

WILLIAM PERKINS ON UNION WITH CHRIST AND JUSTIFICATION

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1. Introduction

ALBERT SCHWEITZER (1875–1965) once wrote that the doctrine of justification by faith is a subsidiary crater formed within the rim of the main crater, the doctrine of mystical union with Christ. According to Schweitzer there were two competing redemptive strains within Paul’s thought, that of mystical union and the forensic. Schweitzer believed that because Paul excluded works of the law from justification he closed the road to ethics. “Those who subsequently made his doctrine of justification by faith the center of Christian belief,” writes Schweitzer, “have had the tragic experience of finding that they were dealing with a conception of redemption, from which no ethic could logically be derived.”¹ Schweitzer believed that the Protestant church had adopted the forensic model almost to the exclusion of the mystical.² In contrast, Schweitzer believed that union with Christ was central to Paul’s soteriology, a soteriology characterized by eschatology.³ In many respects the tensions that Schweitzer perceives in quest for the center of Paul’s theology has characterized historical theological discussions and debates about the place of union with Christ and its relationship to the doctrine of justification especially as it relates to John Calvin’s (1509–64) views on these matters.⁴

The contemporary tension over whether union with Christ or justification is more central to historic Reformed theology can be illustrated by two different assessments of the theology of William Perkins (1558–1602). Heinrich Hepe

¹ Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (1931; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998), 223–25.

² Schweitzer, *Mysticism*, 387.

³ Schweitzer, *Mysticism*, 138–40.

⁴ See, e.g., Mark A. Garcia, *Life in Christ: Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin’s Theology*. Studies in Christian History and Thought (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008); J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers In Union with Christ* (Oxford: OUP, 2007); Randal Zachman, “*Communio cum Christo*” in *The Calvin Handbook*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 365–71; Thomas L. Wenger, “The New Perspective on Calvin: Responding to Recent Calvin Interpretations,” *JETS* 50/2 (2007): 311–28; Merwyn S. Johnson, “Justification and Sanctification in Calvin’s Theology,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 65 (2009): 90–104; Mark A. Garcia, “Imputation as Attribution: Union with Christ, Reification and Justification as Declarative Word,” *IJST* 11/4 (2009): 415–27; J. Todd Billings, “John Calvin’s Soteriology: On the Multifaceted ‘Sum’ of the Gospel,” *IJST* 11/4 (2009): 428–47; Cornelis Venema, “Union with Christ, the ‘Twofold Grace of God,’ and the ‘Order of Salvation’ in Calvin’s Theology,” in *Calvin For Today*, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010): 91–114.

(1820–1879) in his *History of Pietism* claims that Perkins was the father of pietism and the chief concern of Perkins' theology was union with Christ. According to Heppe, Perkins believed that the Christian life had to be directed to the crucified Christ and a possession of him through fellowship (*Gemeinschaft*) and mystical union (*mystischen Vereinigung mit Christus*).⁵ On the other hand, historian Christopher Hill has more recently argued that among the four chief points that surface in Perkins' theology is his "obsession" with the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Hill does not even list union with Christ among the chief characteristics in Perkins' theology.⁶

Heppe and Hill give two disparate readings of Perkins, and a similar trend continues in the work of others, such as William Evans. Evans argues in a recently published work that for Calvin the doctrine of union with Christ was chief and central to Calvin's theology and that subsequent Reformed theologians vitiated his doctrine with the imposition of federalism (presumably the bi-covenantal structure of the covenants of works and grace) and the *ordo salutis*.⁷ Though Evans does not treat Perkins, the Elizabethan theologian would undoubtedly be viewed as one who vitiated Calvin's doctrine of union with Christ because he was chiefly responsible for the solidification of the *ordo salutis* with his famous work, *A Golden Chaine*. Given the above-cited claims, what are we to make of Perkins? Is union with Christ or justification more central to his theology? Does federalism and the *ordo salutis* vitiate the doctrine of union with Christ?

This essay will answer these questions by showing that recent claims like those of Evans, illustrated in the analyses of Heppe and Hill, foist a false dilemma upon the evaluation of a theologian like Perkins. There is no need to choose between union with Christ and justification, but rather Perkins holds both consistently while at the same time giving justification logical (or theological) priority over sanctification in his soteriology. Perkins' soteriology as a whole demonstrates what many contemporary historians and theologians are unable to grasp, namely, looking for a central organizing principle, such as union with Christ or justification, is historically anachronistic in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Whether or not such a quest is a legitimate dogmatic enterprise is a question for another day. This essay is chiefly concerned with the historical-theological question set before us in Perkins' theology: Is it impossible to affirm the doctrine of union with Christ and at the same time the *ordo salutis*, according priority to justification over sanctification? The essay will proceed with a brief biographical and bibliographic sketch outlining Perkins' influence upon the development of Reformed theology. Second, we will explore his views on union with Christ and justification as they are set forth in his broader understanding of the *ordo salutis*. And third, we will conclude with some observations about how Perkins' theology, indeed that of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, does not fit the current central-theme hunting agenda of dogmatists and historians.

