

Sweet Dropper: Richard Sibbes and Conforming Puritanism

Evan May

Referred to as the “Sweet Dropper” because of his consistently encouraging sermons, Richard Sibbes serves as an example of Puritan fervor balanced by centrist conformity in early Seventeenth Century England. Sibbes’s Calvinistic and Covenantal theological convictions, combined with his emphasis in “experimental” theology, distinguish him as a pastor in what has come to be known as the Puritan tradition; but (contrary to some previous historiographical presentations), Sibbes was no Separatist. This pastor serves as an example of pursuing a deeply principled ministry while seeking ecclesiastical unity.

Formative Life

Richard was born in 1577 to Paul and Joane Sibbes in the village of Tostock, Suffolk, and was baptized in the parish church on January 6, 1580. His father was a wheel-wright who intended his son to follow in the trade, even investing in a set of tools for him. Richard, however, was a student and a reader at heart, aiming for the labors of the academy. For several years, Sibbes walked about a mile to and from the school at Pakenham to be taught by Richard Brigs, most likely with a focus on basic literacy. In 1587, he transferred to the Edward VI Free School at Bury St. Edmunds. Students were taught to memorize and recite the creed, The Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commands in English and Latin; they also learned Latin and Greek through reading the classics. After being introduced to John Knewstubb, Sibbes matriculated at St. John’s College, Cambridge, in 1595, under the mastership of William Whitaker. He was eighteen years old.

Cambridge was a setting of theological controversy. Debate concerning the doctrines of grace erupted in the 1590s, particularly when the staunchly Reformed Whitaker died and was succeeded by the proto-Arminian John Overall. Overall was a disciple of Peter Baro, who also

mentored William Barrett—a chaplain of Gonville and Caius College who one day preached a sermon at Great St. Mary’s in which he openly attacked Calvinist doctrine, particularly the perseverance of the saints. Overall’s election as Regius Professor of Divinity was opposed by William Perkins and Robert Some. Sibbes would have been deeply familiar with these surrounding controversies.

Cambridge had distinguished itself as one of the first-rank of European universities in the post-Reformation era. Sibbes’s formal undergraduate education would have included the Latin and Greek classics, rhetoric, and logic; as well as readings in Aristotle and moral, natural, and metaphysical philosophy. Sibbes graduated with his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1599. On April 3, 1601, at the age of twenty-four, he was admitted as Foundress Fellow of St. John’s, his primary responsibility being the tutoring of students. He received a Master of Arts degree in 1602. It was shortly after this that Sibbes experienced conversion under the preaching ministry of Paul Baynes, whom Sibbes referred to as his “father in the gospel.” Sibbes later described the miracle of conversion in this way: “As the minister speaks to the ear, Christ speaks, opens, and unlocks the heart at the same time; and gives it power to open, not from itself, but from Christ” (p. 35). For Sibbes, this experience was gradual and non-dramatic, but it was no less supernatural.

Ministry & Academic Career

Sibbes was ordained as a deacon and priest in the Church of England in Norwich on February 21, 1608. After being licensed, Sibbes quickly acquired the reputation of being a good preacher at Cambridge, probably due to the public sermons he gave at St. John’s College chapel (these sermons were in English and open to the townspeople). The university recognized Sibbes in 1610, converting his M.A. into a Bachelor of Divinity. Part of the process of commencing

B.D. was to respond to two propositions of divinity—Sibbes’s points being 1) *Romana Ecclesia est apostastica*, and 2) *Dei Decretum non tollit libertatum voluntatis*. He defended the two beliefs that were held in common by moderate Puritans of his day. Sibbes’s gifting was also recognized by the town, as he was elected to give public sermons at Holy Trinity Church on Sundays at one o’clock. A new gallery needed to be built for the church in order to accommodate the crowd that came to hear him. John Cotton was converted under this preaching ministry at Holy Trinity. John Preston was impacted by Sibbes’s style and won over from his previous “witty” preaching to the plain explaining and applying of the Word of God for the edification of the people. Thomas Goodwin, who also attended Sibbes’s Sunday lectures, was converted under Preston’s newly influenced preaching.

