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WILLIAM PERKINS, A RAMIST THEOLOGIAN?

Paul Marshall

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

“We may declare that Puritans...derived their ideas from the Bible, from Augustine and Calvin, Petrus Ramus and William Perkins.”¹ Many, following Perry Miller, find that Peter Ramus had a great impact on English and American Puritan theological thought. McKim notes that Ramism did not, “specifically color their (the Puritans) theology,” but he quotes Ramus as saying “my zeal for logic invaded the realm of religion.”² Donald McKim’s dissertation traced the evidence of Ramism in William Perkins’ writings and found that Ong, Howell, Breward and Porter all underestimated the effect of Ramism on Perkins.³ What has been the influence of the Huguenot educator Peter Ramus on the early English preacher and theologian William Perkins? Donald McKim states, “The highly influential English Puritan, William Perkins,...advocated the Ramist principles and practiced them in his approach to exegesis.”⁴ Although McKim’s statement of Perkins’ large dependence on Ramism, has been widely accepted, his evidence needs to be more thoroughly examined, since a familiarity with Perkins’ writings would seem to discredit it.

Perkins had a great influence on the writers of the Westminster Confession, and since McKim must hold to that document as a

¹ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939; rpt. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 7.

² Donald McKim, *Ramism in William Perkins* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), p. 122.

³ Donald K. McKim, “Ramism in William Perkins” (Unpublished Ph.D.Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1980), p. 2.

⁴ Donald K. McKim, “William Perkins’ Use of Ramism as an Exegetical Tool,” in *A Commentary on Hebrews 11(1609 Edition)*, ed. John H. Augustine (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1991), p. 32.

Presbyterian,⁵ Perkins is very important to him. While writing his dissertation on Perkins, he took time off to write a book on how Theodore Beza, Frances Turretin, John Owen and their friends had changed the Reformed movement from its salvific view of scripture to a “scholastic” (inerrantist) one.⁶ For McKim’s hypothesis to hold true, he must show that the Westminster Fathers were not scholastics and he can do that by showing that Perkins was a Ramist. McKim’s attempt to prove Perkins a Ramist, and therefore separate Perkins from the later “scholastic” or inerrantist Puritans, makes room for the doctrine of inspiration to be altered.

The influence of Ramus on Perkins can be viewed in three ways: first, that Perkins was a Ramist in the manner of McKim; second, that Perkins was not a Ramist, but shared some characteristics because they were Protestants and contemporaries; and third, that Perkins may have used Ramist forms with non-Ramist content. This last view is parallel to Jill Raitt’s conclusion that Theodore Beza used scholastic forms without having scholastic content.⁷

Statement of Presuppositions

People are influenced in many different ways: by reading a book or a book review, reading a magazine, a letter, hearing a formal speech or sermon, participating in a group discussion, having a private conversation, or overhearing another person’s private conversation. However, some people arrive at similar conclusions at similar times without consulting one another.⁸ Unless there is a paper trail of influence, it should not be established that one person had impact on another. This is a presupposition

⁵ See below p. 10-11. Perkins could be called a father of the Westminster Fathers because of the influence of his writings and because so many Presbyterians were educated at Cambridge.

⁶ Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), xiii.

⁷ Jill Raitt, *The Eucharistic Theology of Theodore Beza; Development of the Reformed Doctrine* (Chambersburg, Penn.: American Academy of Religion, 1972).

⁸ An example of this is the discovery of the modern liquid propelled rocket. Herman Oberth (1923) and Konstantin E. Tsiolkovsky (1903) both thought about the issue and reached similar conclusions independently. It was not until Oberth’s work was published, that the Russian work was translated, and Tsiolkovsky received the recognition that he deserved.

that others may not share and Donald McKim is not faulted if he does not hold to it.

Jill Raitt's work, that there was not a large shift to Protestant Scholasticism after Calvin's death, is quite convincing. Thus inerrancy was not a scholastic innovation but the historic position of the church.

Statement of the Parameters

This paper deals with the effect, if any, of Ramism on William Perkins. Since this is proposed in the work of Donald McKim and Perry Miller, their positions are closely evaluated. The secondary literature on Perkins is surveyed and a close reading of Perkins' work the *Arte of Prophecyng* is considered.

Statement of the Procedure

This paper examines the lives of William Perkins and Peter Ramus, presents a brief study of Ramist thought, and concludes with a presentation and evaluation of the argument of Ramist influence.

