

# “Live a Holy Life in Order to Die Well”: On the Influence of William Perkins’s *Salve for a Sicke Man* on Gisbertus Voetius’s View of Dying Well

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Dying is an intriguing theme because no one knows in advance what it is like to die, and every human being tries to imagine what it will be like to die. Throughout the centuries, people have reflected on dying and death. In the 1970s, several historians conducted research into how dying has been dealt with throughout the centuries. The most famous researcher in this field is the French historian Philippe Ariès (1914–1984). Ariès researched attitudes toward life and death from classical antiquity up to the time he published his research in the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Remarkably, in his research on the history of mentality, Ariès pays little attention to how death was handled in seventeenth-century European Pietism, including German Pietism and English Puritanism.<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, church historians have devoted considerable attention to the views on dying held by important representatives of European pietistic movements in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These views have been compared and research has been conducted into developments and mutual influences. However, such research has, so far, been largely limited to identifying mutual influences within a single country.<sup>3</sup> In order to

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1. Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Baltimore, 1975); Ph. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes Toward Death Over the Last One Thousand Years*, trans. Helen Weaver (Alfred A. Knopf, 1981).

2. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 234.

3. In the Dutch-speaking area, the earliest research into sixteenth and seventeenth-century writings about dying was conducted by K. Exalto in 1975. K. Exalto, *De dood ontmaskerd, de voorbereiding op de dood in de late middeleeuwen, in de reformatie en in de gereformeerde theologie van de 17e en 18e eeuw* (Ton Bolland 1979). Ten to fifteen years ago,

determine the extent to which international influences play a role in views on death, this article examines the extent to which the views of Dutch pastor and professor Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676) on death were influenced by the views of English Puritan pastor William Perkins (1558–1602). Voetius was evidently influenced by Perkins, as he was familiar with Perkins's writings on death and quoted from them in his own work.

Both ministers paid attention to the theme of death and dying in their writings. Voetius spent a chapter on it in a compendium he wrote on asceticism. And for his part Perkins dedicated a separate treatise on dealing with death and preparing for dying. Prior to a brief summary and comparison of both writings, a brief outline is given of the historical context in which both ministers wrote about dying and preparing for death.

## Developments in Dealing with Death and Dying

### *Dealing with Death from Ancient Times to the Modern Era*

Changes in attitudes towards dying and dealing with death occur very slowly, Ariès observes. He divides attitudes towards death into four periods. This is a very broad classification, making it impossible to draw clear boundaries. The first period runs from classical antiquity to the twelfth century. Ariès refers to this period as the period of “the tamed death.”<sup>4</sup> The second period, from the twelfth to the beginning of the eighteenth century, is referred to by Ariès as the period of “the death of the self.” The third period, described by Ariès as the period of “the death of the other,” runs

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this research was taken up again by A. Baars, J. Hoek, H.J. Selderhuis, and others. A. Baars, “Pastoraat aan stervenden, lessen voor levenden. De visie van de vroege Nadere Reformatie op sterven en stervensbegeleiding,” in *DNR* 36 (2012); J. Hoek, “‘Euthanasia’ in the Seventeenth Century: *Ars moriendi* in Dutch Reformed Perspective,” in *Strangers and Pilgrims on Earth: Essays in Honour of Abraham van de Beek*, Studies in Reformed Theology 22, ed. E. van der Borght and P. van de Geest (Brill, 2011); H. J. Selderhuis, “*Ars moriendi* in Early Modern Calvinism,” in T. Rasmussen and J. Øygarden Flåtten, *Preparing for Death, Remembering the Dead* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 109–22. In 2024, I obtained my PhD with a thesis on the views of several Reformed ministers from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on dying. G. M. Bosker, *Memento mori. Een onderzoek naar de visie van enkele Nederlandse gereformeerde predikanten in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw op het sterven* (Barneveld, 2024). For a more extensive overview of church historical research on the theme of dying, see this dissertation. Bosker, *Memento mori*, cf. 14–16.