⁵ Heinrich Heppe, *Geschichte des Pietismus und der Mystik in der Reformirten Kirche* (Lieden: Brill, 1879), 24–26; also see Richard A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 131–32.

⁶ Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution: The English Revolution of the Seventeenth Century* (1958; New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 217.

⁷ William B. Evans, *Imputation and Impartation* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 38–39, 81. A similar stance is taken in Michael McGiffert, "The Perkinsian Moment of Federal Theology," *CTJ* 29 (1994): 117–48.

2. Biographical and bibliographic sketch

William Perkins is known as one of the more influential Reformed theologians of the late sixteenth century. He was educated at the University of Cambridge and was a leading Puritan of his day. He was trained in scholastic theology, though he was more interested in the modified place logic of Peter Ramus (1515–72). Ramism was a method of simplifying topics by dividing them in two.⁸ Ramists typically displayed great interest in practical application of doctrine. During his ministry Perkins was a preacher at Great St. Andrews Church, Cambridge, the most influential pulpit near Christ's College, and he also served as a fellow at Christ's College from 1584 to 1595.⁹

In addition to this preaching and teaching activity, Perkins authored a number of theological works. Around the time of Perkins' death, eleven editions of his writings were issued. Those editions contained fifty treatises, among which included expositions on Galatians 1–5, the Sermon on the Mount, Hebrews 11, the book of Jude, and the first three chapters of Revelation. In addition to these exegetical works, Perkins also wrote treatises on predestination, the Lord's prayer, preaching, the Christian life, Roman Catholicism, the doctrine of assurance, and the order of salvation.¹⁰ Perkins' works sold quite well in England and were the first to surpass both Calvin and Theodore Beza (1519–1605) in terms of the number of published editions. Perkins' works went through fifty editions in Switzerland, nearly sixty in Germany, and more than one hundred in Holland. His works were also published in France, Hungary, and Bohemia, and were translated into Welsh, Irish, Dutch, German, French, Spanish, and Hungarian.¹¹ Perkins' influence not only extended through his theological works, but he also impacted a number of students and contemporaries including: William Ames (1576–1633), Richard Sibbes (1577–1635), and John Cotton (1585–1652). Thomas Goodwin (1600–80) notes that six of his professors had sat under Perkins and were still disseminating his teaching.¹² For all of these reasons, Raymond Blacketer opines, "Perkins was arguably the most significant English theologian of the Elizabethan period."¹³ Others have noted that Perkins was a chief architect of the theology that was later codified in the Westminster Standards (1647).¹⁴ Gisbert Voetius (1589–1676) included Perkins' didactic theology with the caliber of work from likes of Beza, Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562), Lambert Daneau (ca. 1535–90), and Ames. Voetius also included Perkins' catechetical work as being as worthy as that of Daneau, Zacharias Ursinus (1534–83), Jerome Zanchi (1516–90), and Andre Rivet (1595–1650).¹⁵

⁸ See Peter Ramus, *The Logike* (1574; Leeds: The Scholar Press, 1966); Donald K. McKim, *Ramism in William Perkins' Theology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987).

⁹ Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans: With a Guide to Modern Reprints* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 471.

¹⁰ Beeke and Pederson, *Puritans*, 474.

¹¹ Raymond A. Blacketer, "William Perkins (1558–1602)," in *The Pietist Theologians: An Introduction to the Theology in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 48.

¹² Beeke and Pederson, *Puritans*, 475.

¹³ Blacketer, "William Perkins," 41.

¹⁴ Paul R. Schaefer, "Protestant 'Scholasticism' at Elizabethan Cambridge: William Perkins and a Reformed Theology of the Heart," in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment*, eds. Carl R. Trueman and R. Scott Clark (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), 149.

¹⁵ Gisbert Voetius, *Disputationes*, in *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John W. Beardslee (Oxford: OUP,

For the purpose of this essay, attention will be given to three of Perkins' chief works: his *Armilla Aurelia (Golden Chaine)*, *Exposition of the Apostles' Creed*, and *Commentary on Galatians*.¹⁶ There are certainly other works that could be explored, but these three stand out among the rest for the following reasons. First, though Perkins' *Golden Chaine* has been vilified by some as a decretal system of theology, it is more responsibly known as Perkins' explanation of the *ordo salutis*.¹⁷ This work shows how Perkins relates the different elements of his soteriology. Second, Perkins' *Exposition of the Apostles' Creed* by his own admission is his most comprehensive treatment of Christian doctrine.¹⁸ His treatment of union with Christ in that work, then, provides important theological data. And, third, Perkins' commentary on Galatians is important not only because it was his last theological work, but also because Paul's epistle to the Galatians treats the doctrine of justification. It should be no surprise, then, that Perkins has much to say on the doctrine in his commentary. These three works provide an excellent window into Perkins' theology and the relationship between union with Christ and justification, and more broadly the *ordo salutis*.

