

## Church History (41): Richard Sibbes and Thomas Watson

In coming to Richard Sibbs and Thomas Watson, we come to two prominent Puritans. Each of their writings have remained in print until today (either in collected works, or individual volumes).

### I. Richard Sibbes and Thomas Watson

1. *Richard Sibbes* (1577-1635). "Richard Sibbes was born in 1577 at Tostock, Suffolk, in the Puritan County of old England. He was admitted to St. John's College in Cambridge at the age of eighteen. In 1603, he was converted under the preaching of Paul Baynes, whom Sibbes called his 'father in the gospel.' Baynes succeeded William Perkins at the Church of St. Andrews in Cambridge. Sibbes was ordained to the ministry in the Church of England in 1608, and served as lecturer at Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge from 1611-1616" (Beeke).<sup>1</sup> "His celebrity having spread abroad, and reached the metropolis, he was, in the year 1618, chosen preacher at Gray's-Inn, London, where he became remarkably popular and useful" (Brook).<sup>2</sup> He returned to Cambridge in 1626, and was granted a Doctorate in Divinity in 1627. He continued to exercise his ministry at Gray's Inn, London, and Holy Trinity, Cambridge, until his death on 6 July 1636 at the age of 58. "He became known as 'the heavenly Doctor,' due to his godly preaching and heavenly manner of life. Isaac Walton wrote of Sibbes, 'Of this blest man, let this just praise be given, heaven was in him, before he was in heaven.' Sibbes never married, but he established an astonishing network of friendships that included godly ministers, noted lawyers, and parliamentary leaders of the early Stuart era" (Beeke).<sup>3</sup> "Sibbes was a moderate Puritan, one who would still conform to the requirements of ecclesiastical uniformity. Yet his impact upon the Puritan era, is still being measured by Puritan specialists" (Frost).<sup>4</sup> "Dr. Sibbes died July 5, 1635, aged fifty-seven years. He was a grave and solid divine, and famous for piety, learning, devotion, and politeness" (Brook).<sup>5</sup>

His collected *Works* fill seven volumes in their present form. "Dr. Sibbes has rendered himself famous by his numerous and excellent publications. His works, which breathe the warmest strains of evangelical piety, will transmit his fame to the latest posterity. The whole is composed with so much wisdom, piety, judgment, and experience, that it commends itself to all who are wise for their souls. And I doubt not that they will find their understandings enlightened, their temptations answered, their fainting spirits revived, and their graces confirmed; and will have cause to praise God for the worthy author's godly and painful labors" (Brook).<sup>6</sup> Some of his more popular treatises were, *The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax: An Exposition of Matthew 12:20* (1630); *Bowels Opened: Sermons on Canticles 4-6* (1639); *The Returning Backslider: An exposition of Hosea 14* (1639); *A Fountain Sealed: An Exposition of Ephesians 4:30* (1637). "The third volume is devoted to Sibbes's exposition of 2Corinthians chapter 1. Solid doctrine, love for Christ, and warm pastoral applications abound in this commentary. This work also contains Sibbes's notable teaching on the sealing of the Holy Spirit (vv22-23)" (Beeke).<sup>7</sup>

His treatise *The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax* is an exposition of Matthew 12:20. "A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench." Sibbes applied both imageries to humble sinners coming to Christ, and poor saints returning to Christ. Those bruised are bruised by Christ Himself with a sight of their sin. "He has wounded, and He must heal" (Isa.61:1). "Lord, you have bruised

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<sup>1</sup> Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 534

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Brook, *The Lives of the Puritans*, 2:417

<sup>3</sup> Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 535

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Frost, *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics*, 83-84

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Brook, *The Lives of the Puritans*, 2:418

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Brook, *The Lives of the Puritans*, 2:419-420