1. The Life and Influence of William Perkins

Contemporary Events

Perkins (1558-1602) lived in a time when the Bible was just beginning to make strong inroads into the consciousness of the common people. Before his time the clergy and society were woefully unaware of the Scriptures. John Wycliffe's translation⁹ had been made, but since it predated the printing press, it was not widely distributed. Wycliffe's followers, the Lollards, also had a great influence, but were persecuted. By Perkins' time the Bible was in wide circulation, although there was still some opposition to its use by those of the Catholic and Anglican High Church persuasion.

⁹ This translation was done by Wycliffe's followers around 1380-1392. Nicholas of Herford and John Purvey are usually considered to have done most of the work.

Finally, in 1582 the Catholics published their Douai-Reims annotated Bible, which entrenched an English Bible in the hands of the laity.¹⁰

The study and preaching of the Bible is a Puritan distinctive.¹¹ Most importantly, the Puritans wanted change to continue beyond the point of the Reformation. They wanted to eliminate many of the things that reminded them of “popery,” such as bowing at communion.¹²

While there was acceptance of the Bible, Puritans were subjected to constraints in the name of political expediency because Royal control of the churches was seen as essential for political stability.¹³

The Life of William Perkins

There is not much known about the life of William Perkins except for the few details in Thomas Fuller’s books.¹⁴ Perkins was born in 1558 to Thomas and Anna Perkins. They apparently had enough money to send him to Christ’s College, Cambridge. At that stronghold of Puritan thought, he was tutored by Lawrence Chaderton, who was later described as “the pope of

¹⁰ See John Knott, *Sword of the Spirit: Puritan Response to the Bible*, p. 137.

¹¹ Peter Toon (*Puritans and Calvinism* [Swengel, Pennsylvania: Reiner Publications, 1973], p. 9) has noted six characteristics of the Puritans. First, there was a commitment to the Bible as the authoritative Word of the living God. Second, there was a belief in Reformed Theology. Some were federal theologians and some believed in limited atonement while others did not hold to either of these. Some can be called “Arminian Puritans” such as John Goodwin, but generally they were Reformed. Third, there was a desire for a restructuring of the Church of England on the principles of Reformed Theology. Fourth, there was a belief in the necessity of personal regeneration, justification by faith and sanctification by the Spirit. Fifth, there was a need for revival in the country at all levels. This was to be done by legislation, Bible teaching, personal holiness with fervent prayer and fasting. Sixth, there was a strong sense that the last days had come and that Christ would soon return.

¹² Derek Wilson, *The People and the Book: The Revolutionary Impact of the English Bible, 1380-1611* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1976), pp. 132, 137.

¹³ Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), pp. 37ff.

¹⁴ Thomas Fuller, *The Holy State and the Profane State* (1642) and *Abel Redivivus* (1651).

Cambridge Puritanism.”¹⁵ This tutor selection prompted widespread speculation that his family may have had Puritan leanings. Yet, this may not have been the case, since many tutors at the time were Puritans.¹⁶

At Cambridge, Perkins did not always act like the ideal Christian scholar. Rather, he is described by Fuller as taking “wild liberties to himself as cost him many a sigh in his reduced age.”¹⁷ Fuller notes that Perkins’ wild youth later gave him the ability to better deal with sinners.¹⁸ He seems to have had some exposure to Astrology.¹⁹ Breward notes that Perkins’ earliest works deal with the folly of Astrology.²⁰ His work, *Four Great Lyers*, shows the futility of almanacs by printing four side by side and showing their great divergence.²¹

As a result of his conversion, Perkins began to work with Cambridge prison inmates. He was an effective chaplain with sermons so popular that outsiders also came to hear him.²² This led to his appointment as lecturer (preacher) at Great St. Andrews Church, Cambridge in 1584.²³ Fuller records that his simple preaching style, uncluttered by latin and hellenic quotations caused his ministry to be very well received by both the

¹⁵ See “Chaderton, Lawrence,” *Dictionary of National Biography* (1885-1900) and Donald McKim, *Ramism in William Perkins’ Theology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), p. 5.

¹⁶ The Puritans were, in general, a very well-educated group and tended to dominate university life with their intellectual gifts.

¹⁷ Thomas Fuller, *Abel Redivivus* (London, 1651), p. 432. Ian Breward (*The Work of William Perkins* [Appleford, Berkshire: Sutton Courtenay, 1970], p. 6) noted that there is a puzzling bequest of a Bible to his son-in-law John Hinde. It is possible that his seven-year-old eldest daughter was a child bride, but it appears more likely that he had an earlier illegitimate daughter.

¹⁸ Fuller, p.432.

¹⁹ See Thomas Fuller, *The Holy State and the Profane State*, ed. James Nichols (London, 1841), p. 80 and Fuller, *Abel Redivivus*, pp. 432-433.