4. Cf. Ariès, *Western Attitudes*, 2–14; Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 28–32; 45.

from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> In the twentieth century, the fourth period, death has become taboo, according to Ariès.<sup>6</sup>

During the second period, death became increasingly individualized as a result of growing urbanization. The individualization of dying is evident from the fact that there is increasing talk of an individual judgement immediately after death, which is increasingly linked to one's own biography. The final decision about the eternal destination of the dying person is made at the moment he breathes his last breath. The familiarity with death from the first period gives way to fear and uncertainty. In the late Middle Ages, the deathbed increasingly became a place where angels and demons fight for the soul of the dying person. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the individualization of death continued, and death remained problematic; preparation for death shifted from the deathbed to the whole of life.<sup>7</sup>

### *The Origins of the Ars Moriendi*

It was mainly in this period, when dying was problematic and death evoked fear, that a special genre of writings emerged to prepare people for death. This genre is called the *ars moriendi*. During this period, from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century, Europe was ravaged by devastating plagues. During these centuries, the plague took many lives. While the mortality rate in the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands was around 3.5 percent in years without plague outbreaks, it could reach 15 percent in years with severe outbreaks.<sup>8</sup> These devastating epidemics meant that death was always close by during this period. People were constantly confronted with death in the streets, when they saw houses standing empty because the residents had succumbed to the plague, and when they saw the many funeral processions passing through the town. In addition, mass graves could be seen in the cemeteries where those who had died of the plague were buried.

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5. Cf. Ariès, *Western Attitudes*, 59–73; Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 440–42; 484; 490–96; 510–12.

6. Cf. Ariès, *Western Attitudes*, 85–90; Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 600–612; 617–30.

7. Ariès, *Western Attitudes*, 30–39; 45–46; Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 318–37; 345–51; 436–37.

8. Van der Woude, “Demografische ontwikkelingen van de Noordelijke Nederlanden, 1500–1800,” in D. P. Blok et al., *Nieuwe Algemene geschiedenis der Nederlanden V* (Fibula/van Dishoeck, 1977–1983), 139–45.

Many people at that time had lost a loved one, a family member, or a friend to the plague.<sup>9</sup>

Because many people died as a result of the plague and other infectious diseases during these centuries, there were not always enough clergy to accompany the dying. Therefore, the help of monks and lay people was sometimes needed. However, these monks and lay people often had little or no experience with end-of-life care. The first writings on dying from the late Middle Ages were therefore intended to provide clergy and laypeople with some guidance on how to accompany the dying. Good end-of-life care was considered absolutely essential because the end-of-life counselor had to accompany the dying person at the most decisive moment, the transition from temporary life to eternal destiny. The first writings on dying contained a brief explanation of the art of dying, questions for the dying person, prayers, exhortations, some practical advice for those accompanying the dying and, in some cases, a few examples of a blessed death. These writings reveal an intense pastoral concern for people in the last hours of their lives and a deep conviction that the decisive moment of death comes once for every human being.

The most well-known basic forms of the *ars moriendi* are the *Admonitio Anselmi*, attributed to Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), the third part of the *Opus Tripartitum de praeceptis decalogi, de confessione et de arte moriendi* by Jean Gerson (1366–1429), the treatise *Speculum artis bene moriendi* by Nikolaus von Dinkelsbühl (ca. 1360–1433), and a deathbed locution that is not a written text, but eleven woodcuts. The author of this pictorial *ars moriendi* is unknown. Each of the eleven woodcuts depicts a dying person on their deathbed. Five of the eleven images show the dying person being attacked by devils who want to incite them to doubt, despair, impatience, overconfidence, and greed. Five other images show angels supporting and helping the dying person with five corresponding consolations. Faced with the temptations of the devils, the dying person is encouraged by the angels to have faith, hope, patience, humility, and to offer a renunciation of the world. The eleventh and final image shows the good death of the dying person, who has overcome all temptations. The soul of the dying person, depicted as a small human figure, is led to heaven by the angels to enjoy eternal beatitude. These images of dying are intended to encourage

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9. L. Noordegraaf and G. Valk, *De gave Gods. De pest in Holland vanaf de late Middeleeuwen* (Bert Bakker 1996), 132.

the dying in the final struggles that may precede death and to call upon them to trust in the saving power of God’s grace.<sup>10</sup>

*Sixteenth-Century Reactions to the Late Medieval Ars Moriendi*

The fundamental principle of the late medieval *ars moriendi* is that a person’s eternal destiny is only decided at the moment of death. Until then, all he can do is constantly reflect on his life, examine his conscience, confess his sins, pray, receive the sacraments, imitate Jesus’s suffering, and hope that God will be merciful to him. However, it remains a matter of hope. Receiving complete certainty about a favorable outcome of the struggle with death is impossible. It was precisely this desire for certainty that prompted Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (ca. 1469–1536) and Martin Luther (1483–1549) to approach preparation for death from a different perspective.