<sup>7</sup> Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 538

me deservedly for my sins, bind up my heart again."<sup>8</sup> By a "smoking flax" is meant those whose graces are small and feeble. "In God's children, especially in their first conversion, there is but a little measure of grace, and that little mixed with much corruption, which, as smoke, is offensive."<sup>9</sup> "Christ will not quench the smoking flax. First, because this spark is from heaven, it is His own, it is kindled by His own Spirit. And secondly, it tends to the glory of His powerful grace in His children, that He preserves light in the midst of darkness—a spark in the midst of the swelling waters of corruption."<sup>10</sup> "Sibbes's ambition was to lead his readers to a profound assurance of their salvation. He intended to show how God's 'free offer of grace' was able to bring such comfort" (Frost).<sup>11</sup> Sibbes wrote the basic point of his treatise in the preface: "It's the right consideration of the gracious nature and office of Christ which is the spring of all service to Christ, and comfort from Him. God has laid up all grace and comfort in Christ for us, and planted a wonderful sweetness of pity and love in His heart towards us. As God His father has fitted Him with a body (Heb.10:7), so with a heart to be a merciful Redeemer."<sup>12</sup>

But as popular as the *Bruised Reed* proved to be, it was his writings on the Holy Spirit that Sibbes became known for. "Sibbes was one of the greatest Puritans of his age. He greatly influenced the direction and content of Puritan preaching, theology, and writing in England and America. His theology of the Holy Spirit was especially important because of its emphasis on how the Spirit operates in the daily life of the Christian. Sibbes winsomely referred to that process as 'entertaining the Spirit' in the soul. For Sibbes, that entertaining meant to welcome with hospitality and nurture our friendship with the indwelling Spirit. 'There is nothing in the world so great and sweet a friend that will do us much good as the Spirit, if we give Him entertainment,' Sibbes wrote" (Beeke).<sup>13</sup> His views on the Spirit are developed in two treatises: *A Fountain Sealed: An Exposition of Ephesians 4:30* and *An Exposition of Second Corinthians chapter 1*. "The Holy Spirit is called a Spirit, not only by nature, as being a spiritual essence, but in regard of His person and office; He is both breathed from the Father and the Son, as proceeding from them both; and by office, breathed into all that God has given Christ to redeem and Him to sanctify."<sup>14</sup> Thus, for Sibbes, if the Spirit is to be entertained, we must be mindful of His indwelling, sealing, and holiness.

(1) We must be mindful of the indwelling of the Spirit. "The Spirit's indwelling is necessary to entertaining Him, Sibbes said. Sibbes taught that when the Spirit of God enters the heart of a sinner, regenerating him and persuading him of the truth of the gospel, the Spirit immediately begins to live within that person" (Beeke).<sup>15</sup> "Next to the love of Christ in taking our nature and dwelling in it, we may wonder at the love of the Holy Ghost, that will take up His residence in such defiled souls."<sup>16</sup> As an Indweller, the Spirit unites us to Christ, in whom we have grace and spiritual power to live victoriously. "The Spirit is a Spirit of union, to knit us to Christ, and make us one with Him, and thereupon to quicken us, to lead us, and guide us, and to dwell in us continually, to stir up prayers and supplications in us, to make us cry familiarly to God as to a Father, to comfort and support us in all our wants and miseries, as He did Christ."<sup>17</sup> For Sibbes, the communion we have with Christ and the Father are through the Spirit. "All the communion that Christ as man had with God was by the Holy Ghost; and all the communion that God has with us, and we with God is by the Holy Ghost: for the Spirit is the bond of union

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Sibbes, *Works*, 1:47

<sup>9</sup> Richard Sibbes, *Works*, 1:49

<sup>10</sup> Richard Sibbes, *Works*, 1:51

<sup>11</sup> Ronald Frost, *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics*, 84

