

# Foreword to Richard Sibbes' 'The Love of Christ'

In his original preface, John Dod wrote that this book is 'so full of heavenly treasure, and such lively expressions of the invaluable riches of the love of Christ' that it serves 'to kindle in the heart all heavenly affections unto Jesus Christ.' Indeed it does! And that was very much what Richard Sibbes was about in all his ministry. As he himself put it, 'one main end of our calling, the ministry, is, to lay open and unfold the unsearchable riches of Christ; to dig up the mine, thereby to draw the affections of those that belong to God to Christ'.

Richard Sibbes (1577-1635) is rather less well known now than some other Puritan luminaries, but in his own day he was enormously influential. In his latter years he managed to hold three prominent posts simultaneously, as master of Katharine Hall, Cambridge, 'lecturer' at Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge, and preacher to the prestigious Gray's Inn, one of the London Inns of Court. More tellingly, though, Sibbes was widely and deeply loved. He became known as 'the heavenly Doctor', and that, not because of any remote other-worldliness, but because of his sheer loving kindness and good-natured amiability. Still today, his recorded sermons glow with sunny warmth.

*The Love of Christ* is a series of sermons Sibbes preached on Song of Songs 4:16-6:3, originally published under the title *Bowels Opened* (a reference to the deep, gut desires explored or 'opened' in the book). For Sibbes, Song of Songs 'is nothing else but a plain demonstration and setting forth of the love of Christ to his church, and of the love of the church to Christ', and as such it gets to the very heart of the gospel as he understood it. Christianity, he believed, was essentially a love story in which Christ the bridegroom comes to win his bride, the church.

Such imagery and use of Song of Songs was not only popular in Sibbes's day (and supported by the notes of the Geneva Bible), it also had a distinguished place in Reformation history. When, in his *The Freedom of a Christian*, Martin Luther first explained his mature understanding of justification by grace alone, it was to Song of Songs that he turned for illustration. For the understanding that the relationship between Christ and his people is a marital one changed everything. In medieval Roman Catholicism, Christ had been a distant figure, doling out his 'grace' from afar, approachable only through other mediators such as priests and saints. Before him one could never have confidence or know intimacy. But if Christ is the church's loving bridegroom, what place is there for mediators between him and us? And what now would the church want from him? Not some *thing* called 'grace', but the bridegroom himself, freely offered. Plus, a bride can have assurance in her love.

Let us oft think of this nearness between Christ and us, if we have once given our names to him, and not be discouraged for any sin or unworthiness in us. Who sues a wife for debt, when she is married? ... Therefore answer all accusations thus: 'Go to Christ.' If you have anything to say to me, go to my husband. (*Works* 2.25)

Sibbes does not defend his interpretation of Song of Songs; in his generation he did not need to.

Today, though, the majority of commentators do not agree that Song of Songs is a parable of the love between Christ and the church. More normally it is treated as a poem on common romance. Now, even if Sibbes is misappropriating Song of Songs, the wonderful truths he expounds still stand. In that case, he is preaching Christ beautifully, but simply from the wrong text. But *is* he misreading Song of Songs? Is this fanciful allegorising (as is possible with any interpretation), or is he heading in the direction the text leads?

Certainly Solomon seemed to enjoy allusion. The architecture of the temple he built shows that: from the cherubim to the sea of cast metal, everything was designed to be a copy and shadow of spiritual reality (Hebrews 8:5). One expects Solomon to be always alluding to spiritual reality. And one expects books of Scripture to be about God and his relations with his people. So we have a reasonable *expectation* as we approach Song of Songs.

Jonathan Edwards argued that the very title 'Song of Songs' then confirms this expectation:

The name by which Solomon calls this song confirms me in it that it is more than an ordinary love song, and that it was designed for a divine song, and of divine authority; for we read, 1 Kings 4:32, that Solomon's "songs were a thousand and five." This he calls the "song of songs" [Canticles 1:1], that is, the most excellent of all his songs, which it seems very probable to me to be upon that account, because it was a song of the most excellent subject, treating of the love, union, and communion between Christ and his spouse, of which marriage and conjugal love was but a shadow.<sup>11</sup>

Then to the text itself. Song of Songs has two main characters: the lover and his beloved. The lover is a shepherd-king like David (1:4, 7); but he is the son of David (3:7). He stands at the door and knocks in 5:2-3. His carriage in chapter three looks like the tabernacle/temple; and like the Lord in the Exodus, he comes up from the wilderness like a pillar of smoke (3:6), all perfumed with the scents of the temple. The beloved is described as being like Israel, coming up from the wilderness leaning on her lover (8:5). Like Israel in Isaiah 5:1-7, she is repeatedly compared to a vineyard, and to Jerusalem (8:10-12). And while she is his bride, she is also his sister (4:9): Christ is the church's bridegroom and brother, but given the taboo on marrying one's sister in Leviticus 18:9 it seems highly unlikely that this could describe an ordinary Jewish romance.

Ordinary lovers are parted by death, but the love of these lovers is as strong as death. Not even floodwaters can wash it away (8:6-7). It all looks as if Song of Songs is describing that unique story of the love between Christ and the church. And the overall similarity of the book to Psalm 45, which definitely refers to Christ and his marriage, is striking. It is no wonder, then, that Song of Songs, like Revelation, ends with the bride calling 'Come!'

Song of Songs does not simply mouth a doctrine, though. Its sensuous imagery sings its message. It is as if the love story is played on violins. The reader is thus brought, not simply to understand, but to taste and share the delights of the lovers. But this is precisely what Christ's people need, Sibbes knew: it is not enough to be *aware* of Christ's love; we must sense, grasp and *enjoy* it. Only then will we truly love the Lord our God with all our hearts.

Knowing that, Sibbes could never allow preaching to be a mere recital of bare facts: if his listeners were to delight in Christ, they would need a preacher who 'opened' to them how delightful and good he is. And in his sermons on the Song of Songs here, Sibbes shows what a masterful preacher he was, bringing his audience actually to *feel* the love of Christ. That, in fact, is one reason why so many avoid books like this one: they want information, and they want it fast. But Sibbes intends to affect you, to hold your eyes on Jesus that you might develop a

stronger appetite for him. Such work cannot be fast work, but it is profoundly transforming. I urge you, then, to give this book time; if you do, I think I can guarantee more benefit than from ten others.

This is the foreword to the Banner of Truth Puritan Paperbacks title, *The Love of Christ*.

## Endnotes

<sup>[1]</sup> *Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 15, Notes on Scripture*, Ed. Stephen J. Stein (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998), 92, note 147



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