3. Union with Christ

It may be a surprise to some, but as Heppe has noted, even though Perkins is known for his *Golden Chaine*, he is also a theologian of union with Christ. In his *Exposition* Perkins begins his chapter on mystical union by explaining the three different types of union that exist: (1) a union of nature, when different things are joined by one and the same nature, such as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who are different persons but nevertheless share a common nature; (2) a union of person, when things in nature are different but nevertheless cohere in one person, such as the union between body and soul; and (3) a spiritual union whereby Christ and his church are united. This third type of union, states Perkins, is in view under the subject of mystical union. And the bond that unites Christ to his bride, the church, is the Holy Spirit.¹⁹

Perkins explains the nature of the union: "There is a most near and straight union between Christ and all that believe in him: and in this union Christ with all his benefits according to the tenor of the covenant of grace, is made ours really: and therefore we may stand just before God by his righteousness; it

1965), 289–90; Richard A. Muller, "Perkins' *A Golden Chaine*: Predestinarian System of Schematized *Ordo Salutis*?" *SCJ* 9/1 (1978): 1 n. 1.

¹⁶ William Perkins, *An Exposition of the Apostles' Creed* (1595; London: 1616); idem, *Golden Chaine, or The Description of Theology* (London: 1592); idem, *A Commentary on Galatians*, ed. Gerald T. Sheppard (1617; New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989). Note, all subsequent quotations from these works have updated spelling.

¹⁷ See e.g., R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: OUP, 1981), 54–66; Basil Hall, "Calvin against the Calvinists," in *John Calvin*, ed. Gervase Duffield (Appleford: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1966), 17–31; cf. Muller, "Golden Chaine," 68–81. A similar work that has drawn criticism is by Theodore Beza, *Summa totius Christianismi, sive descriptio et distributio causarum salutis electorum, et exitii reprobatorum, ex sacris literis collecta* (Geneva: 1570). For analysis of this document see Richard A. Muller, "The Use and Abuse of a Document: Beza's *Tabula Praedestinationis*, the Bolsec controversy, and the Origins of Reformed Orthodoxy," in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999): 33–61.

¹⁸ William Perkins, *A Cloud of Faithful Witnesses* (1607; London, 1618), 1.

¹⁹ Perkins, *Exposition*, 299.

being indeed his, because it is in him as in a subject; yet so, as it is also ours; because it is given unto us of God.” Noteworthy in this statement is that Perkins locates justification as a benefit of union with Christ and coordinates this as a benefit of the covenant of grace.²⁰ Here Perkins’ federalism raises its head, a subject to which we will give greater detail below. But Perkins not only connects justification with union, but also sanctification: “From this fountain,” that is, union with Christ, “springs our sanctification, whereby we die to sin, and are renewed in righteousness and holiness.”²¹ So, like other Reformed theologians before and contemporaneous with him, Perkins identifies justification and sanctification as two of the many benefits of union with Christ.²²

Among the more interesting images that Perkins employs to illustrate the necessity of the believer’s union with Christ are that of worms and flies, and fruit trees. Perkins explains that worms and flies lie dead all winter until they are exposed to the sunlight of spring, which begins to bring them to life. “Even so,” writes Perkins, “when we are united to Christ, and are (as it were) laid in the beams of this blessed sun of righteousness, virtue is derived thence, which warms our benumbed hearts dead in sin, and revives us to newness of life.”²³ The other image that Perkins uses to illustrate union with Christ is a common one, a fruit bearing tree, though his version has a slight twist. With an appeal to John 15:1, where Christ explains that he is the vine and believers are the branches, Perkins writes: “Christian men are trees of righteousness growing by the waters of the Sanctuary: but what trees? Not like ours for they are rooted upward in heaven in Christ, and their grains and branches grow downward that they may bear fruit among men.”²⁴ Perkins turns a common biblical illustration on its head, and paints a picture of believers as fruit-bearing trees that grow downward from heaven because they are rooted in (or in union with) Christ.

Though Perkins considered *Exposition* to be his most detailed explication of the Christian faith, a comprehensive statement on the nature of the believer’s union with Christ appears in his Galatians commentary. Perkins reflects upon a number of texts that address the subject of union with Christ when he comments on Galatians 2:20, “I am crucified with Christ: thus I live, yet not I any more, but Christ lives in me” (Eph 1:22; John 15:1; 1 Cor 6:15, 17; 12:13; 15:45; Acts 3:15; Rom 6:5; 8:11; 11:24; Phil 3:10; 1 John 5:12). Perkins explains that the union between Christ and believers is a substantial union. Perkins does not argue that the natures of Christ and the believer are mixed, but rather that the person who believes is united to the person of Christ. This union, as previously noted, is brought about by the work of the Spirit and

²⁰ See Young Jae Timothy Song, *Theology and Piety in the Reformed Federal Thought of William Perkins and John Preston* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998), 35, 37, 53–54, 69.

²¹ Perkins, *Exposition*, 300.