Sibbes was chosen as lecturer for Gray’s Inn, London, in 1616—titled the “Reader of Divinitie to the house.” Similar to his popularity at Holy Trinity, by 1624 his ministry here was so well received that the auditorium had to be enlarged. Sibbes observed about London, “I think there is no place in the world where there is so much preaching” (p. 80). He was appointed to the Mastership of Katharine Hall in late 1626 (maintaining his London position), and soon after he received the Doctor of Divinity degree at Cambridge. From then he was frequently called “the heavenly Doctor Sibbes.” In 1633, King Charles I offered Sibbes the vicarage of Holy Trinity, Cambridge, where he served until his death.

Sibbes preached his final sermon on June 28, 1635 at Gray’s Inn. While speaking of the believer in Christ during this message he said, “When there comes ill tidings of the church abroad and at home, it doth not much dismay him. His heart is fixed; he believeth in God and in Christ, and that keeps him from being like a reed shaken with every wind” (p. 94). He fell ill that

evening and died July 5. Hartlib reports of Sibbes in his final days, “Being asked how hee (Dr. Sips) did in his soule replied I should doe God much wrong if I should not say very well” (p. 94).

Theology

Contrary to some scholars’ assessments, Richard Sibbes was not vague on his theological positions, nor did he substantially depart from his Calvinistic predecessors. Sibbes held to representatively Reformed theology with its heart in the Covenantal framework. He affirmed exhaustive divine sovereignty, and his teaching on predestination is characteristically Puritan, stating:

“First, that there was an eternal separation of men in God’s purpose. Secondly, that this first decree of severing man to his ends, is an act of sovereignty over his creature, and altogether independent of anything in the creature, as a cause of it, especially in comparative reprobation, as why he rejected Judas, and not Peter; sin foreseen cannot be the cause, because that was common to both, and therefore could be no cause of severing. Thirdly, . . . that damnation is an act of divine justice, which supposeth demerit; and therefore the execution of God’s decree is founded on sin, either of nature, or life, or both” (p. 101).

On the question of the order of decrees, Sibbes does not explicitly identify as Supralapsarian or Infralapsarian—labeling the matter “a mystery” without practical significance. Nevertheless, he believed in election and reprobation. He also affirmed particular redemption, teaching that “Christ died alone and singular in this respect; because in him dying all died that were his, that the Father gave him to die for. For they go in parallel, God’s gift and Christ’s death” (p. 105).

Sibbes was pastorally sensitive with how he preached and applied the doctrines of grace. The doctrine of election was not simply a matter for theological debate and discussion; it was something to be demonstrated in the life of the believer. Along with his emphasis in experiential religion, Sibbes encouraged his hearers to seek evidence of their election and calling. This did not mean searching eternity past to find the secret content of God’s

predestination, the “dark scruples of his eternal decree!” Rather, “obey the command, obey the threatening, and put that out of doubt. If thou yield to the command, if thou obey the threatening, if thou be drawn by that, undoubtedly thou art the child of God” (p. 107).

Following his theological forebears John Knewstubb and William Perkins, Richard Sibbes considered the concept of the covenant as essential to an adequate understanding of Scriptural teaching. Along with Jon Davenport, he writes in their introduction to *The New Covenant, or the Saints Portion* (1629), “We send forth these sermons of God’s All-Sufficiency, and Man’s Uprightness, and the Covenant of Grace first...because the right understanding of these points hath a chief influence into a Christian life” (p. 112). Sibbes held to the bi-covenantal framework of a Covenant of Works and a Covenant of Grace, the latter being a unifying administration throughout redemptive history. Sibbes speaks of “the administration of the covenant of grace under the gospel...with the administration of the same covenant in the time of the law” (p. 119). Entrance into covenant membership was through the New Covenant sacrament of baptism, and this covenant membership was renewed in the Lord’s Supper. However, not all who are outwardly covenant members are saved, for there is required an inward work “which is the washing of the soul; the outward doth not save without the inward” (p. 113).

