

The Affectionate
Theology of

Mark Dever

**RICHARD
SIBBES**

A LONG LINE of GODLY MEN



“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, Bridgend, Wales

The Affectionate Theology of
Richard Sibbes

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MARK DEVER



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The Affectionate Theology of Richard Sibbes

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Foreword

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 agelong 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.

FOLLOWERS WORTHY TO BE FOLLOWED

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 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

Preface

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

Introduction

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. 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

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

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

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 wofully 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.

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

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).

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

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.

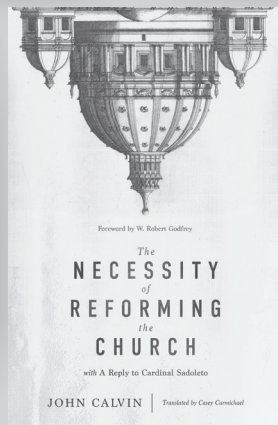
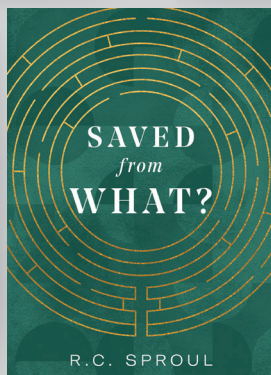
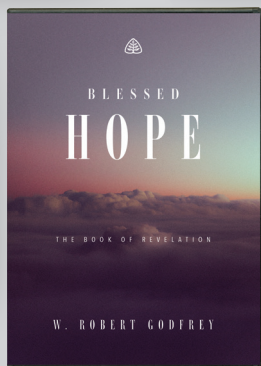
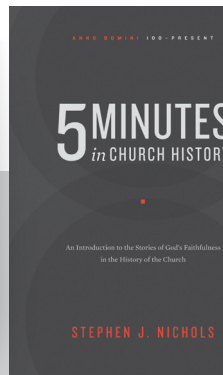
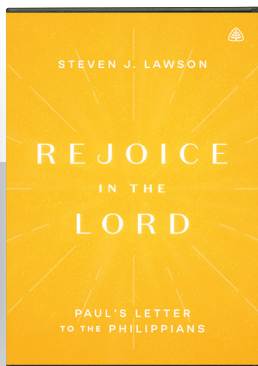
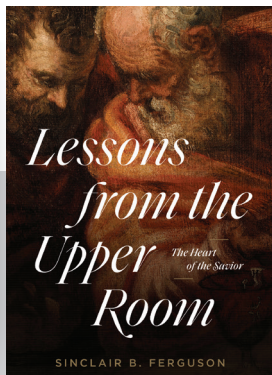
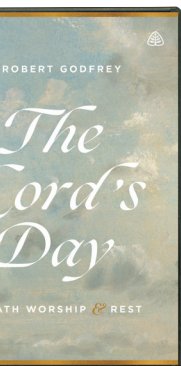
Despite his association with prominent institutions and his posthumous reputation, Sibbes has largely been neglected. Few biographies or studies of his theology exist, except for a few unpublished dissertations, and he is more often cited than studied. He provides a model for exploring and investigating “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 outdistance 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

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.

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