²² See, e.g., Heinrich Bullinger, *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, 4 vols. (1849–52; Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2004), 3.9 (2.330); John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, LCC, vols. 20–21, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.11.1; Girolamo Zanchi, *De Religione Christiana Fides – Confession of Christian Religion*, 2 vols., eds. Luca Baschera and Christian Moser (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 19.1–2 (1.334–37). See also James Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius*, 3 vols., trans. James Nichols and William Nichol (1825–75; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 2.204–05.

²³ Perkins, *Exposition*, 300.

²⁴ Perkins, *Exposition*, 301.

therefore is a spiritual bond. Perkins then asks two questions: “One, in what order Christ gives himself to us?” and, “How can Christ be said to live in us?”

Perkins answers the first question by stating that Christ gives himself to believers by his flesh and blood, which is synonymous with Christ himself. The answer to the second question is: Christ’s gifts, namely, the efficacy and merit of his death. Perkins answers the second question of how Christ lives in the believer by making reference once again to the work of the Spirit. Christ does not indwell the believer with a local presence, but through the special operation of the Spirit, which is threefold:

The first is, when God imputes the righteousness of Christ to them that believe, and withal gives the right to eternal life, and the earnest of this right, namely, the firstfruits of the Spirit. Hereupon justification is called ‘the justification of life’ (Rom 5). The second is, vivification by the virtue of the resurrection of Christ (Phil. 3:10). And this virtue is the power of the God-head of Christ, or the power of the Spirit, raising us to newness of life, as it raised Christ, from the death of sin. And by this power, Christ is said to live in them that believe. The third is, the resurrection of the dead body to everlasting glory, in the day of judgment (Rom 8:11).²⁵

In this explanation Perkins assigns priority to the imputed righteousness of Christ and justification. He prioritizes justification over sanctification in terms of the order that he assigns them. Sanctification (or vivification, as he terms it here), is second.

In another explanation from his exposition of Jude, Perkins once again prioritizes the forensic over the transformative. Perkins prioritizes justification over sanctification, but also coordinates them with union with Christ and the doctrine of the covenant. Note how Perkins sets union within the context of the covenant of grace:

According to that order which God has set down in the covenant, not of works but of grace, wherein God promises to give Christ with all his merits and graces to every believer. Now according to the tenor of this covenant, first Christ with his merits is given unto the believer; he again is given unto Christ, by virtue of which donation many may say Christ is mine, his benefits are mine also, as truly and surely as my land is my own. Hereupon, to make this mutual donation effectual, follows a second thing, which is the union of us with him by the bond of the Spirit, and this is a mystical union but a true union, whereby he that is given unto Christ is made one with him.²⁶

So at the outset Perkins lays a foundation of the merit of Christ, which is the promise that constitutes the covenant of grace. He gives priority to the obedience of Christ. God then executes this promise through the believer’s union with Christ. But when the believer is united to Christ, Perkins distinguishes between imputed and infused righteousness:

After this comes a third thing, which is a communication of Christ himself and all his benefits unto believers. This is done two ways: first, by way of imputation,

²⁵ Perkins, *Galatians*, 128–29.

²⁶ William Perkins, *Exposition upon the Epistle of Jude*, in *The Workes of that Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ in the Universitie of Cambridge M. William Perkins*, vol. 3 (London: 1631), 594.

which is an accounting and accepting of his obedience and sufferings as ours, for the discharge of our sins and acquitting us from them. Secondly, by a kind of propagation, whereby grace is derived from his grace, and infused into those that are set into him. For as many candles receive light from one great torch or light, and as many branches; even so all his members drink of his fountains, are enriched by his treasures of wisdom and knowledge: yes indeed and live by no other life, than that which by his Spirit he inspires into the faces of their souls.²⁷

Imputed and infused righteousness are not confused but distinguished, with priority given to imputed righteousness, as he lists it as first of two benefits, but also because of the antecedent promise of the covenant.

But why must Christ's obedience have priority in the covenant? A forensic foundation has been laid with the respective works of Adam and Christ, the second Adam, in the unfolding of redemptive history:

He shows himself to be a root, even that *root of life*, and that second Adam conveying unto all his branches righteousness and life, as the first Adam (being a root also) derived corruption from himself to all his posterity springing and arising from him; so is that place 1 Cor. 1.30 to be understood, *he is made of God to us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption*; because he is the root and fountain of all these graces unto us, of whose fullness we receive them.²⁸

Perkins argues that the believer's mystical union is grounded upon the imputed obedience of Christ because his merit is promised in the covenant of grace. This priority, therefore, is not temporal (Perkins is not saying that imputation precedes union), but theological. Salvation is ultimately grounded in the representative obedience of Christ, which the believer receives through imputation. In both cases, whether with Adam or the second Adam, each secures the respective destinies *prior* to the existence of those whom each Adam represents. And to be sure, though Perkins' nomenclature was of recent origin (i.e., placing the works of the two Adams under the covenants of works and grace), his federalism was not. Federalism was part and parcel of Reformed theology from the outset of the Reformation.²⁹ So within the broader rubric of union with Christ, Perkins prioritizes justification over sanctification.

