



The Affectionate Theology of

Richard Sibbes

MARK DEVER



A Long Line of Godly Men Profile

ENDORSEMENTS

“Mark Dever introduces us to a Christian who was a faithful friend to many in his day and whose writings have instilled spiritual comfort in many more in succeeding generations, including the great preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Richard Sibbes soaked strong theology in sweet love for Christ and tender mercy to broken-hearted sinners, making him a stellar example of Reformed experiential Christianity. In an age of division and discord, Sibbes strove for unity while seeking spiritual renewal in the Church of England. Dever’s thorough historical research illuminates the life of this moderate Puritan, of whom it was said, ‘Heaven was in him before he was in heaven.’”

—DR. JOEL R. BEEKE

President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary
Grand Rapids, Mich.

“Richard Sibbes, once called ‘the sweet dipper of grace,’ is an important, but sadly neglected Puritan writer. Mark Dever’s fine book helpfully puts Sibbes into context and the vitality of his theology for his day and for ours.”

—DR. W. ROBERT GODFREY

President emeritus and professor emeritus of church history
Westminster Seminary California, Escondido, Calif.

“Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once called Richard Sibbes ‘an unfailing remedy’ for the troubled of soul. Sibbes was, he wrote, ‘balm to my soul at a period in my life when I was overworked and badly overtired, and therefore subject in an unusual manner to the onslaughts of the devil.’ And that has been my own experience of ‘the heavenly Doctor Sibbes’: his heart-melting sermons seem, without fail, to draw my affections to Christ. I am delighted, then, to see this helpful and accessible introduction to Sibbes. May God use it to put many more in the way of Sibbes’ rich and affecting ministry.”

—DR. MICHAEL REEVES
President and professor of theology
Union School of Theology, Oxford, England

The Affectionate Theology *of*

Richard Sibbes

The Long Line of Godly Men Profiles

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The Affectionate Theology of Richard Sibbes

by Mark Dever



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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

The Affectionate Theology of Richard Sibbes

© 2018 by Mark Dever

Published by Ligonier Ministries
421 Ligonier Court, Sanford, FL 32771
Ligonier.org

Printed in Crawfordsville, Indiana
Lakeside Book Company
0001221

First edition, second printing

ISBN 978-1-56769-854-1 (Hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-56769-922-7 (ePub)

ISBN 978-1-56769-923-4 (Kindle)

Adapted from Mark E. Dever, *Richard Sibbes: Puritanism and Calvinism in Late Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (2000).

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Cover illustration: Steven Noble

Interior design and typeset: Katherine Lloyd, The DESK

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The Library of Congress has cataloged the Reformation Trust edition as follows:
Names: Dever, Mark, author.

Title: The affectionate theology of Richard Sibbes / Mark Dever.

Description: Orlando, FL : Reformation Trust Publishing, 2018. | Series: A long line of Godly men profile | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017036686 (print) | LCCN 2017048216 (ebook) | ISBN 9781567699227 (ePub) | ISBN 9781567699234 (Kindle) | ISBN 9781567698541

Subjects: LCSH: Sibbes, Richard, 1577-1635. | Puritans. | Theology, Doctrinal—History—17th century. | Reformed Church—Doctrines—History—17th century.

Classification: LCC BX9339.S53 (ebook) | LCC BX9339.S53 D478 2018 (print) | DDC 230/.59092--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017036686>

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Followers Worthy to Be Followed

Down through the centuries, God has raised up a long line of godly men whom He has mightily used at strategic moments in church history. These valiant individuals have come from all walks of life, from the ivy-covered halls of elite schools to the dusty back rooms of tradesmen's shops. They have arisen from all points of this world, from highly visible venues in densely populated cities to obscure hamlets in remote locations. Yet despite these diverse differences, these pivotal figures have held in common those virtues that remain nonnegotiable.

Each man possessed an unwavering faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But more than that, each of these stalwarts of the faith held deep convictions in the God-exalting truths known as the doctrines of grace. Though they differed in secondary matters of theology, they stood shoulder to shoulder in

embracing these biblical teachings that magnify the sovereign grace of God in salvation. These spiritual leaders stood upon and upheld the foundational truth that “salvation is of the Lord” (Ps. 3:8; Jonah 2:9).