Erasmus applied Plato’s view that philosophy is a continuous reflection on death to Christian preparation for dying. He characterized life on earth as continuous preparation for the afterlife. During this lifelong preparation for death and the constant reflection on death and the afterlife, Christians learn to let go of earthly things more and more. According to Erasmus, personal faith that comes from constant reflection on Jesus’s death and a pious way of life, through which Christians overcome death, is crucial for dying well. The dying person who overcomes this struggle through Jesus’s power has the prospect of eternal happiness.<sup>11</sup> In Erasmus’ view, personal faith and a pious way of life are therefore the most important sources of comfort in death. The sacraments play hardly any significant role in this view. With this view of dying, Erasmus aligns with the humanistic spirituality of, among others, the well-known Dutch representative of the *Devotio Moderna*, Thomas à Kempis. According to à Kempis, we must live with death in mind and prepare ourselves for dying by despising the world and leading a righteous life.<sup>12</sup>

In his search for certainty in dying, it was the Wittenberg reformer Martin Luther who completely broke with the late medieval *ars moriendi*.

10. R. Rudolf, *Ars moriendi, von der Kunst des heilsamen Lebens und Sterbens* (Graz, 1957), 69–78.

11. L. Schottroff, *Die Bereitung zum Sterben, Studien zu den frühen reformatorischen Sterbebücher* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2012), 83–88.

12. T. H. à Kempis, “De imitatione Christi,” in T. H. à Kempis, *Opera omnia*, vol. 2, ed. J. Pohl (Herder, 1902), I.23.1–3; Cf. Breure, *Doodsbeleving en levenshouding, Een historisch-psychologische studie betreffende de Moderne Devotie in het IJsselgebied van de 14e en 15e eeuw* (Verloren, 1987), 42–43, 57.

Luther emphasized the fulfilled work of Jesus Christ *extra nos* and *pro nobis*. Death is terrible in itself. Human life is a constant struggle against death, which presents itself together with sin and hell. However, this struggle is not in vain, because victory is anchored in Jesus Christ. Jesus's victory gives man, especially on his deathbed, certainty and joy. When people face death in Christ, death is defeated. Luther was therefore able to turn the medieval adage "in the midst of life is death" on its head and say, "in the midst of death is Life."<sup>13</sup> The strong emphasis on the *extra nos* of salvation in Jesus Christ was emphasized by the Geneva Reformer John Calvin (1509–1564). In addition, Calvin emphasized in his theology of the *unio mystica cum Christo* the work of God *in nobis*. According to Calvin, death encompasses all the misery that results from the Fall. When a person is united with Christ through the Holy Spirit, he or she participates in the new creation, God's image is restored in him or her, and he or she receives eternal life. Christians, who live in communion with Christ, look forward to perfect life with Him and therefore have no reason to fear death.<sup>14</sup>

The writings belonging to the genre of *ars moriendi* and the responses to them described above laid an important foundation for various writings on dying that were written in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, including those by William Perkins and Gisbertus Voetius. There will now follow a brief summary of the chapter that Voetius wrote on the art of dying well. This is succeeded by an explanation of Perkins's thoughts on dying and preparing for death. Their views on dying are then compared against the background of the context described above.

## Voetius and the Theme of Dying

### *Theology Is Always Focused on Church Practice*

Gisbertus Voetius studied theology at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, where he not only received a solid scholastic education but also became acquainted with medieval devotional literature and Puritan writings from England. After finishing his studies, Voetius became a minister of the Reformed Church in Vlijmen in 1611. It was mainly during his time as a minister in Vlijmen that Voetius immersed himself in the writings

13. M. Luther, *Eyn Sermon von der Bereytung zum Sterben. Doctoris Martini Lutheri* (Nürnberg, 1519); Cf. Exalto, *De dood ontmaskerd*, 45–49; Schottrof, *Bereitung zum Sterben*, 44–46.

14. As a sinner, a person fears death. But as one justified in Christ, he has nothing to fear and receives death with joy. H. J. Selderhuis expresses this as follows: *simul terror et consolatio*. Selderhuis, "Preparing for Death, Remembering the Dead," 121–22.

of William Perkins. In 1617, Voetius became a minister in Heusden, the town where he was born in 1589. Voetius served the Reformed Church of Heusden until he was appointed professor at the newly founded, illustrious school of Utrecht in 1634. In 1636, the school of Utrecht was promoted to university status. Voetius remained a professor until his death in 1676. In addition to his position as professor, Voetius also served as minister of the city church of Utrecht from 1637 to 1672.<sup>15</sup>