²⁷ Perkins, *Exposition of Jude*, 594.

²⁸ Perkins, *Exposition of Jude*, 594.

²⁹ See, e.g., Bullinger, who writes: "For Paul, the teacher of the Gentiles, does in the way of opposition compare Christ with Adam, and shows that of Adam, and so of our own nature and strength, we have nothing but sin, the wrath of God, and death. And this does he show under the name of Adam, to the intent that no man should seek for righteousness and life in the flesh. And again, on the other side, he declares that we by Christ have righteousness, the grace of God, life, and the forgiveness of all our sins" (*Decades*, 1.6 [1.113]). Bullinger does not speak in terms of the covenants of works and grace, but he does have in view the federal effects of Adam and Christ. And from the earliest of days of the Reformation (1534), Bullinger explained that Christ's redemptive work came through covenant (see Heinrich Bullinger, *De testamento seu foedere Dei unico et aeterno*, in *Fountainhead of Federalism: Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenantal Tradition*, eds. and trans. Charles S. McCoy and J. Wayne Baker [Louisville: WJK, 1991], 99–138). On the development of the bi-covenantal structure of Reformed theology, see Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 175–90.

4. The *ordo salutis*: justification and sanctification

Why does Perkins prioritize justification over sanctification? An answer comes from both his formulation of the *ordo salutis* as well as the exegetical-theological reasons presented in his Galatians commentary. It is helpful, however, to answer first a broader question, namely, Why does Perkins even argue for an *ordo salutis*? If the believer receives all of the benefits of Christ through union, why conceive of an order in which those benefits are received? There is a twofold answer to this question.

4.1. Why the *ordo salutis*?

First, Perkins explains in the introduction to his *Golden Chaine* that there are four different ways that theologians conceive of “the order of God’s divine predestination.” When Perkins writes of an “order,” he does not have in mind a specific *ordo decretorum* vis-à-vis the lapsarian question, but rather the way in which soteriology in general is conceived. This conclusion is evident when he lists the “the old and new Pelagians; who place the cause of God’s predestination in man,” in that they believe that God neither ordained life or death but he merely foresaw what man would do by his own free will in his rejection or reception of God’s grace.³⁰ He next identifies Lutherans as those who argue that based upon God’s foreknowledge, who saw that all men were imprisoned in unbelief and would therefore reject God’s mercy, he chose some to salvation by his mercy and rejected the rest based upon his foreknowledge that they would reject his grace. Lastly he identifies the “semi-Pelagian Papists,” who attribute salvation partly to God’s predestination and partly to man’s “foreseen preparations, and meritorious works.”³¹

Perkins’ intention is to show how these three positions are erroneous. But noteworthy are the reasons why he sees error in them. Perkins is certainly interested in refuting what he perceives as erroneous views of predestination, particularly those which found God’s choice of sinners upon foreknowledge of human choices and works. However, also in Perkins’ crosshairs is the place of works in redemption—this is especially evident when he describes the Roman Catholic position as one where redemption is based partly in God’s mercy and partly in man’s good works. When we consider that the full title of Perkins’ treatise is, *A Golden Chaine, or the Description of Theology, containing the order of the causes of Salvation and Damnation, according to God’s word*, it is evident that one of Perkins’ goals is to show how and in what way works factor into redemption among the causes of redemption. This conclusion is also further strengthened when we consider that Perkins devotes a chapter to “the order of the causes of salvation according to the doctrine of the Church of Rome.”³² Of particular interest on this point is Perkins’ positive quotation of Martin Luther

³⁰ See Mark R. Shaw, “William Perkins and the New Pelagians: Another Look at the Cambridge Predestination Controversy of the 1590’s,” *WTJ* 58 (1996): 267–301. Cf. Michael T. Malone, “The Doctrine of Predestination in the Thought of William Perkins and Richard Hooker,” *ATR* 52 (1970): 103–17; Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, 129–32, 142–49, 160–73.

³¹ Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, preface (note, this edition has no page numbers and will be referenced by chapter numbers).

³² Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, 51; cf. Muller, “*Golden Chaine*,” 1 n. 2.

(1483–1546): “That saying of Luther is most true: Good works make not a man just, but a just man makes good works. For good fruit makes not a good tree, but declares it to be good, but a good tree must need make good fruit.”³³

A second answer as to why Perkins argues for an *ordo salutis* comes from comparing his *Golden Chaine* with a similar work of the period. Perkins was not the only theologian to write a treatise by this title. Little is known about Herman Rennecher (b. 1550), though Jacob Arminius (1560–1609) sought him out for Hebrew instruction because of his reputation as a linguist, but this German Reformed theologian also wrote his own treatise, *Aurea Salutis Catena* (*The Golden Chayne of Salvation*).³⁴ Rennecher was not plagiarizing Perkins’ title, but was expounding a commonly held idea that Romans 8:29–30 contained the golden chain of salvation. The opening words of Rennecher’s work confirms this: “The golden chain of salvation, containing and opening all the causes thereof: and orderly reckoning up and displaying all God’s benefits that come unto us by the eternal election through Christ, out of the words of Saint Paul (Rom 8:29–30).”³⁵ Rennecher goes on to explain: “For the causes in regard of their coherence are arranged and displayed by Saint Paul by a most divine skill, and a most exquisite logical method.”³⁶ Perkins, Rennecher, and Reformed orthodox theologians identified Romans 8:29–30 as the golden chain, or *ordo salutis*.³⁷ Hence, for Reformed orthodox theologians such as Perkins and Rennecher, the *ordo salutis* was not the foreign imposition of an alien principle of logic or dogma upon the Scriptures but rather one that grew organically from them.