²⁰ Some of his works on the subject include, *A Resolution to the Countryman*, which contains theological and logical reasons against the use of almanacs; and *A Fruitful Dialogue Concerning the End of the World*. This work deals with proper Christian thought in regard to the future.

²¹ Breward, *Work*, pp. 7, 114.

²² Samuel Clarke, *A Marrow of Ecclesiastical Historie* (London, 1654), pp. 416-417.

²³ Fuller, *Abel Redivivus*, p. 433.

townspeople and the scholars. He sought to persuade people by the use of the scriptures, logic and emotional appeal, rather than weighty citations.²⁴

Perkins' ministry was very fruitful. In his short life he published the forty books that make up the J. Leggat edition of his works.²⁵ He was a Fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge from 1584 until 1595 when he resigned to marry Timothy Cradocke. In their seven years of marriage, they had seven children, but three died in childhood. At the end of his life, Perkins was afflicted with "the stone" that caused his death, October 22, 1602.

Perkins' Influence

William Perkins was a leader in English Puritanism, but although he was a friend to his tutor, the prominent Puritan, Lawrence Chaderton, Perkins did not consider himself a Puritan.²⁶ He was not a separatist, and attacked those who wanted to split or leave the Church of England.²⁷ Most think of

²⁴ Ian Breward, *Work*, citing William Ames, *Conscience, with the Power and Cases thereof* (1639), n. pag.

²⁵ This edition is the *The Workes of that Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ at the University of Cambridge, Mr. William Perkins* (Cambridge: John Leggat, 1616-1618). This is number 19651 in Pollard and Redgrave's, *A Short-title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland and Ireland 1475-1640*. Vol.III has 264 pages that are not numbered with the rest.

²⁶ Breward (*Work*, p. 11) notes that Perkins did not associate with the Puritan ministers. He only had a small role as a persecution witness in a trial of Puritan ministers in 1590-1591. Breward speculates, apparently correctly, that Perkins was less than totally transparent in his statements on Puritanism and his personal beliefs. Breward's research finds support in the Commentary on Galatians (Perkins, *Works*, II, 183) where Perkins allows for feigning. This feigning is defined as something that is not exactly what a person is thinking, but is not contrary to it. This is only allowed when it is "not to the prejudice of the truth, against the glory of God, and the good of our neighbor, and some convenient and reasonable cause." Perkins (*Works*, III, 15B; I, 342) states that none can be called pure and so "puritan" is a "vile name" to apply to the godly.

Also, Breward (*Work*, p. 22) recorded that Perkins took the "anti-puritan" oath used to rid the church of Puritan sympathizers. It stated that no one should separate "themselves from the Church, ministry and the service of God."

²⁷ See Breward, *Work*, p. 12.

him as a Puritan. The following reasons will show why. First, he opposed the practice of kneeling at the sacraments.²⁸ Second, he is considered as having had Puritan sympathies since his Calvinistic-Presbyterian background and beliefs were normally, but not exclusively, associated with Puritanism. Third, Perkins attended the Synod of 1589 at St. John's College which resulted in their drafting of Presbyterian statements, leading to an investigation by the infamous Star Chamber in 1591. Perkins did not give any information about the events that occurred at the College, nor did he state who was there. Yet, after this incident he did not engage in any overt Puritan activity.²⁹ Fourth, he seems to fit the later pattern of the Puritan's "influence by education". Since Puritans were not allowed to have leadership in the Church of England or the government, they were content to work at preparing the future clergy. It is uncertain whether this was deliberate by Perkins, but the pattern fits. Fifth, the Puritans accepted him as one of their literary figures after his death.³⁰

Not only did Perkins have a great influence in Puritan circles, he was widely translated and disseminated.³¹ Cotton Mather and John Cotton were familiar with his writings and noted that other New England clergy were familiar with them.³² In his lifetime he was widely respected for his ability as a preacher. He made things clear and used common sense, so that most who heard him were impressed by the profound yet simple thoughts that he presented.

²⁸ Charles H. Cooper and Thompson Cooper, *Athenae Cantabrigienses* (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell and Company, 1858-1913) II, 535, cited in Coleman Cain Markham, "William Perkins' Understanding of the Function of Conscience" (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1967), p. 3.

²⁹ See Markham, "Conscience," p. 4 and Rosemary A. Sisson, "William Perkins, Apologist for the Elizabethan Church of England," *Modern Language Review* 48, no.4 (October, 1952), pp. 500-502.

³⁰ The men of 1662 saw Perkins as a spiritual forbearer. See Breward, *Work*, p. 15.

