

'Precious in the Sight of the Lord...': the theme of

death in puritan pastoral theology

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It is one of the minor curiosities of church history that, while historians as well as the hagiographers of evangelical nonconformity readily admit that the seventeenth-century puritans were notable for the standards of their pastoral care, relatively little attention has been devoted to this aspect of the puritan movement in recent serious historical writing. Contemporary interest focuses more on the ecclesiological and politico-economic aspects of the puritan movement than on what might be broadly described as the spirituality of puritanism, and this has led to a failure to recognize the deep significance of the pastoral motif for an understanding of the whole puritan phenomenon. The consensus is that puritanism began as a movement concerned essentially with further changes in the order and structure of the church: a religious focus of a parallel power struggle between those elements of society which were represented in the House of Commons, and those represented in the Lords and the Court; only as this movement came to nothing with Whitgift's successful attempt to dismantle the Elizabethan presbyterian movement in the 1590s did the puritans take up with pastoral care as a new focus for their considerable energies for imposing a programme on the church.

The facts may, of course, be represented in this light. Certainly it was in the late 1580s that the stream of treatises on subjects within the field of pastoral theology began to leave the puritan presses in significant quantity. But it is an error to see the pastoral concerns of seventeenth-century puritans as the sublimation of frustrated ecclesiological hopes, because this is to fail to recognize the essential continuity of puritanism with the earlier Reformation interest in pastoral care. Indeed, the Reformation took its rise in concern over pastoral issues: it was the essential question of the right method of the cure of souls that was the first issue to be raised in Luther's Ninety-five Theses; and while recent study has emphasized the discontinuity between the Reformation answer to the questions posed by late mediaeval religiosity and the puritan tendency to revert to the pre-Reformation religious values,¹ it must not be allowed to hide the essential continuity of interest which made the question of pastoral

care, and the content of pastoral and moral theology, the proper objects of concern of both movements. The conformity of puritanism to this earlier Reformation concern with the cure of souls is clear from the importance within it of the prophesying movement of the 1570s. Puritan clergy sought to share with their non-puritan colleagues something of the benefits they had received from the Cambridge system of preparation for ministry, by transferring to the market town the university practice of gathering a group of divines to give a series of expositions on one given text. The process has been fully described by Patrick Collinson,² but its importance for the present purpose is its intention: it was aimed at improving the quality of the pastoral ministry in the parishes, and it was welcomed and supported by even non-puritan bishops on that basis. The truth is that concern with pastoral issues and pastoral theology was a deeper, not a lesser, pre-occupation of the puritan mind than ecclesiology, and one from which the ecclesiological, and ultimately the political aspirations arose.

The school of 'affectionate, practical English divines'³ that came to prominence with the ministry of William Perkins as fellow of Christ's College, and lecturer of St Andrew the Great, Cambridge in the 1590s was, therefore, an expression of the authentic puritan tradition. Indeed, Perkins and his disciples spoke for puritanism far more widely than had Wilcox or Cartwright, the earlier doyens of the presbyterian faction, for they included in their number puritans of every shade of opinion on ecclesiological matters: from committed conformists (sometimes called 'anglicans') like Samuel Hieron and Andrew Willet, to nonconformists of the stamp of William Ames and Thomas Hooker. What Perkins did in the 1590s was to give effective voice to concerns and objectives which had been the subject of meditation and discussion amongst divines for a generation already. Those who followed him further refined and polished this tradition of pastoral theology, producing in the process some of the finest literature on pastoral care and its expression the world has ever seen. They are, of course, works of their time and seldom read today because of it, but the ignorance of their very existence, let alone their contents, which is apparently so widespread among the evangelical heirs of their tradition, can only reflect upon our contemporary preoccupation with the techniques and minutiae of ministry, rather than with the understanding and application of what these writers knew as pastoral theology.