Hence, the simple answer as to why Perkins and others employed the *ordo salutis* to explain the nature of union with Christ was because Paul gave an order of redemption. Given Reformed orthodox views on Scripture and its divine inspiration, there were not two competing strands of redemption, the mystical and the forensic, nor were the concepts of union and the *ordo salutis* inherently fraught with irresolvable tensions. Rather, Scripture presented both union and the *ordo salutis*, and Perkins’ intention was to show how others had misunderstood this order specifically as it relates to predestination (Pelagians and Lutherans) and the role of good works in redemption (Roman Catholics). Moreover, Perkins consistently shows throughout his *Golden Chaine* that “the *ordo salutis* both originates and is effected in Christ.” Perkins seeks to show how the work of Christ is applied to each aspect of the *ordo salutis*.³⁸ For

³³ Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, 51.

³⁴ Herman Rennecher, *Aurea Salutis Catena* (Lichae: 1597); idem, *The Golden Chayne of Salvation* (London: 1604); Caspar Brandt, *The Life of Jacob Arminius*, trans. John Guthrie (London: Ward & Co., 1854), 17.

³⁵ Rennecher, *Golden Chayne*, 1: “Aurea salutis catena; continens et explicans omnes ejus causas: et singula Dei beneficia ex aeterna electione per Christum ad nos descendencia ordine enumerans et demonstrans: ex verbis Pauli Rom. 8. 29 & 30” (*Aurea Catena*, 1).

³⁶ Rennecher, *Golden Chayne*, 4: “Nam causae ipsae prorsus divinissimo artificio et dialectica methodo quam-accuratissima respectu cohaerentia a S. Paulo sunt dispositae et explicatae” (*Aurea Catena*, 5).

³⁷ Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), s. v. *armilla aurea, ordo salutis*.

³⁸ Muller, “A Golden Chaine,” 76–77. Some, such as G. C. Berkouwer, have claimed that the *ordo salutis* does an injustice to Christ because it makes “subtle distinctions and divisions between the objectivity and subjectivity of salvation” (*Faith and Justification* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954], 25–36, esp. 33). Perkins shows that Berkouwer’s fears are unwarranted, as he understands that the

Perkins, union with Christ is the *ordo salutis*. In other words, when Perkins discusses the *ordo salutis* he is ultimately talking about union with Christ. The different elements of the *ordo salutis* are given to the believer as part of his union with Christ—for example, justification, the forensic aspect of union with Christ, and sanctification the transformative aspect of union. Given this information regarding the origin and role of the *ordo salutis* in Perkins' thought, we have the necessary contextual data to understand the relationship between justification and sanctification.

4.2. Justification and Sanctification

When it comes to the narrow question of the relationship between justification and sanctification, and more specifically, the priority of the former over the latter, we find Perkins casting his soteriology in federal terms. Perkins draws his readers' attention to the origin of sin and its punishment and notes that mankind participates both in Adam's first sin and consequent guilt. Perkins explains: "Adam was not then a private person but represented all mankind, and therefore look what good he received from God, or evil elsewhere, both were common to others with him."³⁹ By contrast, those who are elect, chosen in Christ, have him as their foundation.⁴⁰ Christ serves as the foundation for believers because Christ offered satisfaction, "a full propitiation to his Father for the elect," though by the term *satisfaction*, Perkins has both Christ's passion and his fulfillment of the law in view, his passive and active obedience. In this respect, Perkins identifies Christ as a public person (or federal head): "Christ, because he is the head of the faithful, is to be considered as a public man sustaining the person of all the elect."⁴¹

Man's sin, according to Perkins, is imputed to Christ and Christ's satisfaction is imputed to man. Perkins then states: "The end of Christ's intercession is, that such as are justified by his merits, should by this means continue in the state of grace." For Perkins, the merit of Christ is foundational for the salvation of the elect. Christ also accomplishes this work to confirm the covenant of grace for the sake of the elect.⁴² Once again Perkins wraps his soteriology in the robe of federalism and the doctrine of the covenant, as both Adam and Christ are federal representatives and accomplish their respective work as mediators of either the covenant of works (for Adam) or the covenant of grace (for Christ). As Perkins explains: "The covenant of grace, is that, whereby God freely promising Christ, and his benefits, exacts again of man, that he would by faith receive Christ and repent him of his sins."⁴³

Perkins explains the federal relationship between Adam and Christ in the opening chapters of his *Golden Chaine*, and after an exposition of the Law, Perkins then moves into his explanation of the *ordo salutis*. For Perkins, the *ordo salutis* is an extension of God's love in Christ by which he reaches

ordo salutis is synonymous with union with Christ.