³¹ Among other languages, he was translated into Hungarian, Spanish, Czech, Irish and Welsh, and his Latin writings had wide reading in Germany, Switzerland, and Holland. See Markham, "Conscience," p. 5.

³² Christopher Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 159. See also Susan M. Kingsbury, ed., *The Records of the Virginia Company of London* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1906-1935), I, 421-422.

2. The Life of Peter Ramus

The Life of Peter Ramus

Peter Ramus (Pierre de la Ramee, Petrus Ramus 1515-1572), a Huguenot orator, philosopher and educator, was born in Cuth, Picardy, France, not far from the birthplace of John Calvin.³³ His family, impoverished nobility, had lost their land in 1485 during the wars of Charles the Bold. Although his father was a farmer, Ramus became the servant, at age twelve,³⁴ of a wealthy student. There, at the College of Navarre, he had companions such as Charles Bourbon, future cardinal and Pretender to the French Crown, and Charles de Guise, future cardinal. In spite of the friends he made, it appears that he was resentful. First, he resented all the valet work he had to do for his employer, the Sieur de la Brosse. Second, he appears to have been older than most of his classmates, because he had been held back for financial reasons.³⁵ Third, there is some evidence that he did not do well in the disputations that were part of the curriculum then, nor could he reason to the point very well.³⁶ Fourth, it appears that he had a fierce desire to learn, and the obstacles only increased his resentment. Ong concludes that these factors may have led to his extreme attacks on the educational system, causing some later troubles.³⁷

³³ There are three biographies of Ramus by his contemporaries: that of Johann Thomas Freige (1575), Theopile de Banos (1576) and Nicholas de Nancel (1599). Nancel was an understudy, secretary and co-author of Ramus for 20 years. He later became a medical doctor. His is the best biography, except on religious issues, which he avoided discussing. All later biographies use these sources: see Walter J. Ong, *Ramus: Method and the Decay of Dialogue*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), pp. 17-20.

³⁴ In describing his early life, Ramus notes, "I confess that my whole life has been one bitter struggle. As a young boy [*invenis* not *puer* indicating that he was probably older than eight] under every possible handicap I came to Paris to study the liberal arts." This is translated from Nicholas de Nancel's Latin *Biography of Ramus*, translated and cited in Ong, *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

According to his contemporary biographers, Ramus became an outstanding master of Latin, despite his difficulties,³⁸ and by age 21, he graduated with a M.A. from the University of Paris.

He began teaching college immediately, first as lecturer in philosophy at the College du Mans, and then at the College de l'Ave Maria. There he met his close friend Omer Talon (Audomarus Talaeus), with whom he coauthored several books, including the works that were to define Ramism. The first was *Dialecticae Partitiones (The Structure of Dialectic)*, that was renamed *Dialecticae Institutiones (Training in Dialectic)*, and *Aristotle Aninadversiones (Remarks on Aristotle)*. His promising career was interrupted by his colleagues pressing civil charges against him. He was accused of attacking Aristotle's philosophy, thereby endangering the foundations of religion and philosophy, but more clearly he was undermining the other faculty since they practiced Aristotle's principles. He was convicted in 1543, during somewhat irregular circumstances. Yet, it appears that he was guilty of the charge.³⁹ By order of King Francis I, his books were banned and he was barred from teaching philosophy without special royal permission. He chose instead to teach math and the classics. He taught at the College de Preles, and by the end of 1545 had become principal. His friend Omer Talon also taught there. Ramus reprinted his work on Dialectics under Talon's name in 1546, entitled in English, *Three Commentaries on Dialectic Published under the Authorship of Omer Talon*. This became an important edition of his works. Ramus published a Latin version of Euclid (*Euclides*) and helped Talon with a work on Oratory (*Institutiones Oratoriae*).

Ramus was a very popular lecturer, being more forceful and denouncing the same authorities that his colleagues based their programs on. Apparently he was very generous with poor students, but did have a bad temper. While corporal punishment was acceptable then, Ramus was excessive for the time.⁴⁰ In 1547 Ramus published a commentary on part of Cicero's work (*Brutinae Quaestiones*), which he dedicated to the new King, Henry II.

The ban on his books was lifted and he became dean of what was to be the College de France. He became a Regius Professor, which meant that his

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.23. Part of the problem being that any innovators were seen as "Lutherans or other heretics!"

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

salary was paid for by the crown. He seemed to attract trouble wherever he went, and not just over religious issues. Theodore Beza attacked Ramus at a synod, saying that Ramism was one of the greatest attacks ever on the French Protestant church.⁴¹ Ramus was lynched on August 26th, 1572 by a Catholic mob, during the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. In total he authored sixty works and coauthored another thirteen.