That concern with the theology of pastoring the flock is evident at the outset, through acquaintance with the puritan concept of the cure of souls. Samuel Hieron speaks of

all the duties of the ministers of God which may be referred to these general heads: *First to the preaching of the word... Secondly to the administration of the sacraments... Thirdly to private inspection by*

reproveing sinners, by admonishing, exhorting, by comforting the afflicted and those which are cast down, and all to this end, that the elect whome sinne hath loosened and disjoynted from *Christ* their head may be restored to their place againe, joyned both to *Christ* their head by the *Spirit*, and to one another by loue. . . .⁴

This may strike the modern reader as theological or, indeed, scholastic. It is both, but the reference to the elect must not be allowed to leave the impression that puritan pastoral theology was unduly dominated by theological system. Puritan pastoral care was not the application of a procrustean set of theological norms to the living varieties of Christian experience without regard to persons or circumstances. Indeed, in many ways the opposite was true. If puritan divines were systematizers, it was of religious experience, not theological exactitude, and puritan pastoral theology was an attempt to take seriously the variety of religious experience encountered by the pastor. It was more often the problems of religious experience than those of theological precision with which the puritan pastor began, and he sought to take those problems seriously and to invest them with full weight; though, because he did believe in the relevance of the 'body of divinity' to spiritual experience, he was seldom merely situational or pragmatic. Puritan pastoral theology was, in effect, an attempt to bring together that body of truths and that catalogue of experiences without doing violence to either, but it was more often than not the experience from which puritan pastoral thinking began. This is clear from the features of puritan pastoral literature itself: there is a relative absence of large-scale works on the pastoral office (only Richard Baxter produced a truly definitive systematized discussion of pastoral care⁵), but an enormous proliferation of books of casuistry, guides to godliness, and volumes addressed to particular spiritual conditions.

It is the fact that puritan pastoral theology sought to theologize spiritual experience in this way that saves it from consignment to the historical disposal unit as of mere curiosity or antiquarian interest. Spiritual experience, of course, appears in each age clothed with that age's cultural forms, and the religious experiences of seventeenth-century men and women do not always, at first sight, look very much like those of their twentieth-century counterparts. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental continuity in spiritual experience much more far-reaching than the discontinuities of human cultural change; and once the cultural and mental background of the seventeenth century is brought fully into play as the context for puritan pastoral theology, it is possible to perceive a good deal of relevance and pertinence in it for our own attempts at addressing the modern counterparts of seventeenth-century experiences. In particular this is true of the one spiritual and religious (and physical!) experience that confronts all men in every generation without regard to culture or mentality—the

experience of death—arguably the ultimate spiritual experience for all men, whether they have affirmed religious values or not during their lifetime. Death by its ubiquity forces itself on pastoral theology in every age, and it is perhaps not unjust to regard response to death as the acid test of any pastoral theology. Puritan pastoral theologians took the subject of death with due seriousness; and in an age when death seems, once again, to be emerging from the limbo to which it has been consigned for a number of decades, it may not be inappropriate to examine the very positive contributions that puritan thought can make to a contemporary approach to death and dying.

In a BBC radio broadcast some years ago, when the present recrudescence of interest in the subject of death was just beginning, it was noted that over 70 per cent of deaths take place in hospitals today. In the seventeenth century, it goes without saying, things were far otherwise. A tiny minority of deaths took place in hospitals, whereas the vast majority occurred in the home, usually as the culmination of relatively protracted and often distressingly painful illnesses, or suffering due to accidents. Medical science was hardly even in its infancy, and many people, with some reason, trusted more to well-tried traditional remedies than to the ministrations of physicians. Consequently, death was part of the natural rhythm of family life, and mortality was closer to everyone. Richard Baxter may have been a hypochondriac, but the authentic flavour of the proximity of death to seventeenth-century men and women comes through very clearly in his introduction to *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*:

Being in my quarters far from home, cast into extream languishing (by the sudden losse of about a gallon of blood) after many yeares foregoing weaknesse, and having no acquaintance about me, nor any Books but my Bible, and living in continuall expectation of death, I bent my thoughts on my everlasting rest...⁶

Much the same feeling can be detected in the following remark from one of the anonymous sermons published by Daniel Featley in 1660 under the title *Threnoikos, or The House of Mourning Furnished*:

And yet, what know we how soon, or how suddenly we may be overtaken? Some of us drop away daily, some young some old, some lie sicke longer, and how soon it will be our turn we cannot tell.⁷

It is still true today, of course. Everyone must die. Death has not become less common. But it is not felt like that.