Any survey of church history reveals that those who have embraced these biblical Reformed truths have been granted extraordinary confidence in their God. Far from paralyzing these spiritual giants, the doctrines of grace kindled within their hearts a reverential awe for God that humbled their souls before His throne. The truths of divine sovereignty emboldened these men to rise up and advance the cause of Christ on the earth. With an enlarged vision for the expansion of His kingdom upon the earth, they stepped forward boldly to accomplish the work of ten, even twenty men. They arose with wings like eagles and soared over their times. The doctrines of grace ignited them to serve God in their divinely appointed hour of history, leaving a godly inheritance for future generations.

This Long Line of Godly Men Profiles series highlights key figures in the age-long procession of these sovereign-grace men. The purpose of this series is to introduce you to these significant figures and explore how they used their God-given gifts and abilities to impact their times for the work of Christ. Because they were courageous followers of the Lord, their examples are worthy of our emulation today.

This volume focuses on the man who has been called “the

quintessential Puritan,” Richard Sibbes. Far from embodying the misguided stereotype of the dour Puritan, Sibbes was a man on fire with passion for the gospel. Whether he was standing before the common man or before the learned man of the academy, he preached it with conviction and power. An outstanding example of a preacher who married solid Reformed theology with heartfelt zeal, Sibbes sought to unfold for his hearers the whole counsel of God in order to ensure that they understood the gospel and its implications for their lives. This doctrinally sound yet practically relevant preaching can be seen in the way he emphasized assurance of salvation, the place of emotions in Christian living, and God’s covenant with man.

I want to thank the publishing team at Reformation Trust for their commitment to this Long Line of Godly Men Profiles series. I remain thankful for the ongoing influence of my former professor and revered friend, Dr. R.C. Sproul. I must also express my gratitude to Chris Larson, who is so instrumental in overseeing this series. Finally, I am grateful to Dr. Mark Dever for reworking his doctoral dissertation, *Richard Sibbes: Puritanism and Calvinism in Late Elizabethan and Early Stuart England*, in order to present this too-often-neglected figure to a new generation.

May the Lord use this book to energize and embolden a new generation of believers to bring its witness for Jesus Christ upon this world for God. Through this profile of Richard

THE AFFECTIONATE THEOLOGY OF RICHARD SIBBES

Sibbes, may you be strengthened to walk in a manner worthy of your calling. May you be zealous in your study of the written Word of God for the exaltation of Christ and the advance of His kingdom.

Soli Deo gloria!

—Steven J. Lawson

Series editor

How This Book Came to Be

Other than Richard Sibbes and myself, four people have been essential to the creation of this book that you're now holding. If you'll spend just a couple of minutes with me reviewing this, I think you'll better understand what this book is.

The first two people are senior scholars. William Nigel Kerr was the church history professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Mass., who back in 1982 first suggested Richard Sibbes to me as a focus for my studies. Eamon Duffy was my supervisor in the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, when I wrote the first edition of this book, as my dissertation (1988–92). To both men I owe a profound debt.

The third person is Michael Lawrence, a friend and colleague, who, at a turning-point in his own life, spent the

better part of a year editing my dissertation for publication by Mercer University Press under the substantial title *Richard Sibbes: Puritanism and Calvinism in Late Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (2000). Michael has since gone on to pursue his own studies at Cambridge in Thomas Goodwin, and has since 2010 been the senior pastor of Hinson Memorial Baptist Church in Portland, Ore.

And the fourth person is Kevin D. Gardner. When the idea came up of Ligonier taking my soon-to-be out-of-print dissertation on Richard Sibbes and editing it down for a more popular readership in this Long Line of Godly Men series, Kevin was assigned the task. I think that he has performed it admirably. The more obscure particulars of interest only to academics have been omitted (and can still be found in my dissertation, or in the fuller version published by Mercer). The bones of my argument are still here in my own words. We've added a little bit to make it of more general interest.

Richard Sibbes was, and is, a powerful preacher. His sermons are theologically clear and often pastorally piercing. He is another who, by grace, is in that long line of godly men.

—Mark Dever
Washington, D.C.
October 2017

The Quintessential Puritan

Someone described as “a rather bland, sweet-natured, mild-mannered, charming, learned and highly respected middle-aged gentleman” may not seem to be a promising prospect for study.¹ Though disincentives and even difficulties may discourage investigation, Richard Sibbes is an inviting subject, historically and theologically. His theology epitomizes that of the early seventeenth century under the reigns of James VI and I and Charles I, and his history illustrates conflicts and consensus within the Church of England. Even the neglect he has endured encourages investigation.