Definition of Ramism

Ramus wished to liberate logic from its highly formalized medieval inheritance, and reorganize rhetoric. He wanted Aristotelian "categories" broken down into "arguments" or "concepts." He had a method of breaking things down into concepts from the whole to the parts, which often involved dichotomies. Often he would diagram the results so that every element would have a place on the chart. However, other philosophical systems also divided things into smaller groups. Ong notes that, "the use of dichotomies, or division by twos, was not uniquely Ramist, although extreme specialization in them was," and that Ramus inaccurately ascribed dichotomies to Plato. It is certain that John Major, Boethius and Porphyry used dichotomies. George of Brussels followed Boethius in saying that

⁴¹ Beza was angry with Ramus for three reasons. First, Ramus advised the Zurich church to break with the Basel congregation over rather inconsequential matters relating to the Lord's Supper. Second, Ramus tried to influence Heinrich Bullinger, pastor at Zurich, to reject the findings of the French National Synod at La Rochelle. Beza, as Moderator of the Synod wrote a long discourse to explain the Synod's position and to attack Ramus for "false teachings" and stirring up trouble. Third, Ramus influenced a provisional synod at Lumignyen-Brie in March, 1572 causing a major controversy at the National Synod at Nimes (May 1572), in which all the Ramist influenced reforms were rejected, the memoirs of the March council ordered to be destroyed, and Synod discipline enforced. Ramus and three others were summoned to the Colloquy of Beauvosin and encouraged to change their ways or else be labeled as rebels. See Robert M. Kingdon, *Geneva and the Consolidation of the French Protestant Movement 1564-1572*. (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), p. 109.

“every good division ought to be two-membered.”⁴² Instead of syllogisms, the Ramist would use axioms, things that were commonly seen as true by the target audience. Yet, syllogisms still had value in solving doubts that arose from problems of definition and division.

For Ramus the task of dialectic was discourse. Therefore, a student should intelligently organize all the data from axioms and syllogisms into propositions and then form discourses.

Influence

Ramist thought was extremely well distributed. Peter Ramus and his associate Omer Talon had 750 separate editions of their work published and 1100 separate printings. Most of these were done between 1550 and 1650.

According to Ong,⁴³ Ramism was extremely strong in Calvinistic Germany between 1580-1620, where it adopted forms that were radically different from the original. It was banned at the University of Leipzig in 1592. Ong⁴⁴ believed that the encyclopaedias of Alsted were semi-Ramist because they dealt with all fields of knowledge. Ong⁴⁵ finds that those who define, divide and diagram with an eye to clarity are under the influence of Ramus, but that it is hard to figure out “what his dialectic or logic is.”⁴⁶

Ramist thought poured into England, where it was accepted by younger students, but not by the professors. Ong⁴⁷ finds that “Methodism” came out of Ramist principles because Wesley wrote a “logic textbook vaguely reminiscent of Ramism.” Though it appears that Ong could find traces of Ramism almost everywhere in western Europe, he minimizes the effect of Ramus on Perkins, stating that William Perkins was at best a “semi-Ramist.”⁴⁸

⁴² Ong, p. 199 citing John Major, “Primus Tractatus Summularum,” in *Libri Quos in Artibus in Collegio Montis Accuti Parisus Regentando Commentarii* (Paris: 1506), fols. xxvi, xxviiff.

⁴³ Ong, p. 298.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

When Wilbur Samuel Howell⁴⁹ examined the Perkins' corpus he found that Perkins derived his style from sources "closer to Ciceronian rhetoric and scholastic logic than to the logic and rhetoric of Ramus." Howell bases his conclusion on the fact that Perkins does not credit Ramus as a source, therefore Perkins "must be regarded as a traditionalist in respect to most of his subject matter, and as a Ramist only in respect to method of presentation and to a few points of doctrine." Consequently, Perkins was not a "thorough going disciple" of Ramus.⁵⁰

Breward, probably the preeminent present-day scholar on William Perkins, does not consider Perkins to have been significantly impacted by Ramus.⁵¹

Conclusion

Apparently, Ramism was very popular in some circles during Perkins' time, if only because of his influence on the students and the large number of editions or reprints of his work. Yet, Howell, Ong and Breward cast doubt on the extent of this influence on Perkins.