It would be easy to imagine that this familiarity with death made seventeenth-century men more ready to contemplate their own end. No doubt the literature of the period does reflect a more prosaic and robust attitude to death than is characteristic of modern Christian thought. The readiness with which puritan preachers might allude to the corruptions of the physical body in funeral sermons at which

relatives of the deceased were present, should warn us against transferring our own delicate susceptibilities into another earthier, more realistic age. On the other hand, it does not necessarily follow that men were any more ready to consider death in personal terms just because it was happening all around them. One of the commonest complaints of the preachers was precisely that men did not consider their end or number their days, and so consequently did not get a heart of wisdom.

Evil men perswade themselves that they are in no danger of Hell or of the grave. Death will not come yet, thinketh the oldest man, and, when it comes I hope I shall do well enough, thinketh the most godless man. Thus men couzen themselves with their own fancies and death steals on them unawares, and becomes God's sergeant to arrest them and carry them away to eternal condemnation...⁸

Even in the church there are those

...whose hearts...are notwithstanding fraughted with malice...with worldliness, repining at the word...with sleepiness and security⁹

precisely because they have not considered their end. It is clear enough that puritan pastors and preachers faced very much the same reactions to the fact of death in their death-conscious society, as do their successors today in our death-unconscious one. Familiarity with death may have given them a greater freedom of expression, but they found men and women in the seventeenth century just as unready to take serious thought about death as they are in the twentieth.

And yet that is not the whole story, either then or now. In the radio programme referred to previously, a Hampstead rabbi discussed how frequently it is the mourners, the relatives, who form a conspiracy to prevent the pastor discussing death with the dying one until it is too late, and the ability to think clearly about what is happening has gone. And yet, when this does not happen, he testified to the relief and gratitude of the person spoken to, in almost every case. People do want to face up to death, if they are helped to do it; and they did in the puritan era too. Indeed, the interest of ordinary men and women in the subject of death is testified to by the popularity of a series of 'Art of Dying' books that first appeared in the fifteenth century, and of which the puritan treatise on death is a lineal descendant. The most formative of these in puritan times was probably William Perkins' *Salve for a Sick Man*, and, together with a selection of funeral sermons, some of which were published in Featley's collection without ascription to individual authors, it forms the basis of this study. The funeral sermon was a typical puritan genre. Not for them the five-minute exordium that sometimes characterizes modern funerals. The puritan funeral sermon was a full-blooded affair, sometimes running to forty or fifty pages of print, though others knew how to be shorter.

And there was, generally speaking, one aim: the improvement of the event of death to the benefit of the living. Even the frequent and sometimes stylized accounts of the life of the deceased have the same aim: to give an example of godliness to those who are left.

How did the puritan divine see death? Perhaps the best place to begin to answer that question is in Ecclesiastes 7:1, one of the most favourite of all puritan texts on the subject of death:

A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth; it is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting for this is the end of all men and the living will lay it to heart.

Or, as Perkins puts in the dedicatory epistle of the *Salve*,

The death of the righteous, that is of every beleeving and repentant sinner is a most excellent blessing of God, and brings with it many worthy benefits...¹⁰

Death, then, is a blessing. This is the uncompromising stand Perkins takes at the outset, and maintains throughout. Nevertheless, when he comes to define death, another side to the picture emerges:

Death is the deprivation of life as a punishment ordained of God and imposed on man for his sinne. . . . the ordainer of this punishment is God in the estate of mans innocencie. . . . the executioner is hee that doth impose and inflict the same on man. . . . God himselfe. . . . the procurer of death is man, not God, in that man by his sinnes and disobedience did pull upon himselfe this punishment.¹¹

Again this is quite uncompromising. Perkins' definition of death is explicitly theological. No attempt is made to escape the ethical implications of the event, and the sovereignty of God is admitted in it from the outset. God both ordains (that is the general decree for sin) and executes (that is the application of the general decree in each particular instance). Modern evangelicals would no doubt go all the way with Perkins when he ascribes death to sin in general terms: i.e., that all death results from sin being present in the world, and therefore that death is imposed on man in general for his sins; but Perkins is even more explicit. It is clear enough from the way he handles the sickness of which death is the conclusion, that he regards each man's death in particular as a particular judgement upon his own sins.