<sup>12</sup> Richard Sibbes, *Works*, 1:38

<sup>13</sup> Joel Beeke & Mark Jones, *A Purity Theology*, 573

<sup>14</sup> Richard Sibbes, *Works*, 5:412

<sup>15</sup> Joel Beeke & Mark Jones, *A Purity Theology*, 576

<sup>16</sup> Richard Sibbes, *Works*, 5:414

<sup>17</sup> Richard Sibbes, *Works*, 1:22

between Christ and us, and between God and us. God communicates Himself to us by His Spirit, and we communicate with God by His Spirit. God dos all in us by His Spirit, and we do all back again to God by the Spirit."<sup>18</sup>

(2) We must be mindful of the sealing of the Spirit. "Sibbes thought of the Spirit's sealing in two ways: (1) a one-time sealing, and (2) a sealing that came later as one matured in the Christian life. The once-and-for-all sealing of salvation is granted when a person first believes in Christ and God's promises. Sibbes taught that as a king's image is stamped upon wax, so the Spirit stamps believers' souls with the image of Christ from the very moment of believing" (Beeke).<sup>19</sup> "God by His Spirit sets the stamp and likeness of Christ upon us; He distinguishes us to Himself, and likewise He authorizes us and puts an excellency upon us to secure us against all."<sup>20</sup> According to Sibbes, every Christian is sealed in this way at their conversion. But Sibbes also believed this sealing was an ongoing and deepening experience. "The Spirit seals by degrees. As our care of pleasing the Spirit increases so our comfort increases. Our light will increase as the morning light unto the perfect day. Yielding to the Spirit in one holy motion will cause Him to lead us to another, and so on forwards, until we be more deeply acquainted with the whole counsel of God concerning our salvation. Otherwise, if we give way to any contrary lust, darkness will grow upon our spirits unawares, and we shall be left in an unsettled condition, as those that travel in the twilight, that cannot perfectly find out their way"<sup>21</sup> For Sibbes, this ongoing sealing work of the Spirit strengthens our assurance and awareness of God's love. "The sealing of the Spirit is necessary to witness the Father's love to us, to us in particular, saying, 'I am thy salvation,' and 'thy sins are pardoned.' And this testimony the word of God echoes unto, and the heart is stirred up and comforted with joy inexpressible. So that both our spirits and consciences, and the Spirit of Christ joining in one, strongly witness our condition in grace, that we are the sons of God."<sup>22</sup> Joel Beeke admits that Sibbes sounds mystical at times, but says Sibbes warded off mysticism in two ways: "First, he maintained that this special sealing must never be divorced from the Word of God, and second, Sibbes said that the genuineness of such sealing may be readily examined by the practical effects it produced in a person's life."<sup>23</sup>

The Spirit by which we are sealed is the Spirit of illumination, not that it reveals any thing different from the word, but gives a larger understanding and inward knowledge of the same truths as were known before. Such sealing also results in a liberty and boldness with God, for 'where the Spirit is, there is a gracious liberty.' Where the Spirit seals, it gives liberty to freely open and spread our case before him and call upon Him. Furthermore, this sealing results in more humility. None are more abased in themselves than those that have nearest communion with God. Job, after God had manifested Himself unto him, abhorred himself in dust and heavenly-mindedness.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore we ought to desire to be sealed by the Spirit, in regard of an holy impression; and then that the Holy Spirit would shine upon His own graces, so as we may clearly see what is wrought in us above nature; and because this is furthered by revealing His love in Christ in adoption to us, we must desire of God to vouchsafe the Spirit of revelation, to reveal the mysteries of His truth unto us, and our portion in them in particular, and so our adoption; and in the mean time to wait and attend His good pleasure in the