³⁹ Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, 11.3.

⁴⁰ Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, 15.

⁴¹ William Perkins, *Golden Chaine* (London: 1616), 36. Note this quotation comes from a later edition.

⁴² Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, 18.

⁴³ Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, 31.

out to save the elect. God's love in Christ comes in a number of *degrees*, or the logical steps of the *ordo salutis*.⁴⁴ The degrees of God's love are effectual calling, justification, sanctification, and glorification. Through effectual calling believers are united to Christ, which is "a union or conjunction, which is the engrafting of such, as are to be saved, into Christ, and their growing up together with him: so that after a particular manner, Christ is made the head, and every repentant sinner, a member of his mystical body." Hence, at the outset of Perkins' *ordo salutis*, union with Christ is effectuated by the work of the Spirit, who works faith, thereby giving a person a miraculous and supernatural faculty within the heart by which he may apprehend Christ.⁴⁵

This leads to the second degree of God's love, justification. Justification has two parts, the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness. The remission of sins frees a person from the guilt and punishment of sin; the imputation of righteousness accounts him righteous in God's sight. Perkins also argues that justification has another forensic benefit annexed to it, namely adoption, whereby believers are accounted as God's sons.⁴⁶ The third degree of God's love is sanctification. Perkins explains: "The third degree is sanctification, whereby such as believe, being delivered from the tyranny of sin, are by little and little renewed in holiness, and righteousness."⁴⁷ Perkins stipulates that repentance is derived from sanctification, as "no man can repent, before he has begun to hate sin."⁴⁸ The final degree is glorification, which "is the perfect transforming of the saints into the image of the Son of God." However, glorification begins at death and is completed at the Day of Judgment.⁴⁹

Given this order of the degrees of God's love, why does Perkins list them in this particular sequence? The easy answer is that this is the order that Paul gives in Romans 8:29–30, though Perkins adds sanctification, something Paul does not mention. But why does Paul list the degrees in the order that we find in Romans 8:29–30? Perkins does not directly address this question in his treatment of the *ordo salutis*, but he does explain it when he critiques the Roman Catholic understanding of redemption. As mentioned above, Perkins believed the Roman Catholic Church misunderstood the place and function of works. Perkins believed that the Roman Catholic Church confused law and gospel and faith and works in salvation. Salvation was not partly by God and partly by man: "That there is neither any justification by works nor any works of ours that are meritorious. For election is by the free grace of God: and therefore in like sort is justification. For (as I said before) the cause of the cause, is the cause of the thing caused."⁵⁰ Perkins wanted to show that election (and therefore salvation) was not in any way based upon foreseen works.

For Perkins, justification secured eternal life for the elect. In the context of delineating the difference between law and gospel and faith and works Perkins explains: "The thing which is the means to procure life unto us, is also the

⁴⁴ Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, 35.

⁴⁵ Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, 36.

⁴⁶ Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, 37.

⁴⁷ Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, 38.

⁴⁸ Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, 39.

⁴⁹ Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, 48.

⁵⁰ Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, 57.

means of our justice or justification before God. And good reason. Justice causes life: and that which gives life, first of all, gives justice. Hence it follows that works cannot meritoriously deserve eternal life. For if life be by the works of the law, then justice also: but that cannot be: for we must first of all be justified before we can do a good work.⁵¹ As noted, Perkins appealed to Luther's claim that only a good tree produces fruit.⁵² Perkins elaborates on this point: "Righteousness is indeed imputed to them that believe, and that in this life, yet the fruition and the full revelation thereof is reserved to the life to come, when Christ our righteousness shall appear, and when the effect of righteousness, namely sanctification, shall be accomplished in us (Rom 8:23; 1 John 3:2)."⁵³ Perkins is jealous to guard the grace of salvation and consequently bars works from any role in securing it. Hence, for Perkins, justification takes logical, not temporal, priority in redemption. This does not mean, however, that he marginalizes sanctification.

When Perkins discusses the *ordo salutis* he is not talking about something different from union with Christ—they are one and the same. But to protect the *sola* of *sola gratia* he excludes works from securing salvation in any way, but especially as it relates to justification. For Perkins, justification secures salvation; however, when a person is saved the fruit of his redemption is good works. Perkins explains that though justification is by faith alone, "Faith is never alone in the person justified, nor in godly conversation: but is joined with all other virtues." Borrowing a Pauline analogy, Perkins contends that the eye is not alone in the body but is joined to it, but the eye alone has the office of sight. Perkins also uses a distinction between a *way* and a *cause* of salvation: "If faith be considered as a way, we are not only saved by faith. For all other virtues and works are the way to life as well as faith, though they be not causes of salvation."⁵⁴ Works considered broadly are a part of a person's salvation. They accompany it but they do not cause it, according to Perkins. Therefore, Perkins rejects the Roman Catholic doctrine of a second justification: "There is not a second justification, by works, as the Papists teach. For he that is justified by Christ, is fully justified, and needs not further be justified in any thing out of Christ, as by the law."⁵⁵