...he shall find by Gods word that sicknesse cometh ordinarily and usually of sinne. . . . It is true indeed there be other causes of the wants of the bodie, and of sicknesse, beside sinne. . . . Yet we for our parts, who are to go by the revealed will of God must make this use of our sicknesse, that it is sent unto us for our sins.¹²

Logically, of course, this cannot be faulted. But the question

inevitably arises of what effect it would have pastorally. To the sick man this kind of statement sounds too explicit. He is not contemplating death in the abstract or general; not even in the case of a near and dear one. He is facing death for himself, and against that fact all other deaths will likely fade into insignificance. What he will notice about the living around him is that they are not dying, not that they must eventually die too, and he will conclude, perhaps, that his wickedness is greater, or less forgiveable than theirs, or else he would not be dying either. It is to just such circumstances that Christ's words about those who died when the tower in Siloam fell are addressed, and interestingly one of the preachers of the *House of Mourning*, in a sermon which follows the outline of Perkins' *Salve* so closely as to be clearly dependent on it, introduces them at this point.¹³

What brings together the two views of death outlined above is the death of Christ:

Death by itself considered is indeed the wages of sinne . . . yea the very suburbes and gates of Hell: yet by the vertue of the death of Christ it ceaseth to be a plague and punishment, and of a curse is made a blessing and is become unto us . . . a little wicket or doore whereby we passe out of this world and enter into heaven.¹⁴

In this connection the puritan divine commonly discriminated between the two kinds of death. Perkins, for example, introduces what is for him the dominant motif in interpreting death, the idea of separation:

Bodily death is nothing else but the separation of the soule from the bodie. . . . spiritual death is the separation of the whole man both in bodie and soule from the gracious fellowship of God, of these twaine, the first is but an entrance to death and the seconde is the accomplishment of it.¹⁵

The effect of the death of Christ is to remove from the believing soul the threat of the second death, so leaving death for the Christian to be regarded simply in terms of the separation of body and soul for a period. Besides this, the idea of separation is capable of a whole series of further applications. Most commonly, the puritan preachers in the *House of Mourning* apply it to the separation of a man from his estate or goods. Less attention is paid to what the modern reader might have thought to be the more important theme of separation from family and friends, though this does appear. The reason for this is the slightly different motivation of the puritan pastor in the face of death. Whereas today it is the thought of comfort for the bereaved that is often uppermost in the mind, the puritans were quite clear that death presented them with a great opportunity for challenging their hearers to greater devotion to Christ. Hence the emphasis on the judgemental aspect of death, and hence, too, the repeated emphasis

that death is to be laid to heart by the living:

The main business is now to be done, while a man and his wealth are together...to use it to Gods glory, otherwise it will be a woful and heavy parting when death shall come to make a separation.... It is necessary, therefore (I say) that men take to heart the death of those that die before them.¹⁶

The overall effect of this view of death is to approach it with an attitude that is highly positive. It is precisely because death is in fact a separation, that the puritans regarded it as a blessing. Indeed, death is to be preferred to life; God, argues Simeon Ashe, has many intentions in the death of his people:

... sometimes that they may be secured from common calamities coming upon the world... that they may rest *from their labours*, both of service and suffering, when their task and exercise is over... and the Lord hath sufficiently proved and purged them by variety of providences.¹⁷

Or, as one of the preachers of the *House of Mourning* puts it,

The godly have many advantages by death; (1) Rest from their labours. (2) A crown when they have finisht the race. (3) Freedom from danger of sinning any more. (4) Death frees from a possibility of further dying. (5) They goe presently to God... We wrong death when we call it horrid... there is often more pain in a toothake than in dying.¹⁸

And perhaps the greatest benefit of all is noticed by Perkins:

Though there be no part of mans life voide of just occasions wherebye we may put faith in practice, yet the speciall time of all is in the pang of death, when friends and riches and pleasures, and the outward senses & temporall life, and all earthly helps forsake us. For then true faith maketh us to goe wholly out of ourselves, and to despare of comfort and salvation in respect of anie earthly thing, and with all the power and strength of the heart to rest on the pure mercie of God.¹⁹

What is at work here, of course, is that thoroughgoing puritan tendency to reverse the values of the natural man by looking at the circumstances of life (and death) with the eye of faith, and seeing in them the sentences of the book of providence, revealing God's specific interest and care as well as his sovereign direction. If death is the greatest trial, it is also the greatest opportunity; and the man of faith will greet it as such, improving even the moment of dissolution, of Satan's temporary triumph, to the ultimate good of his soul.