Sibbes’ style of preaching—and his theology itself—were typical of the period. His sermons epitomized the practical emphasis that marked the English church at the time.

¹ William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (New York: 1938), 163.

During his life, Sibbes was recognized as an eminent, practical preacher: in 1634, Samuel Hartlib referred to him as “one of the most experimental divines now living.”² Rarely polemical, his preaching was distinguished by its peaceable tone, more concerned with comfort than controversy. In the preface to Sibbes’ *The Glorious Feast of the Gospel*, Arthur Jackson, James Nalton, and William Taylor wrote:

Alas! Christians have lost much of their communion with Christ and his saints—the heaven upon earth—whilst they have woefully disputed away and dispirited the life of religion . . . To recover therefore thy spiritual relish of savoury practical truths, these sermons of that excellent man of God, of precious memory, are published.³

Later historians have realized Sibbes’ ability as a preacher.⁴ Yet if his ability and success were singular, his theology and aims were not.

2 Samuel Hartlib, *Ephemerides*, Hartlib Mss., Sheffield University.

3 Arthur Jackson, James Nalton, and William Taylor, “To the Reader,” preface to *The Glorious Feast of the Gospel* by Richard Sibbes (London: 1650); repr. Alexander Balloch Grosart, ed., *The Works of Richard Sibbes*, 7 vols. (Edinburgh, Scotland: 1862–64), 2:439.

4 William Haller described Sibbes’ sermons as “among the most brilliant and popular of all the utterances of the Puritan church militant” (Haller, 152). Norman Pettit suggested that Sibbes had “the richest imagination of all. Indeed, Sibbes was unique among spiritual preachers, perhaps the most original of his time” (Norman Pettit, *The Heart Prepared: Grace and Conversion in Puritan Spiritual Life* [New Haven, Conn.: 1966], 66).

Even more than his style and expression, the essence of Sibbes' theological thought was characteristic of his era, particularly in his use of the idea of covenant. Sibbes called the covenant the ground of the entirety of the Christian life "both in justification and sanctification."⁵ This covenantal framework is often seen as the central difference between Calvin and his later English followers, and thus Sibbes provides a window into this uniquely English contribution. Because Sibbes' theological style and substance can be said to be both typical of and unique to the period, it is unsurprising that Christopher Hill described Sibbes as "the quintessential Puritan."⁶

Sibbes also invites study because his history illustrates agreements and conflicts within the English church at the time. His life was marked not so much by conflict and deprivation as by success in gaining positions and pulpits. From the age of ten, when he began to study at the King Edward VI Free School in Bury St. Edmunds, until his death at age 58 while preacher at Gray's Inn, London, master of Katharine Hall at Cambridge University,⁷ and vicar of Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge, Sibbes was associated with well-known institutions. As such, his positions and situations act as a tour through history.

Despite his association with prominent institutions and

5 Sibbes, "The Rich Poverty; or, The Poor Man's Riches," in *Works*, 6:245.

6 Christopher Hill, "Francis Quarles and Edward Benlowes," in *Collected Essays* (Amherst, Mass.: 1985), 1:190.

7 The position of "master" is roughly equivalent to the American "dean." The college changed its name to St. Catherine's College in 1860.

his posthumous reputation, Sibbes has largely been neglected. Few biographies or studies of his theology exist, except for a few unpublished dissertations, and he is more often cited than studied. He provides a model for exploring and investigating “moderate Puritans,” “Nonconformists,” and “Calvinists.” And he did not lead the life of muzzled exile that many of his contemporaries, and some friends, did. Therefore, one goal of this book is to unite the images of Sibbes’ life and thought, to illuminate both him and his times.

Although a study of Richard Sibbes may prove helpful, it is not easy. Questions out-distance evidence. Difficulties, even unusual ones, abound in the study of this public man: first, Sibbes never married, so there was no obvious family member to write a biography or to collect his papers, letters, or manuscripts. Various letters and manuscripts are divided between London, Oxford, and Cambridge, but no cache of papers either by or pertaining to Sibbes exists for the historical student.

Second, and unusual in the study of a public person, is the lack of a surviving funeral sermon for him. Such sermons are important sources for the historian, as they provide contemporary insight into the subject’s life. William Gouge preached Sibbes’ funeral sermon, but it was never published. A brief and unsatisfying contemporary memoir of Sibbes does exist, by Zachary Catlin, and another, even shorter, published by Samuel Clarke in *A Collection of the Lives of Ten English Divines* (1652).