The fact that Voetius was active not only in the academy but also in church life clearly influenced his academic work. Voetius believed that theology should always serve the church practically. That is why he placed strong emphasis on what he called *theologia practica*. He divided this practice-oriented theology into three areas: ethics or decalogistics, which mainly concerned the interpretation and application of the Ten Commandments to daily life; *politica ecclesiastica*, which mainly concerned matters of ecclesiastical law; and asceticism. The latter area concerns the practice of piety, to which Voetius, along with other ministers considered part of the Dutch movement of the Further Reformation, attached great importance.<sup>16</sup>

### *Voetius and Ascetism*

In the field of asceticism, Voetius published his well-known work *Ta askētika, sive Exercitia pietatis in usum iuventutis academicae nunc edita* in 1664.<sup>17</sup> In this publication, Voetius discusses various topics related to the practice of piety, such as holy living, prayer, meditation, faith, conversion, the sacraments, dealing with temptations, Sabbath observance, self-examination, and the like. Dying well also has a place in this publication because, according to Voetius, there can be no dying well without living well.

Voetius published his *Exercitia Pietatis* in Latin. The purpose of this publication was to convey the Puritan ideal of sanctification to ministers and theology students. In terms of subject matter, the *Exercitia Pietatis* is not original, but it is original in its scholastic treatment of ascetic topics.

15. A. C. Duker, *Gisbertus Voetius I* (Groen, 1989), 7, 13, 75–86, 105, 137–55, 186–215; W. van 't Spijker, “Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676),” in *De Nadere Reformatie: een beschrijving van haar voornaamste vertegenwoordigers*, ed. T. Brienens (Boekencentrum, 1986), 49–51.

16. C. A. de Niet, “Inleiding. Aspecten van Voetius' praktische vroomheidsleer,” in G. Voetius, *De praktijk der godzaligheid. Ingeleid, vertaald en toegelicht door dr. C. A. de Niet* (De Banier, 1996), xxiv–xxxii.

17. G. Voetius, *Ta askētika, sive Exercitia pietatis in usum iuventutis academicae nunc edita. Addita est Oratio de Pietate cum scientia coniugenda* (Gorinchem, 1664).

Voetius draws on various sources for this scholastic treatment of piety. Firstly, he used sources from classical antiquity, including the works of Aristotle, Seneca, and Epictetus, as examples. Secondly, he used writings by the Church Fathers, such as Augustine, Ambrose, Cyprian, Jerome, Tertullian, and Chrysostom. Thirdly, he used writings by the Reformers. Fourthly, Voetius draws on medieval Roman Catholic sources. These include writings by Thomas Aquinas, Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas à Kempis, Jean Gerson, and others. Fifthly, he consults writings by contemporaries such as Perkins, Amesius, Bayly, Goodwin, and many others. It is remarkable that Voetius drew abundantly from pre-Reformation Roman Catholic sources and little from the writings of well-known Reformers such as Luther, Calvin, and Melancthon.<sup>18</sup>

At the beginning of his *Exercitia Pietatis*, Voetius himself provides an overview of the main structure. This shows that Voetius uses a dichotomous structure. The first chapter focuses on topics of piety that are strongly internal and individual. In later chapters, the emphasis shifts more strongly to communal and external subjects.<sup>19</sup> Voetius classifies his treatment of the good death among the general individual exercises. This fits in with the trend towards increasing individualization that various historians, including Philippe Ariès, observe from the eleventh century onwards. Since the purpose of the *Exercitia Pietatis* is to convey the Puritan ideal of sanctification to ministers and theologians, Voetius will have included this chapter in his *Exercitia Pietatis* to equip ministers and theologians to properly guide the dying and to impress upon parishioners that sanctification of life is indispensable for a good death.

### *Dying Well and Living Well*

Voetius begins his chapter on dying well by citing various writings on dying published over the centuries. These writings can be divided into three categories. First, there are writings on the art of dying from his own time. These include writings by William Perkins, Johannes Hoornbeek, and Charles Drelincourt. Second, there are writings on dying by pre-Reformation Roman Catholic authors, such as Erasmus of Rotterdam,

18. While Voetius refers forty times to the work of Thomas Aquinas, thirty times to the work of Bernard of Clairvaux and Bonaventure, and twenty-one times to the writings of Erasmus, he refers only eight times to the work of Luther and Calvin. C. A. de Niet, *Inleiding*, lvix–lxiii.