To draw from all this the inference, however, that the puritans were one-sidedly positive in their attitude to death would be quite wrong. Death *is* a separation—of body and soul—and as such is a dislocation of the created order. Moreover, since it is related to sin, it is quite properly to be feared. Death-wishes were not part of puritan spirituality.

As we must think of life as being content to die, so we must think of death as being content to live: And they are as well to be liked of that doe measurably feare death as they who joy much at it, because...they tremble at Gods judgements.²⁰

... such as truly beleeeve themselves to be children of God are not to feare death overmuch. I say overmuch, because they must partly feare it and partly not. Feare it they must...because death is the destruction of human nature in a mans owne selfe and others, and in this respect Christ feared it without sinne...²¹

There is a real balance and proportion about this last statement. A certain fear is inseparable from death, and the man who does not feel it is not simply insensitive. He is out of tune with the mind and purpose of God who, in making death originally a sanction for sin, meant it to be feared, and who, in our sinful world, wills not the death of the wicked. Death is an offence to God too, which is why he will have none of it in his new creation. Not to fear death at all, then, argues as reprehensible an attitude as to fear it too much. What the Christian is to show is not fearlessness but courage; not carelessness, but willingness:

How rare is it to meet with a Christian, though of strongest parts and longest profession, that can die with unfeigned willingness... Indeed, we sometimes set a good face on it, and pretend a willingness when we see there is no remedy... But if God had enacted such a law for the continuance of our lives on earth as is enacted for the continuance of the Parliament, that we should not be dissolved till our own pleasure... I fear heaven might be empty for the most of us...²²

The same balance and wisdom is displayed in the ways in which puritan pastors handle some of the misconceptions about death current in their own day. It was accepted that the important thing about death was to die well, but that left unanswered the question of what dying well entailed. In an ignorant and still superstitious age, it was commonly accepted that dying well meant dying peacefully; that to die in anguish and pain was a mark of the sovereign displeasure of God, and that there could be no question of the fate of the man who died raving or cursing. In the same way, if a man died despairing of his salvation, many held it to be a sign of ultimate reprobation. The godly puritan, on the other hand, saw with a clearer, more finely balanced vision:

It is true that not only wicked and loose persons despair in death, but also repentant sinners... I doubt not... that the child of God most deare unto him may, through the gulfe of desparation attaine to everlasting happinesse... the childe of God may pass to heaven by the very gulfes of hell. The love of God is like a sea into which, when a man is cast he neither feesle bottom nor sees bank. I conclude therefore that despair, whether it arise of weaknesse of nature or conscience of sin, cannot

prejudice the salvation of them that are effectually called. As for... ravings and blasphemings, they are the effects of melancholy, and of frenzies which often happen at the end of burning feavers... We must judge a man not by his death but by his life.²³

The same may be said also of various odd medical symptoms manifested in death, like the blackening of the skin, which is due to bruising, not to the disfavour of God, as the credulous believe.

On the other hand, though a hard death is no sign of God's judgement, it should not surprise us to find that an easy one is a mark of God's favour. Moreover, though conclusions drawn from the despair of some may be erroneous, there is much to be learned from the details of the peaceable end of others. Many of the funeral sermons conclude with detailed descriptions of the last end of the dead person, with accounts of their words and experiences, their godly concerns and prayers, their patience under various afflictions and so on. Such deaths are examples to the living, marks of God's favour not only to the dying but to the living as well, to be laid to heart, and improved as special providences. This, indeed, is the main aim and purpose of the sermons—to get the living to lay to heart the deaths of the dying. There is, of course, a sinful laying to heart of death:

That is, when men with too much fondnesse and with too great excesse and distemper of affection looke upon their dead friends, as if God could never repair the losse... what is all this but to look on men as Gods rather than men....²⁴

Instead, death is to be laid to heart so as to improve the living:

Let us make the death of our friends easie by making good use of them while they live....