The necessity of personal repentance and faith highlights Sibbes’s doctrine of conversion, which, as Perry Miller observes, “holds in miniature almost every characteristic of Puritan thinking” (p. 121). Sibbes not only affirmed the sovereignty of God in conversion—his monergistic work to create spiritual life in dead hearts—but he also recognized the importance of *means* and the role of human responsibility in accomplishing God’s work. This is the doctrine of *preparation*; church members must intentionally prepare themselves to receive the experience of grace. However, in assigning *responsibility* to man, Sibbes did not thereby assume an *ability*

inherent in the individual to repent and believe. Saving grace was sovereign grace, and irresistibly so. Nevertheless, God ordinarily uses the means of the preaching of the gospel and the preparation of hearts to receive the new birth.

Affectionate Preaching

Richard Sibbes's moderate popularity as a preacher and lecturer and his affectionate titles of "Sweet Dropper" and "Heavenly Doctor" have already been noted. Sibbes was known as a preacher of passionate rhetoric and warm-hearted appeal. His emotive language and imagery in his sermons are striking. "To preach is to woo," he states. This emotional element in Sibbes's style has sometimes been referred to as "mysticism," although that is an unclear and unhelpful label. Dever supplies a more appropriate adjective (and one that was contemporary to Sibbes): he was an *affectionate* theologian.

It was Sibbes's conviction that the broad spectrum of human faculties is to be appealed to in preaching. The heart, with its will and affections, is central in motivating human behavior; and accordingly it is the heart that must be addressed. "Religion," Sibbes argues, "is mainly in the affections" (p. 143). He speaks of the Christian life as being driven by holy loves and desires—indeed, this element distinguishes true from false religion: "Whatsoever we do else, if it be not stirred by the Spirit, apprehending the love of God in Christ, it is but morality. What are all our performances if they be not out of love to God?" (p. 148).

Nevertheless, Sibbes's appeal to the affections was not an exercise in *emotionalism*. As is clear in the previous quote, it was his purpose to draw attention to "the love of God in Christ," since that is what motivates behavior and accomplishes true and lasting change. Sibbes's preaching, therefore, was not emotion-centered but Gospel-centered; it served to highlight the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit as the means of transforming believers. This is

evident in his writings, such as *The Bruised Reed* and *Glorious Freedom*, which emphasize the compassion and mercy of Christ in calling Christians to increasing faith.

Reforming Conformity

Attention is now given to an organizing category for Sibbes's life, that of a moderate Puritan. Richard Sibbes never married, but he was surrounded by a circle of faithful friends—among them William Ames, Paul Baynes, Richard Capel, and Ezekiel Culverwell. However, while many of these left the established church, Sibbes never did. Nor was Sibbes ever deprived of any of his academic posts due to his Puritan convictions, as is erroneously conveyed by some of his biographers. How could Sibbes have such affinity with his nonconformist friends (and share many of their beliefs) while deciding against separation from the Church of England?

After being met by the Millenary Petition on his way from Edinburgh to his new kingdom, James Stuart determined to achieve conformity in the church under his ecclesiastical rule. He issued the Canons of 1604, containing the Three Articles of Canon 36 that affirmed the king as governmental head of the Church of England, the legitimacy of the Book of Common Prayer, and the necessity of conforming to that prayer book in the administration of the sacraments. Sibbes subscribed to the Three Articles in December 1616, after voicing his concerns and reservations (for example, that the sign of the cross in baptism could be misunderstood by some). This scenario is evidence that Sibbes was “a hesitator, and a questioner, but not a dissenter” (p. 47). He was willing to conform to certain outward practices, even when he disagreed with them.