3. Traces of Ramism in Perkins

Introduction

Since Perkins was such a popular and early writer, if a trail can be drawn from Ramus to Perkins, then Ramus can be said to have had a great influence on the Puritan movement. William Perkins wrote a very influential work on preaching, *The Arte of Prophecyng*. At the conclusion of the book,⁵² Perkins listed the authors who influenced him: Augustine, Hemingius, Hyperius, Erasmus, Illyricus, Wigardus, Jacobus, Matthias, Theodorus Beza and Franciscus Junius. Two observations can be made from

⁴⁹ Wilbur Samuel Howell, *Logic and Rhetoric in England 1500-1700* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), p. 207.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Breward, *Work*, p. 70.

⁵² William Perkins, *Arte of Prophecyng*, p. 146.

this list. First, Beza hated Ramus⁵³ and his thought. Second, there is no mention of Ramus nor of any Ramists. If a man includes the thought of one man who has condemned the works of another, how can McKim make a case for the influence of the latter? Yet this is the book that Donald McKim finds replete with Ramist thought. To clarify McKim's position and evidence, the path of influence from Ramus to Perkins that Perry Miller and Donald McKim⁵⁴ have discovered, will be retraced.

The Miller Path

As noted above,⁵⁵ Perry Miller did affirm that William Perkins was a disciple of Peter Ramus.⁵⁶ Yet, there is little mention of how this came about, rather it is simply stated on his authority, without evidence.⁵⁷ Miller sees similarities in all the Puritans,⁵⁸ and all Puritans as Ramists.⁵⁹ Since Miller presupposes the influence of Ramism, it should not be assumed that

⁵³ See above.

⁵⁴ McKim has stated his case in three works, the most compact being "The Function of Ramism in William Perkins' Theology," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 21 (1985), pp. 503-517. The most comprehensive is *Ramism in William Perkins Theology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987). The dissertation is "Ramism in William Perkins" (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation., University of Pittsburgh, 1980). For the sake of convenience, reference will only be made to the Peter Lang work unless there are significant differences.

⁵⁵ First page of this article.

⁵⁶ McKim, *Ramism*, p. 119.

⁵⁷ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), p. 339. Miller says that Perkin's "phrase 'disposition either axiomaticall, or syllogisticall, or methodicall' can hardly be anything but "a summary" of one of Ramus's works. He then goes on to say that "if Perkins was not wholly guided by Ramus, he must have been strongly influenced." Miller states that Perkins depended on Ramus because of Perkins's use of similar vocabulary, references and the fact that Perkins was at Cambridge in the 1590s. Since none of this evidence is completely presented and all of it is circumstantial, it is fair to state that Miller assumes something that he does not prove.

⁵⁸ David Hackett Fischer has critiqued him specifically for doing this (*Historians' Fallacies* [New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970], pp. 197-199).

⁵⁹ See Miller, p. 12.

he has proven it, nor should it be taken as proof merely on Miller's affirmation of it.

The Student Path

1.) The Importance of the Perkins' Teaching

After leaving his teaching post at Cambridge, Perkins became the preacher at a nearby Church,⁶⁰ giving him the potential to influence many students who would become the Puritans and Presbyterians. McKim has correctly sought to analyze some of Perkins' students to see if there are any traces of Ramus thought in them.

2.) Paul Baynes

McKim examined the work of Paul Baynes (d.1617), *An Entire Commentary Upon the Whole Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Ephesians* (London, 1643), and found that there were Ramist brackets in at least eight places.⁶¹ This pattern was repeated with three brackets in *The Terror of God Displayed Against Carnal Security*, and one bracket in *A Caveat for Cold Christians*. Yet, he does not establish whether these were common at the time. That is, if brackets were used by many others at the time, including those who were not Ramists, then the tie with Ramus is less distinct. Of course Ong notes that many different groups were under the influence of Ramus, but he usually draws a tie more substantial than brackets.⁶²

3.) Daniel Rogers

Perkins' student Daniel Rogers (1573-1652), wrote a poem mourning Ramus' violent death. This does not necessarily make it the work of a student for his beloved master, for Ramus was perhaps a more tragic

⁶⁰ McKim, *Ramism*, p. 119.

⁶¹ McKim, "The Function of Ramism in William Perkins' Theology," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 21 (1985), p. 507. He noted that the brackets are on pages 217, 221, 244, 429, 635, 639, 682 and 502.

⁶² Ong, p. 303.