19. Voetius, *Ta askêtika*, 18–19; Cf. De Niet, *Inleiding*, 29–30.

Tauler, and Bellarminus. Third, there are writings on dying by early Christian authors such as Ambrose and Cyprian.<sup>20</sup>

After a brief introduction based on the words of Ecclesiastes 9:2, Voetius addresses twelve questions about dying that are necessary for a proper understanding of the subject. A number of central ideas emerge from his discussion of these questions. First, dying is not part of human nature, but is an inescapable punishment for sin. Second, the state of man after death is irrevocable. This makes it necessary for every person to prepare for death. Third, Voetius explicitly connects a holy life to a holy death. It is not the words and actions during a person’s last hours before death that decide his eternal destiny, but his Christian confession and pious way of life.<sup>21</sup>

The actual treatment of dying can be divided into two parts, namely preparation for dying and dealing with dying itself. Preparation for dying can, in turn, be divided into two parts, namely general preparation throughout life and special personal preparation prior to the dying phase.

### *General Preparation for Death*

Preparation for death can be divided into two parts: general preparation throughout life and special personal preparation prior to the dying phase. The most important element of general preparation throughout life is the *meditatio mortis*. In general preparation throughout life, it is important that the believer regularly reflects on death, the causes of death, the necessity of dying, the possible ways of dying, the uncertainty of the moment of death, the certainty that we will all die, the means to overcome the fear of death, and descriptions of deathbeds (*exempla*).<sup>22</sup> Voetius does not provide an exegetical foundation for *meditatio mortis*. In addition to contemplating death, Voetius believes it is necessary to take concrete measures regarding earthly matters. The reason that such earthly matters must be settled in advance is that, after the death of the dying person, these things should not be a cause

20. Voetius, *Ta askētika*, 561–63.

21. Voetius, *Ta askētika*, 563–69.

22. That Voetius also considers *meditatio mortis* to be a motive for conversion is evident from the chapter on the practice of conversion. There, he states that the hope of a long life and the idea that death is far off are obstacles to conversion. In this context, Voetius notes that our life, whether long or short, is uncertain and that the time of our death is unknown. The conditioned nature of our lives, and the reflection on this, should be a powerful motive for conversion. Occasions that are especially useful for *meditatio mortis* are the beginning and end of each day. Voetius, *Ta askētika*, 176–77; 365; 400.

of discord among the bereaved. These practical measures include drawing up a will and arranging care for the bereaved, especially the children.<sup>23</sup>

### *Specific Personal Preparations for Death*

The special personal preparation for death involves three relationships: with God, with oneself, and with one's neighbor. Of these three relationships, the special preparation regarding oneself is emphasized, which fits in with the general-individual framework in which Voetius places the art of living well.

In relation to God, Voetius believes that believers should strive to revitalize their relationship with God. Illness, pain, and other foreshadowings of death offer a good opportunity for this. Voetius mentions self-examination (syllogism), reflection on God's promises, encouragement to persevere, and asking others for advice and help as means of achieving a closer and stronger relationship with God.<sup>24</sup>

In relation to themselves, the believer should use situations of adversity, pain, and illness to stir themselves up to sorrow over sin and to seek help from Christ. In addition, a believer should face physical death with confidence. He should ensure that he has already died to the world, to sin, and to his own flesh before he dies physically. This makes it easier for him to willingly accept and face death. Voetius then offers some consolations against the fear of death. First, the dying person should not view death in isolation. Viewed in isolation, death is the bitter fruit of sin and the seal of damnation. Through the death of Christ, death means gain for the believer, because on the day of death, his soul enters into eternal salvation. For the faithful Christian, death also means deliverance from sin, temptations, and the hatred of the world. Second, the believer must remember that dying is God's will. God has determined the end of life for all believers with a view to their well-being and the enjoyment of salvation. Third, the believer can derive comfort from the faith, steadfastness, patience, and cheerfulness of the godly who have already died. Fourth, believers must constantly strive to be closely united with Christ and to live in communion with Him. Fifth, the believer must constantly reflect on God's loving promises. In the case of illness, God strengthens the heart, gives comfort, relief, and respite. He does not test the believer beyond what he or she can bear.<sup>25</sup>

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23. Voetius, *Ta askētika*, 570–72.

24. Voetius, *Ta askētika*, 567–77.

25. Voetius, *Ta askētika*, 577–81.

In relation to his neighbor, the believer should, in his special preparation for death, make amends for any harm he has caused his neighbor, pay any outstanding debts, and give timely instructions to all his household members and subordinates about a pious way of life and the things they should do. He should reconcile with his neighbor if there has been a quarrel. Finally, he must take measures regarding his earthly possessions.<sup>26</sup>

### *Dying Itself*

The second part of Voetius’s chapter on dying well deals with dying itself. Voetius characterizes dying as a struggle or battle, in which the dying believer must keep his eyes focused on Christ. If the believer does so, this struggle will have a happy ending. It is important that the dying person willingly entrust himself to Christ, look forward to meeting Him, and continually support his faith with prayers. Dying believers who have strayed in religion or have lived an improper life must confess this.