This does not, however, imply that Sibbes was soft on matters of doctrinal importance. Sibbes had no patience for Romanism. Concerning the increasing irenicism in

England toward the Papists, Sibbes laments, “We see nothing in religion, but are as ready to entertain popery as true religion. Is this the fruit of the long preaching of the gospel, and the veil being taken off so long?” (p. 82). Moreover, Sibbes’s definition of moderation did not give place to Arminianism, as is clear in his refutation of Robert Bellarmine’s free will objections. On matters close to the heart of the Gospel, he was unmoveable.

Rather than being evidence of theological unfaithfulness, Sibbes’s conformity to the Anglican Church was a functional expression of his ecclesiology. While Sibbes’s considered Rome to be an apostate church deserving of separation, he believed that the Church of England was a true church, since it had all of the necessary marks of a true church—namely, “sound preaching of the Gospel, right dispensation of the Sacraments, Prayer religiously performed, evil persons justly punished,” and the production of “many spirituall children to the Lord” (p. 89-90). As he argues in his six-page *Consolatory Letter to an Afflicted Conscience*, even if the Church of England is corrupted with ceremonialism, “must we make a rent in the Church for... circumstantial evils? That were a remedy worse than the disease” (p. 90). Except where doctrinal fidelity was concerned, the priority of ecclesiastical unity ranked above the priority of ecclesiastical purity.

Therefore, according to Sibbes’s assessment of the Anglican Church during this period, to separate from it over secondary matters was not to follow conscience but to violate conscience in divisiveness. Indeed, the personal conscience was not only to be heeded, but *educated* by other concerns. By virtue of his Covenant Theology, Sibbes held the church to be a mixed covenant community, containing people at different levels of understanding and spiritual maturity, to be dealt with in patience and forbearance while correction and change is sought. Dever notes this balance of theological fidelity with outward generosity:

“Not that Sibbes was a moderate man when preaching of the necessity of justification by faith, the certainty of God’s salvation of the elect, or the duty of all members of the covenant to fulfill their obligations. No record remains of his being put in a position by those in authority over him to equivocate on such doctrinal essentials. His moderation was reserved for those externals of religion, which he deemed adiaphorous and which his church deemed edifying—the sign of the cross, the use of the surplice, and perhaps even an unworthy recipient of a fellowship...Even in his last years when he must have felt most circumscribed and could have easily despaired, he remained until his dying day a member of ‘the sacred communion of the truly Evangelical Church of England’” (p. 218).

Conclusion

Izacc Walton has said of Richard Sibbes, “Of this blest man, let this just praise be given: Heaven was in him, before he was in heaven.” While an ardent reader from his early years and a committed academic throughout his life, Sibbes was a warm theologian and pastor who was passionately concerned for God’s truth and eager to serve God’s people. His ability to present Christ in plain yet compelling language has fed not only the congregations that surrounded him but all who have read his sermons since. He serves as an example of affectionate and theologically rooted ministry. Sibbes has had an abiding influence beyond the Puritans of his era, extending to many Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Independents to follow.

Sibbes embraced the Reformation dictum *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*, but he was committed to seeking change from within. As has been seen, this was a function of his doctrine of the covenant and his understanding of ecclesiastical union. It is also a result of his assessment of the state of the church in his day; how he would have responded to the needs present after his death is a matter of historian’s curiosity. What is clear is that Sibbes fits comfortably in the category of a moderate Puritan—contrary to how he has been assessed in the past. The English Reformed of the Seventeenth Century wrestled with a variety of options before them for how they would pursue their convictions. Many believers in the centuries that have

followed have been met with similar challenges as they seek to live faithfully in the midst of weaknesses present in the church of their day. Sibbes's example is an instructive reminder that principles and patience, truth and love, are both to be cherished.

Richard Sibbes embodied the memorable proverb, often attributed to Augustine's ghost, "in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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