Rather, at the tribunal of Christ before the evaluation of their works, the elect will be separated from the reprobate and taken to the right hand of Christ, who will pronounce the sentence: "Come ye blessed of my Father, possess the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matt 25:33).⁵⁶ Moreover, when God does accept the works of the elect on the last day, he accepts them through the lens of the imputed righteousness of Christ: "And it is the reward of good works: not because works can merit: but by reason of God's favor, who thus accepts works, and in respect of the merit of Christ's righteousness, imputed to the elect."⁵⁷ In the end, for Perkins, the

⁵¹ Perkins, *Galatians*, 194.

⁵² Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, 51.

⁵³ Perkins, *Galatians*, 334.

⁵⁴ Perkins, *Galatians*, 114.

⁵⁵ Perkins, *Galatians*, 117. Bullinger employs the same passage in the manner that Perkins does in his explanation of the final judgment (Bullinger, *Decades*, 3.9 [2.346]).

⁵⁶ Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, 49.

⁵⁷ Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, 50.

believer's good works could never sustain the scrutiny of divine judgment because sanctification is always imperfect—justification, on the other hand, is always perfect because it rests upon the work of Christ and is immediate and complete the moment a person believes.⁵⁸ Hence, for all of these reasons, though justification and sanctification are both benefits of union with Christ, Perkins gives justification priority in redemption and in the *ordo salutis*.

5. Conclusion

The evidence that this essay has presented shows that the late sixteenth-century was not driven by the agendas of contemporary dogmaticians and historians. Schweitzer believed that there were two competing models of redemption in Paul partly because he stood in a line of theological development rooted in the historical-critical school, one that believed that the Bible was not divinely inspired but a product of human imagination. Moreover, Schweitzer was also partly driven by the philosophical quest of looking for central dogmas—uncovering the one principal from which a system of thought could be logically deduced. This dogmatic presupposition also explains the one-sided readings of those like Heppe. When historians and dogmaticians come to someone like Perkins, they must read him within his own historical and theological context. Perkins held to the divine inspiration of Scripture and believed, therefore, that union with Christ and the *ordo salutis* were not in any way contradictory. Moreover, Perkins' own theology was based on the *locus* method, a method that could account for multiple *foci* in a theological system. Richard Muller explains: "Such doctrines as God, predestination, Christ, and covenant provide not alternative but coordinate *foci*—and the presence of each and every one of these topics in theology rests not on a rational, deductive process but on their presence as *loci* in the exegetical or interpretive tradition of the church."⁵⁹

This means that union with Christ cannot and does not comprise the absolute center of Perkins' theology or soteriology, and neither does the doctrine of justification for that matter. Rather, union with Christ is one focal point of his overall soteriology that is coordinated with the doctrines of God, the decree, pneumatology, and the covenants. Perkins does prioritize justification over sanctification within his soteriology and his doctrine of union with Christ, not because it is the center of his soteriology or doctrine from which all others is deduced, but because it is the nexus where Christ's federally representative obedience is imputed to the believer by faith alone, apart from good works, which secures the believer's redemption.

Justification, then, is an anchor of sorts, but this is not to the exclusion of sanctification or the rest of the golden chain. The path to ethics is severed in Schweitzer's thought because union and justification were alternative contradictory models of redemption. But for Perkins, it was the believer's union with Christ, that unbreakable golden chain, that ensured the believer's indefectible status because of Christ's imputed righteousness and the indwelling presence of Christ for his sanctification. Neither the *ordo salutis*

⁵⁸ Perkins, *Galatians*, 112, 152.

⁵⁹ Muller, *After Calvin*, 97.

nor federalism appear to have vitiated Calvin's doctrine of union with Christ, as if such a question were even proper, as Evans claims.

Rather, Perkins simply expressed what some theologians had known since the earliest days of the church's reflection upon soteriology: A person is sanctified because he is justified, he is not justified because he is sanctified. Peter Martyr Vermigli showcases this fact when he once quoted Augustine (354–430): "Good works derive from the fact that we are justified, and not that we are justified because of prior good works."⁶⁰ If the *ordo salutis* was a foreign imposition upon the text of Scripture, then Perkins and other Reformed theologians knew nothing of it. If, however, the *ordo salutis* was simply the recognition of the priorities that Scripture assigned to the various aspects of union with Christ, then Perkins and others whole-heartedly affirmed it. While perhaps it is unthinkable for moderns, for Perkins, union with Christ and the *ordo salutis* were one and the same, which enabled him to give justification priority over sanctification in his soteriology.

⁶⁰ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Predestination and Justification*, ed. and trans. Frank A. James III, The Peter Martyr Library, vol. 8 (Kirksville: Truman State UP, 2003), 151–52.