Have you considered well of death when you can only discourse that such a one that was profitable in his instruction is dead; one by whom we have good in conversing with... one that was young? What is all this? This is but idle and empty discourse... dost thou gather from thence the certainty of thine own death... what death will do to thee when it cometh?²⁵

This leads us, in conclusion, to the main purpose of the funeral discourses, that men may die well by making the proper preparations for death:

That is the only way to a happy death... the leading of a fruitful and profitable life....²⁶

or, as Perkins put it more fully,

That a man may die well, Gods word requires two things: a preparation before death, and a right disposition in death.²⁷

There is a twofold preparation for death. First, men must make a

general preparation: that is, a preparation carried on throughout life. Some men, of course, will argue that it will be enough to begin their preparations when they find themselves at death's door. Such are greatly deceived, for while true repentance can never be undertaken too late, late repentance is seldom true.

The time then is most unfitte to begin a preparation, because all the senses and powers of the bodie are occupied about the paines and trouble of the disease...therefore ther must some preparation goe before in the time of health, when the whole man with all the powers of bodie and soule are at liberty.²⁸

There is a sense in which men may be said to begin to die well, long before their final illness. Perkins quite logically draws attention to the continuity of death with the earlier afflictions of life. This is true when death is seen in itself as a physical affliction which is greater in degree but not of a different order to sicknesses and calamities, and also when both are seen theologically as providential activities of God:

When men doe make the right use of their afflictions, whether they be in bodie or mind or bothe, and doe with al their might endeavour to beare them patiently, humbling themselves as under the correction of God, then they begin to die well... We must first of all acquaint ourselves with these little deaths before we can be wel able to beare the great death of al.²⁹

General preparation for death requires five duties. First there must be, throughout life, a meditation on death. Its cause (sin) and remedy (the death of Christ) must be considered, along with its presence in life at all points. This of course requires self-discipline, for there is a natural tendency in all men, which must be overcome, to discount death. But when men learn to number their days, then they will be humbled, contented with their lot, and pricked on to further repentance. Secondly, there is the weakening of the power of death over its subjects. Death's sting is in sin, and therefore men must weaken sin by constant humbling of themselves for it. Righteous death belongs to godly life, for life and death are of one piece. Thirdly, general preparation will involve entering upon the first degree of eternal life. Eternal life begins not after death, but here and now; therefore men must begin it before they die, or they will never begin it at all. Fourthly, there must be exercise in the practice of dying. Perkins compares the Christian to the athlete who trains for the race; training for death is by the mortification of sin and the bearing of 'smaller crosses' which, as has been shown, prepare us for the greater death. Lastly, men must do whatever good comes to hand: whether to the church, the commonwealth, or to individuals.

Particular preparation for death begins when a man becomes sick.

Here there are three duties. The sick man must recognize the connection between sin and sickness which has already been noticed, and this must drive him to fresh repentance and confession, especially for any sins which may particularly afflict his conscience. Perkins stresses the value here of confession to a minister or Christian friend, and points to the importance of visiting the sick for this purpose. Indeed, he has a forthright attitude towards the relative value of physicians and pastors:

The sicke partie must send for the elders to instruct him and pray for him. And that is in the verie first place of all, before anye other helpe be sought for. Where the divine ends, ther the physitian must beginne, and it is a verie preposterous course that the divine should there begin where the physitian makes an end. For til helpe be had for the soule, and sinne, which is the roote of the sicknesse be cured, physicke for the bodie is nothing. Wherefore it is a thing much to be disliked that in al places almost the physitian is first sent for, and the minister comes when a man is half dead...³⁰

Perkins, of course, did not have the wonders of modern medical science at his disposal. Neither did he have the omnicompetent assumptions of contemporary society about medical practitioners. But perhaps medical opinion about the value of pastoral care has not changed very much since the seventeenth century.

The second duty of particular preparation is towards oneself. The dying man must arm himself against the immoderate fear of death by looking beyond it and seeing it 'in the glasse of the gospel, not that of the law'. He must also be careful (and here we encounter again the proportion of Perkins' mind) to use all lawful means to prolong life:

The meanes is good and wholesome physicke, which, though it be despised of many as a thing unprofitable and needless, yet it must be esteemed as an ordinance and blessing of God.³¹

On the other hand, the wise man will beware of ignorant and malicious physicians, as of those who let blood and use spells and charms!