Huguenot martyr than some militaristic Protestant martyrs, even though all victims deserve sympathy. The violent death of a scholar is a fitting subject for a poem, but need not reflect the poet's feelings toward the scholar's teachings. Rogers' work on 2 Samuel 24 entitled, *David's Cost*, can be charted⁶³ in Ramist fashion but Ramist logic can be so similar to classic Ciceronian logic that it is possible to chart almost anything as Ramist which had classical influence.⁶⁴

4.) Thomas Taylor

The third student of Perkins that McKim studies, included charts in his work. Thomas Taylor (1576-1633), translated Perkins' work on *Jude*, which had a Ramist chart in the English translation.⁶⁵ Taylor also apparently put Ramist charts in his *Commentary Upon the Epistle of St. Paul Written to Titus* (London, 1658).⁶⁶ Yet, as seen above, if an educational device became common in that period, the mere usage of it is not an indication that they imbibe its original presuppositions. It may even be, as argued for Rogers, that the charts were possibly mislabeled as Ramist, when Ciceronian logic is so similar. Ong notes that Ramist literature was being distributed in England, but it was not well received. Ramus' influence in England came by way of those who spent time in the Netherlands. Although the English who did not go overseas were not strongly influenced by Ramism,⁶⁷ there were some exceptions such as Richard Mather,⁶⁸ who read Ramus as an undergraduate at Oxford and then quit the university.⁶⁹

⁶³ Ramist charts reflected the breakdown of the whole into its parts. Usually each whole was broken into halves and the process was repeated all the way down to the smallest unit. The charts usually started at the left side of the page with the whole and the smallest units on the right.

⁶⁴ See Ong, pp. 298ff.

⁶⁵ At present, I am uncertain who inserted this chart but I assume it was Perkins.

⁶⁶ McKim, "Function," p. 507.

⁶⁷ Ong, *Ramus*, pp. 297-305.

⁶⁸ Mather (1596-1669) was not one of Perkins' students, but was a Ramist and was influential among the English and American Puritans.

⁶⁹ Howell, pp. 192-294.

5.) William Ames

William Ames (1576-1633), the fourth student that McKim mentioned, was a Ramist.⁷⁰ Yet, he is also an exception like Mather, for he received much of his academic exposure on the continent, especially in that Ramist hotbed of Holland.⁷¹

Definition of Theology

Another indication of Ramism in Perkins, is that Ramus defined theology as “the art of living well” (*Theologia est doctrina bene vivendi*).⁷² Perkins believed that it was “the science of living blessedly forever.”⁷³ While these definitions are similar,⁷⁴ they also reflect the use of the Bible. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, as well as James 1:26, 2:14 and 3:13 show that these definitions are in the mainstream of Christian Theology. A simple relationship of theology to practice does not show dependence of Perkins on Ramus. Of course, the possibility exists, but since there is no paper trail this could easily have been derived from the Bible, a book we know Perkins read. Since this common definition is so prominent in the Bible, from the prophets (like Amos) to Revelation (3:10), it is far more likely that both Perkins and Ramus received it from that common source.

Love for the Liberal Arts

Both Ramus and Perkins loved the Liberal Arts.⁷⁵ Ramus made it his life work, and Perkins made favourable statements of the Arts. Perkins said that

⁷⁰ At least, this was the opinion of Keith L. Sprunger, *The Learned Doctor William Ames* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1972). I have not critically evaluated Sprunger’s work, but it appears convincing.

⁷¹ Ong, p.304.

⁷² Peter Ramus, *Commenatariorum de Religione Christiana, Libri Quator* (Frankfurt, 1576; rpt. Frankfurt: Minerva, 1969), p.6, cited in McKim, *Ramus*, p.121.

⁷³ *The Workes of that Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ in the University of Cambridge, Mr. William Perkins* (Cambridge: John Leggat, 1616-1618) I, 11.

⁷⁴ Here McKim is following Sprunger, pp. 132, 140.

⁷⁵ McKim, *Ramism*, p. 122.

the study of the Arts was “good and lawful” since the Arts were “warrantable by the word of God.”⁷⁶ Yet, a common love for Arts does not prove a relationship between Ramus and Perkins since many early Reformers (such as John Calvin)⁷⁷ were humanists and therefore proficient in part, or in all of the Arts.

Plain Style Preaching

In several places in the *Arte of Prophecyng*, Perkins affirmed the need for a plain style of preaching.⁷⁸ His personal plain style, directly contrasted with the High Anglican Church style of giving untranslated quotations in Greek and Latin. McKim found that there was a Ramist source for the plain style, as the exegete would go from the general truth to a specific illustration.⁷⁹ This is not conclusive since the plain style is not simply from Ramus, it is something that the ancient orators affirmed as a valuable thing.⁸⁰ A parallel desire to communicate theology and the scriptures, rather than the culture of Antiquity as was practiced in High church situations, encouraged the plain style.