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Sibbes, *Works*, 1:17-18

<sup>19</sup> Joel Beeke & Mark Jones, *A Purity Theology*, 579

<sup>20</sup> Richard Sibbes, *Works*, 3:454

<sup>21</sup> Richard Sibbes, *Works*, 5:452

<sup>22</sup> Richard Sibbes, *Works*, 5:440

<sup>23</sup> Joel Beeke & Mark Jones, *A Purity Theology*, 580

<sup>24</sup> Richard Sibbes, *Works*, 5:442-443

use of all good means. Thus we waiting, God will so far reveal Himself in love to us, as shall assure us of His love, and stir up love again; and the same Spirit that is a Spirit of revelation will be a Spirit of sanctification, and so adoption.<sup>25</sup>

(3) We must be mindful of the holiness of the Spirit. We must not grieve the Holy Spirit. "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Eph.4:30). Sibbes begins with a clarification. "The Holy Ghost cannot properly be grieved in His own person, because grief implies a defect of happiness in suffering that we wish removed. It implies a defect in foresight, to prevent that which may grieve. It implies passion, which is soon raised up and soon laid down. God is not subject to change. It implies some want of power to remove that which we feel to be a grievance. And therefore it is not beseeming the majesty of the Spirit thus to be grieved. We must therefore conceive of it as befitting the majesty of God, removing in our thoughts all imperfections."<sup>26</sup> Thus, for Sibbes, "though the passion of grief be not in the Holy Ghost, yet there is in His holy nature a pure displeasure and hared of sin, and such a degree of abomination, and though it tend not to the destruction of the offender, yet it results in sharp correction; so that grief is eminently in the hatred of God in such a manner as becomes Him."<sup>27</sup> Sibbes suggested we grieve the Spirit when we "disgrace Him by neglect or disrespect, and most of all from unkindness after favor is showed." "What greater indignity can we offer to the Holy Spirit than to prefer base dust before His motions leading us to holiness and happiness? What greater unkindness, yea, treachery, to leave the directions of a friend to follow the counsel of an enemy? Those likewise cannot but grieve the Comforter, that leave His comforts and seek for other comforters; that think there is not comfort enough in religion, but will bow down to the world; such as longer after the liberties of the flesh, after 'stolen waters,' as if God hasn't kept house good enough for them"<sup>28</sup>

Sibbes gave additional ways the Spirit is grieved. "(1) When we slight Christ in the gospel, the ordinance and organ of working good in us, the Holy Ghost is slighted and grieved." "(2) The Holy Spirit is grieved when you have a corrupt judgment of things, not weighing them in the right balance, nor value them according to their worthy. When we esteem any knowledge rather than divine knowledge, any truths but truths that concern Christ, when men look upon grace as contemptible, and prefer other things above it." "(3) Those sins wherein there is plotting and contriving exceedingly grieves the Spirit, because they are done in cold blood. David deeply wounded his conscience, and grieved the Spirit, in plotting the death of Uriah." "(4) We grieve the Holy Spirit when we commit such sins as we might avoid, such sins as we have some helps against and least provocation unto." "(5) Men grieve the Spirit when they take the office of the Spirit from Him; that is, when we will do things in our own strength and by our own light, as if we were gods to ourselves." "(6) Another way whereby we commonly grieve the Spirit of God is, when the mind is troubled with a multitude of business; when the soul is like a mill, where one cannot hear another, the noise is such as takes away all intercourse. It diminishes our respect to the Holy Spirit when we give way to a multitude of business; for multitude of business begets multitudes of passions and distractions; that when God's Spirit dictates the best things that tend to our comfort and peace, we have no time to heed what the Spirit advises." "(7) Lastly, omission or slight performance of duties grieve the Spirit. The Spirit, as He comes from the Father and the Son, from God, so He is great in Himself, being God. When people hear drowsily, and receive the sacrament unpreparedly, this grieves the Spirit, because it comes from irreverence and disrespect."<sup>29</sup> Sibbes then gave several ways we can "grieve the Spirit in others." "(1) By neglecting the grace of God in them, or

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<sup>25</sup> Richard Sibbes, *Works*, 5:444