Finally, the sick man has a duty towards others, especially his dependants. He must take care to make a will while of sound mind, and especially to make proper provision for his relicts to be given continued instruction in the truths of the Christian gospel.

The second part of dying well is the disposition of the dying man in the hour of death. He must die in and by faith, which is to be expressed, and specially in prayer. Of course, the condition of the sick man may make vocal prayer impossible. Nevertheless,

The very sighes and sobbes and grones of a repentant and beleeving heart are prayers before God, even as effectual as if they were uttered by the best voice in the world.³²

Then death must take place in obedience, which is to be ready and willing to die: not going to God like a slave to his master, but as a child to his father. So, the last act of the Christian man must be to render up his soul into the hands of God, following the example of Christ.

Obviously Perkins' view of the duties and opportunities of death belongs to his own time. It is not intended to suggest that the puritan attitude to death—or anything else—is somehow definitive. But it is clearly coherent, theological rather than pragmatic, and consistent. It also displays a remarkable balance and proportion. For these very reasons it challenges—if no more than that—contemporary attitudes. Of course, death today is complicated by the canons of the welfare society. When deaths take place almost entirely in hospitals, often under a conspiracy of secrecy or even deceit towards the dying, much of what Perkins has to say about duties in the hour of death cannot be practised. But behind Perkins' and his fellow-puritans' approach lie solid pastoral principles, not least of which is the realism with which the fact of death is faced, accepted, and above all related to the providential purposes and government of God in the life of individuals. Perhaps it will not be inappropriate to let our subjects have the last word. Here is Simeon Ashe, winding up his sermon *Living Loves betwixt Christ and Dying Christians*:

Gods people should . . . hold up with hope under all their sufferings here, because their death, which is certain, will put an end unto all. Therefore cheer up, ye saints of God, under all your grievances, upon the thought of death.³³

And here, once more is William Perkins:

Men should everie day prepare themselves to death . . .³⁴

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NOTES

- 1 S. E. Ozement, *The Reformation in the Cities* (Yale University Press, New Haven 1975) for example.
- 2 P. Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (Jonathan Cape, London 1967) pp.168-76.
- 3 R. Baxter, 'The Christian Directory' (1673), H. Rogers, ed., *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter*, 1838, I, p.732.
- 4 S. Hieron, *Aarons Bells a-Sounding*, 1623, p.8.
- 5 R. Baxter, *Gildas Salvianus, or, The Reformed Pastor*, 1656.
- 6 id., *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 1656, sig.A2 verso.
- 7 D. Featley et al, *The House of Mourning Furnished*, 1660, p.391.
- 8 *ibid.*, loc.cit.

- 9 *ibid.*, loc.cit.
- 10 W. Perkins, 'A Salve for a Sicke Man, or a Treatise of...the Right Way to Die Well', J. Legatt, ed., *The Workes of that Famous and Worthie Diuine in the Vniuersity of Cambridge, M. W. Perkins*, Cambridge, 1608, I, p.484.
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- 13 Featley, *op.cit.*, p.31.
- 14 Perkins, *op.cit.*, p.487.
- 15 *ibid.*, p.486.
- 16 Featley, *op.cit.*, p.27.
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- 19 Perkins, *op.cit.*, pp.504-5.
- 20 R. Greenham, 'Graue Counsels and Godly Obseruations', H. Holland, ed., *The Works of the Reverend and Faithfull servant of Iesus Christ, M. Richard Greenham*, 1603, p.9.
- 21 Perkins, *op.cit.*, p.508.
- 22 Baxter, *Saints' Rest*, iv, p.23. The reference is to the Long Parliament, still in session when the first edition of the work was published in 1651.
- 23 Perkins, *op.cit.*, p.488.
- 24 Featley, *op.cit.*, p.31.
- 25 *ibid.*, pp.25,30.
- 26 *ibid.*, p.31.
- 27 Perkins, *op.cit.*, p.491.
- 28 *ibid.*, p.492.
- 29 *ibid.*, p.495.
- 30 *ibid.*, p.498.
- 31 *ibid.*, p.501.
- 32 *ibid.*, p.505.
- 33 Ashe, *op.cit.*, p.42.
- 34 Perkins, *op.cit.*, p.492.