In dying, there are five struggles a dying person may face. The first struggle is the fear of death. The dying person may fear death because it may come at an inconvenient time or because it is frightening. The weapons to overcome this fear of death are forsaking the world, encouraging certainty of faith through syllogism, regularly reflecting on death, and praying for a good death. The second struggle is the struggle with the torments that precede death. The dying person can resist this struggle by submitting to God’s will. God shows in these torments that His strength is made perfect in our weakness. The third struggle is against the temptations of the devil. There are two kinds of temptations from the devil. On the one hand, there are the temptations of carelessness, pride, and reliance on one’s own good works. On the other hand, there are the temptations of unbelief and despair. The dying person can arm themselves against these by trusting in God’s mercy and the merits of Christ. The fourth struggle is with the temptations of the world. This concerns the dying person’s struggle with the fact that, upon dying, he must leave behind his family, possessions, and position. In this struggle, it is necessary for the dying person to regard death as a gain, to trust that he will be reunited with his family later, and that God will care for them until then. Furthermore, in this struggle, the dying person must consider that his earthly possessions have no heavenly value. The fifth struggle concerns the temptations of the flesh. The dying person can defend himself against temptation by considering that God sometimes

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26. Voetius, *Ta askētika*, 572–75, 582–83.

chastises His own to test their patience and perseverance. It may also be that He wants to show His power in supporting the sick person. In addition, the dying person who is faced with this struggle must remember that the torments he is experiencing, however intense and prolonged, cannot be compared to the torments of hell and the sufferings that Christ endured.<sup>27</sup>

### *Victory*

Ultimately, believers are more than conquerors in these struggles. While the body is buried in the earth, the soul goes to God. At death, the soul is brought before God's private judgment, where it is acquitted. The soul is then admitted into God's inner sanctuary to enjoy eternal salvation. This eternal salvation consists in contemplating God (*visio Dei*) and enjoying everlasting joy. The soul of the godly will be in eternal communion with Christ, the angels, and the other saints and the righteous.<sup>28</sup>

## **William Perkins's Salve for a Sicke Man**

### *The Day of Death Is Better Than the Day of Birth*

One of the writings on death to which Voetius explicitly refers is *Salve For A Sicke Man* by the Puritan theologian William Perkins (1558–1602), published in 1595. In the introduction to his work, Perkins argues, based on Ecclesiastes 7:1, that the day of death is better than the day of birth. Perkins describes death as the deprivation of life. As such, death is a punishment determined by God and imposed on every human being. God is also the One who carries out this punishment. According to Perkins, there are two kinds of death. First, there is physical death. This physical death is nothing more than the severing of the connection between the human soul and the human body. In addition to physical death, there is spiritual death. Spiritual death is the separation of man and God. This separation between God and man brings unspeakable misery and sorrow. Every human being is spiritually dead by nature, even if he is physically alive. It is important that every human being be connected to Christ through the Holy Spirit during his physical life. According to Perkins, in order to die well, it is essential that the godly person be assured in his conscience that he has a relationship with Christ. Those who bear the fruits of righteousness and repentance, which demonstrate their union with Christ, have no reason to fear death. For those who live godly lives, the day of death brings deliverance from all

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27. Voetius, *Ta askētika*, 583–606.

28. Voetius, *Ta askētika*, 606–10.

pain, sorrow, and sin. In addition, death brings the godly into eternal life with God, Christ, the angels, and all the saints in heaven. However, those who are outside the covenant of grace and outside Christ go to hell and therefore have reason to fear death.<sup>29</sup>

According to Perkins, proper preparation is necessary for a good death. Perkins sees preparation for death as a necessary duty to which humans are bound by God’s commandment. Various biblical texts call on believers to be ready every day for Christ’s return to judge the world. According to Perkins, these same passages also oblige people to be prepared for death. After death, no change or conversion is possible. If a person dies unconverted, he will also be judged by God as unconverted. Preparation for death is therefore indispensable. Perkins divides preparation for death into general and special preparation for death.<sup>30</sup>

#### *General Preparation for Death*

General preparation for death is the process that enables people to face death throughout their lives. This general preparation for death is comprised of five duties, some of which overlap.