<sup>26</sup> Richard Sibbes, *Works*, 5:414-415

<sup>27</sup> Richard Sibbes, *Works*, 5:415

<sup>28</sup> Richard Sibbes, *Works*, 5:416

<sup>29</sup> Richard Sibbes, *Works*, 5:420-423

despising them for some infirmities which love should cover." "(2) We grieve the Spirit in others by sharp censures, and the greater our authority is, the deeper is the grief a censure inflicts." "(3) Those that are above others grieve the spirits of those under them by unjust commands; as when masters press their servants to that which their conscience cannot digest, and so make them sin, and offer violence to that tender part." "(4) Again, we grieve the Spirit in others, when those that are inferior show themselves obstinate to those above them in the magistrate or ministry, when they make them spend their strength in vain." "(5) Lastly, this grieves the Spirit, when those that are good watch not over their ways. The Spirit is grieved when Christians make the name of God to be ill spoken of."<sup>30</sup>

If we would not grieve the Spirit, we must be willing to bring ourselves under all advantages of the Spirit's working; as conversing with those that are spiritual, and especially attending on those ordinances wherein the Spirit breathes; wherein we may meet the Spirit. The walks (paths) of God's Spirit are, in the means of salvation, hearing the word preached, and holy communion one with another. The word and Spirit go together. Therefore if we will have the comforts of the Spirit, we must attend upon the word. Men grieve the Spirit by neglecting the word, and holy conference, &c. The word is dead without the Spirit, and therefore attend on the word. And then wait on the Spirit to quicken the word, that both word and Spirit may guide us to life everlasting. It is a blessed thing when the Spirit in the ordinance and the Spirit in our hearts meet together. Take heed of slighting any help of faith that God affords us. When we despise those helps God has given, we grieve the Spirit of God. Those that neglect the word and sacrament, what do they despise? A poor minister? Bread and wine? No. They despise God Himself, who knows better than ourselves what need we have of these helps.<sup>31</sup>

2. *Thomas Watson* (1620-1686). "Thomas Watson was probably born in Yorkshire. He studied at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1639 and a Master of Arts degree in 1642. During his time at Cambridge, Watson was a dedicated scholar. In 1646, Watson went to St. Stephen's, Walbrook, London, where he served as lecturer for about sixteen years, filling the place of Ralph Robinson" (Beeke).<sup>32</sup> "The church was constantly filled, for the fame and popularity of the preacher were deservedly great. Going in and out among his flock, fired with holy zeal for their eternal welfare, his years rolled on pleasantly enough amid the growing respect of all who knew him" (CHS).<sup>33</sup> "During the Civil War, Watson began expressing his strong Presbyterian views. He was one of the Presbyterian ministers who went to Oliver Cromwell to protest the execution of Charles I. Along with Christopher Love and others, he was imprisoned in 1651 for his supposed part in a plot to restore the monarchy. Watson was released after formally reinstated to his pastorate in Walbrook in 1652" (Beeke).<sup>34</sup> When the Act of Uniformity passed in 1662, Watson was ejected from his pastorate. He preached his farewell sermon on August 17, wherein he said in part: "I have now exercised my ministry among you for almost sixteen years; and I rejoice and bless God that I cannot say, the more I love you, the less I am loved: I have received many signal demonstrations of love from you. Though other parishes have exceeded you in number of houses, yet, I think, no one for strength of affection. I have with much comfort observed your reverent attention to the word preached; you rejoice in this light, not for a season, but to this day."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Richard Sibbes, *Works*, 5:423-424

<sup>31</sup> Richard Sibbes, *Works*, 5:428-429

<sup>32</sup> Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 605

<sup>33</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *A Body of Divinity by Thomas Watson*, viii

<sup>34</sup> Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 605

<sup>35</sup> Quoted by Charles Spurgeon, *A Body of Divinity by Thomas Watson*, ix