Besides these memoirs, the only extant sources are a few remaining letters by Sibbes; chance references in the writings of contemporaries; and the prefaces written by colleagues to his books, most of which were published posthumously. This last source points out another difficulty for the researcher—there is no record of when most of Sibbes' sermons were preached, making it difficult to reconstruct any historical progression in his thought.

A profitable study of Sibbes is still possible, however. In the first part of this book, the life of Sibbes is examined in light of his changing context. By the end of the reign of Elizabeth I in 1603, the focus of many English preachers and scholars had shifted from the controversies of the 1570s to more pastoral, less contentious concerns. Not that controversies ceased, but the literature increasingly focused on personal devotion and piety, preparation for salvation, and assurance of salvation. History has taken this literature to be typical of the loose group usually referred to as the Puritans, of which Sibbes was an acknowledged master.

This book will follow Sibbes' career and his writings, from the early years through the reign of King James and into the very different church being fashioned under King Charles I and William Laud, archbishop of Canterbury, when adherence or nonadherence to the use of the Book of Common Prayer became a primary issue (known as Conformity and Nonconformity). This book will follow Sibbes' thought by examining his theology in context: Was it distinctly Reformed? mystical?

Nonconformist? Special concern will be given to understanding how Sibbes understood the concurrence of the actions of God and the actions of humanity. This is the area in which covenant falls—and in which both the theological uniqueness of Puritanism and the distinctiveness of Sibbes’ writings have usually been seen. His theology will be examined both in its most objective, Calvinistic expressions and its most “experimental,” typically Puritan expressions. Especially important is his emphasis on the affections, or emotions, in the life of the Christian, as well as his insistence on the possibility of the Christian’s being assured of his salvation and his exploration of the role of the conscience in the Christian life.

More generally, this book relates English Puritanism to its Reformed forefathers in a way that highlights the historical rather than the theological shifts. Therefore, Sibbes proves a useful study in the relation of Reformed theology and practice to the demands of early Stuart Conformity, and thereby in understanding the religious life of that period, when hopes for a thorough reformation were waning but had not yet mingled with desperation as fully as they would in the decade after Sibbes’ death.

In the end, Sibbes will be recognized not as a moderate Puritan, forced into Nonconformity by the growing extremism of the Anglican Church under Laud, but as a Conformist to his dying day, yet one who never ceased striving for the reformation of the church.

Formative Context

In the spring of 1559, a poor laborer of Pakenham, Suffolk, died, leaving behind a young wife, Elizabeth, and two sons, Paul and Robert, along with the small inheritance of a house, a little land, and a few pounds. Robert lived into his nineties, his widow Alice having no surviving children. The older son, Paul, became a wheelwright and moved to Tostock; there he married Joane, having six children who survived into adulthood.

Richard was the first of the children born to Paul and Joane Sibbes in 1577 and was baptized in the parish church on January 6, 1580. While Richard was still young, the Sibbes family moved two miles west to the town of Thurston. In his memoir of Sibbes, Zachary Catlin records that “they lived in honest repute, brought up, and married divers children, purchased some houses and lands, and there they both deceased.

His father was. . . a skilful and painful workman, and a good sound-hearted Christian.”¹ There young Sibbes grew up and began his education.

All of the other Sibbes children remained in the area throughout their lives: John took up his father’s trade and house in Thurston; he and his wife had a son, three grandsons, and a great-grandson who followed Richard in studying at Katharine Hall, Cambridge. John died sometime between 1610 and 1635. Thomas moved to the nearby village of Rattlesden, and married Barabara; they had no surviving offspring. The occupations of the husbands of Richard’s three sisters (Susann Lopham, Elizabeth King and Margaret Mason) are unknown. Of all his siblings, only Margaret and Thomas survived Richard.