The first duty of general preparation for death is the continual meditation on death during our temporary life. In this meditation on death, a number of things must be considered, such as the cause of death, namely our sin, the remedy for death, namely the accursed death of Christ, and the threat of death. The latter means that we must live every day as if it were our last. This contemplation of death serves to make us humble before God, to encourage further conversion, and to make us content in all circumstances. Perkins bases the contemplation of death on two passages: Psalm 39:5 and Psalm 90:12. In addition, he argues that pagan philosophers had many excellent reflections on death, although they lacked the correct view of eternal life. As humans, we tend to think that we will live for a while longer. In this way, we put off the thought of death. Perkins sees it as our duty to banish this godless and incorrect imagination from our hearts.<sup>31</sup>

The second duty is the daily weakening of death. The strength and power of death lie in sins. In order to deprive death of its power and disarm it, a person must examine his sins daily, humble himself before God,

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29. Perkins, *A Salve for a Sicke Man: or A Treatise Containing the Nature, Differences, and Kinds of Death; as Also the Right Maner of Dying Well* (Cambridge, 1595), 1–7.

30. Perkins, *Salve for a Sicke Man*, 30.

31. Perkins, *Salve for a Sicke Man*, 35–39.

confess the sins he has committed before God, and resolve to live according to God's Word. Sins are like the sting of death that must be torn out of the heart, root and all. Those who want to die as a righteous person must live as a righteous person. Those who, on the other hand, want to live the life of a wicked person can count on dying the death of a wicked person. This means that a constant humbling of self before God and a pious life are essential.<sup>32</sup>

The third duty is to enter into eternal life during this life. Those who wish to live in eternal bliss must begin in this world by rising from the grave of their own sins, in which they are naturally buried. To enter eternal life during this life, three things are necessary, namely, the saving knowledge by which we conclude that God is our God, peace of conscience, and the rule or life of the Holy Spirit, by which a person begins to live according to God's Word.<sup>33</sup>

The fourth duty is to die to this life before we die. According to Perkins, this means dying to sin by making proper use of the many trials that befall us. Perkins advises us to start by dying to and banishing minor sins. Those who are able to die to minor sins will find it easier to overcome their mortal sins. According to Perkins, the same applies to bearing crosses and even to death. If we have learned to bear crosses such as illness and hardship patiently, we will also be able to endure death. Perkins characterizes hardships and disasters in this life as precursors to death. We can only bear the sorrows of death if we have been shaped by many trials in this life.<sup>34</sup>

The fifth and final duty is to do good to the church, the community, or individuals through one's own legacy. According to Perkins, those who do so will end their lives with comfort and a clear conscience.<sup>35</sup>

### *Special Personal Preparation for Dying*

Special preparation for death should take place as the hour of death approaches. This special preparation for death takes place in relation to God, oneself, and one's neighbor. In relation to God, the dying person should revitalize his faith and conversion on his deathbed through self-examination, confessing his sins before God, and praying for forgiveness and reconciliation with God through Christ. The more serious the

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32. Perkins, *Salve for a Sicke Man*, 39–43.

33. Perkins, *Salve for a Sicke Man*, 43–46.

34. Perkins, *Salve for a Sicke Man*, 46–48.

35. Perkins, *Salve for a Sicke Man*, 48.

situation of the dying person, the more seriously this duty must be fulfilled. If a dying person is no longer able to do this himself, support from the Christian community is needed. The sick person must call upon the elders of the congregation or the pastor to teach him on his deathbed and pray for him. Perkins emphatically states that pastoral assistance is needed first, and only then medical help. According to Perkins, medical help is of no value if the root of all illness, namely sin, is not healed. While the elders or the pastors have the task of teaching the dying person and praying for him, the dying person must confess his sins.<sup>36</sup>

In relation to himself, the dying person must do two things. First, he must arm himself against excessive fear of death by meditating on eternal life, God’s special providence, God’s promises, and the special status of all who are in Christ. The dying person must view death through the lens of the gospel and not through the lens of the law. In the law, death is a curse and a descent into the pool of destruction, but in the gospel, death is an entrance into heaven. For believers, death has been changed by the death of Christ. Second, the dying person should take care of his body until God takes it away. In this context, Perkins devotes considerable attention to the use of medical care and the duties of doctors. According to Perkins, pastoral care is the most important thing. Medical care is not intended to prevent death, but to allow life to continue and be prolonged to its natural end.<sup>37</sup>

In relation to his neighbor, the dying person must do two things. First, he must reconcile with his neighbor, if necessary. Second, he must leave those over whom he had authority during his life in good order. Thus, heads of families must settle their family affairs properly and draw up a will.<sup>38</sup>

### *Experiencing Death*

When the hour of death approaches, the dying person must trust wholeheartedly in the love and mercy of God in Christ. This faith must be expressed through actions, such as calling upon God in prayer. In addition, he must be prepared to leave the world when God calls him and must commend his soul into God’s hands. Only those who have practiced these three duties during their lifetime can do so on their deathbed. That is why

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36. Perkins, *Salve for a Sicke Man*, 54–61.