Application

An indication of Ramist influence according to McKim, is the love of application by Perkins.⁸¹ Ramus was concerned about the “use” of any topic, but this desire of Ramus is also a desire of the Scriptures. McKim notes that Perkins divided applications into “mental” and “practical.” “Mental” was further divided into “doctrine” for the “information of the mind” and “teaching” for the “reformation of the mind.” The “practical” was divided into “instruction” and “correction.”⁸²

⁷⁶ *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft in Works*, III, 608.

⁷⁷ Calvin wrote a Latin commentary on *Seneca's De Clementia* in 1532.

⁷⁸ McKim, *Ramism*, p. 126.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁸⁰ Ong, p. 283.

⁸¹ McKim, *Ramism*, p. 129.

⁸² Perkins, *Works*, II, 650ff., commented on in McKim, *Ramism*, pp. 195-217.

At first glance, this appears to be evidence in support of McKim's argument for Ramism in Perkins.⁸³ There is, however, a more likely source for this division, since in the Epistles of St. Paul to Timothy the role of the Bible in the life of the believer is dealt with. This is an obvious passage to consider when one is dealing with the role of the preacher in communicating the scriptures. "All scripture is God-breathed, and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."⁸⁴ Any standard exegetical commentary,⁸⁵ will reflect Perkins' division of mental and practical, because "teaching" (KJV and Perkins; "doctrine") and rebuking (KJV "reproof" and Perkins "teaching") are intellectual concepts.⁸⁶ "Correcting" (NIV, ἐπανόρθωσιν), is used in the papyri for setting right, correction and setting on one's feet. "Instruction" (παιδείαν), is a term meaning training of a more practical sort or discipline. While Perkins has reversed the order of correction and instruction, he still has reflected the teaching of the passage. Thus, his division of the applications into two parts and again into two more parts is not Ramist but Biblical.

Biblical Interpretation

Another trace of Ramist concepts and terms⁸⁷ surfaces in Perkins' use of "grammatical, rhetorical and logical analysis" which were also Ramist concepts and terms. Ong notes, however, that Ramus was similar in many ways to late Medieval exegesis:

⁸³ However, see the discussion on Ramism earlier in this article.

⁸⁴ 2 Tim 3:16-17, NIV.

⁸⁵ See Walter Lock, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1924), p. 110.

⁸⁶ The KJV was not written until after Perkins' death. It is cited to show the shift in language usage from that time until now. Perkins was a very good scholar who disliked displaying his knowledge, so he tended to hide his translations and quotations. A second reason was because his writings were often transcribed from sermons or lectures. For further evidence of this pattern see Breward, *Work*, p. 70.

⁸⁷ McKim ("Ramism," pp. 132-140) discussed the Art of Memory as a section showing Ramist tendencies. Yet, he also said that it did not fit into the Ramist structure of the book as a whole.

In some measure this is all recognized Renaissance schoolroom practice, undoubtedly effective in getting youngsters “into” a text. It connects, on the one hand with medieval rhetoric and sermon writing and with the medieval practice of summarizing a text before commenting on it, which in turn connects with the late Hellenistic practice of providing “arguments,” in the sense of briefs, even for fictional narration.

Conclusion

It appears that Perkins was similar to Ramus in his exegesis, but this similarity was one of similar philosophical and theological roots, not from Perkins borrowing from Ramus. Both men were Reformed Protestants, both were humanists, both read the Bible, and both were contemporaries.

For McKim these traces seem, in his opinion, enough evidence to show that Ramism “functioned powerfully and comprehensively in the theology of William Perkins.”⁸⁸

4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the life and contributions of William Perkins and Peter Ramus. The trail that Perry Miller and Donald McKim drew was examined to show the impact of Ramus, point by point.

Perkins did not say that Ramus was among the people who influenced his thought in the *Arte of Prophecyng*, a book that McKim says is heavily influenced by Ramus. Therefore, McKim has a difficult case to prove. The citation of the great Puritan scholar, Perry Miller is not a strong argument because Miller merely states that Ramus influenced Perkins, he does not prove it. In general, Perkins’ students do not seem to be strongly Ramist, although it appears that William Ames was. McKim’s point on the definition of theology is very weak, since both Perkins and Ramus depend on the Bible. A love for the Liberal Arts is not a convincing argument since many reformers were humanists. The plain style of preaching does not necessarily mean dependence on Ramism, for it was more likely driven by

⁸⁸ McKim, “Function,” p. 517.

the need to communicate to people. The style of application is not Ramist but “Paulist,” for it comes from 2 Timothy 3:16 and the style of Biblical interpretation is not distinctively Ramist, either.

Therefore, at present, there is no evidence for stating that Perkins was significantly influenced by Ramus. It is best to follow Ong, Howell and Breward who consider William Perkins as a “semi-Ramist,” since Ramism only affected the presentation of his material.