Richard did not remain in Thurston. Nevertheless, even after being elected to a fellowship at Cambridge, he did not cease to be part of his family’s life in Thurston. He was prohibited from marrying—a condition of a fellowship in a Cambridge college in the seventeenth century—which perhaps increased ties to his own family. Catlin records that Sibbes would either preach in the parish church or assist him in distributing communion “whensoever he came down into

¹ The Cambridge University Archives have three different manuscript copies of Zachary Catlin’s “Memoir of Richard Sibbes” (Add. 48; Add. 103; Mm.1.49). It has been printed twice, once by J.E.B. Mayor in *Antiquarian Communications: Being Papers Presented At the Meetings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society* (1859), 1:255–64, and once by Grosart in *The Works of Richard Sibbes* (Edinburgh, Scotland: 1862), 1:cxxxiv–cxli.

the Country, to visit his Mother and brethren”—which was frequently enough that, Catlin remarked, “wee soon grew wel acquainted.”² Throughout his life, Sibbes held land in the village, eventually leaving it to his brother Thomas and his nephew John. Even after moving to London, Sibbes did not forget his familial responsibilities, offering to bring his mother there to live; she declined, preferring to remain in Thurston.

EARLY EDUCATION

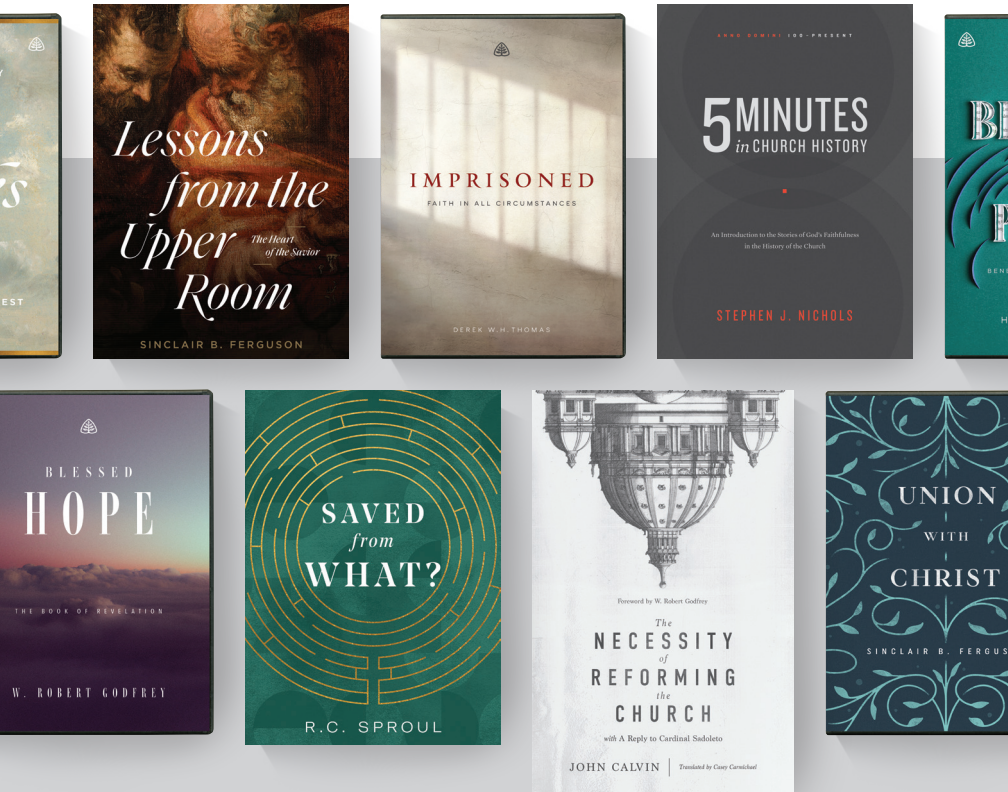
Before his election to a Cambridge fellowship or appointment to a prominent pulpit in London, Richard’s parents intended that he settle in the Thurston area and become a wheelwright like his father. While he later found in the memories of his father’s work a rich store of illustrations, his own early inclination was to study and read.³ So Sibbes devoted his energies instead to the labors of the academy. Catlin records:

Testimony of Mr. Thomas Clark, High Constable, who was much of the same Age, and went to schole, together with him. . . . He hath often told me that when the Boies were dismist from Schole . . . it was

2 Zachary Catlin, “Memoir of Richard Sibbes,” printed as “Appendix to Memoir” in *Works*, 1:cxxxv.

3 E.g., Sibbes’ image of conscience as “a wedge to drive out a hard piece of wood to be cut” (“Witness of Salvation” in *Works*, 7:375), or his presenting “a man out of Christ” as “a stone out of the foundation, set lightly by, and scattered up and down here and there” (“Yea and Amen; or, Precious Promises,” in *Works*, 4:123).

We want to see men and women around the world connect the deep truths of the Christian faith to everyday life.



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