37. Perkins, *Salve for a Sicke Man*, 61–80.

38. Perkins, *Salve for a Sicke Man*, 80–84.

Perkins concludes his deathbed writings with the exhortation to prepare for death during one's lifetime.<sup>39</sup>

### Comparison and Conclusion

When Voetius's chapter on dying well is compared with Perkins's *Salve for a Sick Man*, four clear similarities and one striking difference become apparent.

#### *Similarities*

First, there is agreement on the main structure. Both Voetius and Perkins divide their treatment of the *ars moriendi* into two parts — namely, preparing for death and dealing with dying itself. In addition, both authors divide preparation for death into general preparation, which takes place throughout life, and special preparation, which must occur when the hour of death approaches. The way in which Perkins and Voetius interpret the two parts of preparation for death also shows similarities.

Second, both Voetius and Perkins assign a crucial place to the continual contemplation of death in general preparation for death. Perkins bases this *meditatio mortis* on two texts from the Psalms, while Voetius provides no exegetical foundation whatsoever for this part of death preparation, which he considers indispensable. Since the *meditatio mortis* cannot be traced directly to the Bible, it must have another origin. Recent research has shown that *meditatio mortis* may be traced back to Stoic philosophy, both directly and indirectly through the monastic tradition.<sup>40</sup> This is supported by the fact that Voetius and other seventeenth-century writers on dying well refer directly to Thomas à Kempis, Seneca, and Epictetus, among others, on this point.

Third, both Voetius and Perkins speak of special preparation for death with reference to God, oneself, and one's neighbor. Regarding God, both ministers emphasize the need to revitalize one's faith and to seek an ever-closer relationship with God. Self-examination plays an important role in this. Regarding themselves, according to both ministers, the dying must arm themselves against the fear of death. In this context, both Voetius and Perkins emphasize that believers should not view death in isolation, but through the lens of the gospel. Through the death of Christ, dying means gain for the believer. Regarding their neighbors, both ministers point

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39. Perkins, *Salve for a Sicke Man*, 87–109.

40. Bosker, *Memento mori*, 170.

out that matters for the bereaved, especially the family, must be properly arranged in order to prevent discord, and that the dying person must reconcile with their neighbors if there is a quarrel.

Fourth, both Voetius and Perkins make a clear connection between life and death. Those who wish to die in a state of grace must live piously and tear the sins, which are the thorns of death, from their hearts and lives. Those who die during their lifetime to sin, the world, and their own ego can face death with peace of mind. When Voetius and Perkins emphatically stipulate a devout life as a condition for a blessed death, they follow in the footsteps of the humanistic spirituality of Thomas à Kempis and Desiderius Erasmus. Both Voetius and Perkins also emphasize personal faith and reject Roman Catholic rituals at the deathbed.

Fifth, both Voetius and Perkins show relatively little connection with the *ars moriendi* of the Reformation. In both Voetius's and Perkins's *ars moriendi*, however, the necessity of union with Christ, derived from Calvin's theology, plays an important role. The *ars moriendi* of Voetius and Perkins is furthest removed from Luther's view on a good death. While Luther's redefinition of the medieval adage “in the midst of life is death” to “in the midst of death is life” places full emphasis on the certainty of Christ's victory over death, the comfort of Christ's merit *extra nos et pro nobis*, the certainty of salvation, the comfort of God's promises and the sacraments, Voetius and Perkins focus primarily on the believer who must overcome death himself by practicing piety.

### *Differences*

A significant difference becomes apparent when both ministers write about dealing with death itself. While Perkins briefly describes three duties that the dying person must observe in the context of dealing with death, Voetius describes five struggles that the dying person may face in the struggle with death and the corresponding consolations. The five struggles described by Voetius are reminiscent of the well-known medieval *ars moriendi* in eleven woodcuts. The five struggles and their resistance correspond in part to the medieval engravings depicting the five temptations and their accompanying consolations. Voetius's brief explanation of the believer's victory is similar to the eleventh image of the medieval pictorial *ars moriendi*. The similarities outlined above make it very likely that Perkins's *Salve for a Sicke Man* influenced Voetius's exposition on the good death in his *Exercitia Pietatis*.