeth (that is, the knowledge and feeling of sin) there grace aboundeth much more'".¹⁰⁵ Then, once again engaging to the affections, he adds: "[I]hose corruptions which you feel and those sins that you commit, you hate them. You are displeased with yourself for them, and you endeavor yourself to leave them".¹⁰⁶ So, as Christian understands the logic of the witness of his affections, he comes to find great comfort in the minister's counsel. Christian states: "I am even heart sick of my manifold sins and infirmities; and these good words, which you speak, are as flagons of wine to refresh my weary, laden, and weltering soul [Song 2:5]".¹⁰⁷ Yet, Christian still recognizes a detachment between his desire to please God and the performance of his obedience. The minister then explains that "God regards more the affection to obey, than the obedience itself. . . For the perfection of a Christian man's life stands in the feeling and confession of his imperfections."¹⁰⁸ Also, he explains to Christian that those whom God sanctifies are still laboring under their infirmities in this life so that they may see the great need they have for Christ's righteousness, that their pride may be subdued by grace, and that they may be exercised continually in fighting against sin and pursuing godliness.¹⁰⁹

As the conversation concludes, Christian is thankful for the comfort of the minister's words, but also acknowledges the mercy and consolation of God behind his counsel: "your comfortable answers have much refreshed my troubled mind. The God of all mercy and consolation requite you accordingly".¹¹⁰ And the minister humbly recognizes: "I have spoken that which God out of His Holy Word has opened unto".¹¹¹

Perkins illustrative dialogue corroborates his concern with the conscience, of bringing it to find assurance and rest through the proclamation of scriptural truth and the probing of the affections. For him, the work of the minister is to be done with compassion and due attention to the specifics, as the general remedy of the gospel is applied to individual people in their particular circumstances and struggles. Finally, it is clear in this conversation that the minister, for Perkins, is an insufficient caregiver who can provide help only by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, whose inward work is essential. Ministers are instruments of God, used in the care of consciences, so that others may experience the assurance and rest of Christ, by the action of his very Spirit, in their own lives.

¹⁰³ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 575, c.

¹⁰⁴ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 575, c.

¹⁰⁵ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 577, c.

¹⁰⁶ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 577, c.

¹⁰⁷ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 577, c.

¹⁰⁸ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 578, c.

¹⁰⁹ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 578, c.

¹¹⁰ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 580, c.

¹¹¹ PERKINS, 2019, v. 8, p. 580, c.

CONCLUSION

This paper has described how Perkins' understanding of the conscience impacted and shaped his view and practice of pastoral soul care. For Perkins, caring for souls entailed the ministering to and guidance of the conscience to a restful assurance and an assured rest that are grounded in scriptural truth and sanctified affections, which are supernaturally established and formed by the renewing grace applied by the Spirit, leading to a life that is pleasing to God. Since the conscience is a part of the soul—the most tender one—the care of souls must aim to bring troubled consciences to find peace by the ministering of the proper remedy, namely, the blessings conquered by Christ's work, as testified in God's Word.

As a final note, it is worth highlighting that retrieving Perkins' emphasis on the care of the conscience in pastoral ministry would provide a more biblical perspective for soul care in our days, for several reasons. I will mention a couple. First, it would force counselors to properly consider sin as the basic anthropological problem. Since the conscience functions with a practical syllogism that is based on God's law, addressing the conscience would necessarily entail an account of God's holiness and justice, which inescapably leads to the conclusion of human sin and state of condemnation. The goodness of the gospel would shine brighter as the remedy of Christ is applied to a man aware of his sins. Second, Perkins' emphasis on the conscience helps pastors and counselors navigate cases of sin and suffering without dichotomizing them in excess. Caring for souls who are struggling with sin and suffering involves the same goal (i.e., to please God), and the conscience works amidst both as a guide toward God and holiness.

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