"After his ejection, Watson preached occasionally whenever he could do so with safety. Fines and imprisonments were insufficient to close the mouths of the witnesses of Jesus. In barns, kitchens, out-houses, or dells and woods, the faithful few gathered to hear the message of eternal life" (CHS).<sup>36</sup> "After the Declaration of Indulgence took effect in 1672, Watson obtained a license for Crosby Hall, Bishopsgate. Watson preached there for three years before Stephen Charnock (1628-1680) joined him. They ministered together until Charnock's death in 1680. Watson kept working until his health failed. He then retired to Barnston, in Essex, where he died suddenly in 1686 while engaged in private prayer" (Beeke).<sup>37</sup> "Watson's depth of doctrine, clarity of expression, warmth of spirituality, love of application, and gift of illustration enhanced his reputation as a preacher and writer. His books are still widely read today" (Beeke).<sup>38</sup> "Mr. Watson published a variety of books upon practical subjects, and of a useful nature. But his principal work was *A Body of Divinity*, in one hundred and seventy-six sermons, upon the Assembly's Shorter Catechism, which appeared after his death, in 1692" (CHS).<sup>39</sup> Other popular works are: *The Doctrine of Repentance*; *The Art of Divine Contentment*; *Heaven Taken by Storm*; *The Great Gain of Godliness*; *The Christian on the Mount: A Treatise on Meditation*; *The Beatitudes*; *All Things for Good*.

Added to his treatise, *Heaven Taken by Storm: Showing the Holy Violence A Christian is to Put Forth in the Pursuit After Glory*, is a shorter treatise called, *How We May Read the Scriptures with Most Spiritual Profit*.<sup>40</sup> "The grand question I am to speak to is this: *How may we read the Scriptures with most spiritual profit?*" "(1) Prepare your hearts before the reading of the Word; the heart is an instrument which needs to be put in tune." "(2) Read the Scriptures with reverence; think about every line you read; God is speaking to you." "(3) Read the books of Scripture in order. We do not begin to read a friend's letter in the middle." "(4) Get a right understanding of Scripture. The knowledge of the sense of the Scriptures is the first step to profit." "(5) Labor to remember what you read. The memory should be like the chest in the ark, where the law was put." "(6) Meditate upon what you read. Reading brings a truth into our heard, meditation brings it into our heart." "(7) Give credence to the Word written; believe it to be of God; see the name of God in every line." "(8) Highly prize the Scriptures. Prize this book of God above all other books." "(9) Get an ardent love to the Word. Prize relates to the judgment; love, to the affections." "(10) Observe the preceptive part of the Word, as well as the promissory." "(11) Take special notice of those Scriptures which speak to your particular case." "(12) Take special notice of the examples in Scripture; make the examples of others living sermons to you." "(13) Leave not off reading in the Bible till you find your hearts warmed." "(14) Set upon the practice of what you read." "(15) Tread often upon the threshold of the sanctuary. Wait diligently upon a rightly constituted ministry. Ministers are God's interpreters; it is their work to open and expound dark places of Scriptures." "(16) Pray that God will make you profit." Watson closed his treatise with three short encouragements: "(1) You may profit by reading the Word, though you come short of others. The ground which brought forth thirtyfold was good ground (Matt.13:8). Say not that you have obtained no profit because you are not equal with other eminent saints." "(2) You may profit by reading the Word, though you are not of quick apprehension. Some impeach themselves because they are slow of understanding. A Christian with little knowledge may be kept from sin, as a man that has but weak sight, yet is kept by it from falling into the water." "(3) You may profit by reading Scripture although you have not excellent memories. Many complain that their memories 'leak.' Christian, are you grieved that you can remember no more? Then for your comfort, consider that you may have a good heart, though you do not have a very good memory."

<sup>36</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *A Body of Divinity by Thomas Watson*, x

<sup>37</sup> Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 606

<sup>38</sup> Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 606

<sup>39</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *A Body of Divinity by Thomas Watson*, xi

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Watson, *Heaven Taken by Storm*, 113-129