

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

5 Puritan Prescriptions for Gospel-Centered Preaching

MATTHEW D. HASTE, PHD

1

PURITANS WEREN'T CONTENT MERELY TO DEFEND DOCTRINE FROM THE PULPIT;
THEY SOUGHT TO APPLY TRUTH IN THE PEWS BY ENGAGING THE HEARTS OF
THEIR HEARERS

What comes to your mind when you imagine a Puritan pastor in the pulpit? Long, boring sermons? Monotone diatribes? Such notions fail to account for the testimony of men like Humphrey Mills who spent three years struggling to quiet his conscience after hearing a sermon by the famous Puritan pastor, Richard Sibbes (1577–1635). Mills' description of Sibbes provides a more accurate picture of Puritan preachers: "His sweet soul-melting Gospel-sermons won my heart and refreshed me much, for by him I saw and had much of God and was confident in Christ."¹

Centuries later, the physician-turned-pastor Martyn Lloyd-Jones described Sibbes' gospel-centered preaching in medicinal terms: "The heavenly Doctor Sibbes ... was a 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. ... His books [based on his sermons] quieted, soothed, comforted, encouraged, and healed me."²

Physicians of the Soul

That Sibbes could be effective despite the historical distance evidences just how skilled many Puritans were as physicians of the soul. As a result, they have much to say to us today about gospel-centered preaching.³

The Puritans possessed what J. I. Packer called "a minute acquaintance with the human heart."⁴ While historical caricatures tend to emphasize their external scrupulosity, in reality they aimed at the inner person by means of what they called the "plain style" of

¹ Referenced in Michael Reeves, foreword to *The Tender Heart*, by Richard Sibbes, Pocket Puritans (1983; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2011), ix.

² D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (1971; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 175.

³ Portions of this article are adapted from Matthew D. Haste and Shane W. Parker, *The Pastor's Life: Practical Wisdom from the Puritans* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2019).

⁴ J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision for the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 29.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

preaching.⁵ This method, as outlined by the renowned Puritan expositor William Perkins (1558–1602), encouraged preachers to first explain the text of Scripture, then describe its doctrinal significance, and finally to apply it to the particular “experiences and condition of the church.” The best of the Puritans weren’t content merely to defend doctrine from the pulpit; they sought to apply truth in the pews by engaging the hearts of their hearers. The directives below highlight five key strategies for applying the gospel to the heart.

2

Puritan Prescriptions for Gospel-Centered Preaching

1. Let Scripture Illustrate Scripture

Sibbes’ sermons were full of the Bible because he recognized its role in transforming the heart. “Means do not make the heart tender,” he noted, “but God through the use of means softens it by his Word.”⁶ One practical outworking of this conviction was Sibbes’ use of Scripture as a source for sermon illustrations.

For example, he encouraged his hearers to look to God himself for assurance of salvation, instead of trusting in the “the fig leaves of morality.”⁷ By calling to mind the well-known biblical image of fig leaves (Gen. 3:7), Sibbes provided a powerful contrast between the frail, useless attempts to secure one’s own righteousness with the trustworthy foundation of gospel truth.

2. Make Use of Memorable Images

Sibbes explained the gospel with powerful pictures. He did not merely say, “See great things in little beginnings.” He mused, “See a flame in a spark, a tree in a seed.”⁸ He not only called weary Christians to look to Christ, but advised, “When we feel ourselves cold in affection and duty, the best way is to warm ourselves at this fire of his love and mercy.”⁹ For believers who longed to maintain a tender heart, Sibbes encouraged, “Use the means of grace; be always under the sunshine of the gospel.”¹⁰

Such pictures conveyed truth by engaging the imagination. As Sibbes described, “The way to come to the heart is often to pass through the fancy [the imagination].”¹¹ He believed that “the putting of lively colors upon common truths hath oft a strong working

⁵ William Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying*, rev. ed. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1996), 65.

⁶ Sibbes, *The Tender Heart*, 19.

⁷ Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed*, Puritan Paperbacks (1630; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2008), 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁰ Sibbes, *The Tender Heart*, 57.

¹¹ Sibbes, *Works*, 1:66.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

both upon the fancy [the imagination] and our will and affections."¹² These "lively colors" enhanced the appeal of "common truths" by engaging the heart.

3. Be Tender and Tactful

Sibbes counseled pastors to handle young believers with gentleness and to resist the temptation to be overbearing. A tender Savior shouldn't inspire ill-tempered shepherds. That Sibbes managed such a disposition himself seems clear from his reputation among contemporaries and the way he was remembered by his colleagues. In his day, he was known as "the honey mouth" and "the sweet dropper" for his winsome ability to apply the gospel to tender consciences.

Sibbes' diplomatic temperament may have contributed to his willingness to remain in the Church of England, even as some of his protégés began to dissent. In *The Bruised Reed*, Sibbes indirectly cautioned his comrades against being quick to censure other believers or to break fellowship over disputable matters. He valued tact and discretion, remarking, "Where most holiness is, there is most moderation, where it may be without prejudice of piety to God and the good of others. We see in Christ a marvelous temper of absolute holiness, with great moderation."¹³

4. Provide Practical Points of Application

Sibbes sought to comfort the troubled, but he also called the faithful to action. He counseled the "bruised reed" to embrace the work of God in his life, however painful it might be. "It is better to go bruised to heaven than sound to hell."¹⁴ The "smoking flax" must remember how God views her, despite her meager faith. Christ considers not just who we are, but who he will make us to be, for he can fan a spark into a flame.

Such words of encouragement were accompanied by practical instructions for pursuing the means of grace. In *The Bruised Reed*, Sibbes specifically encouraged regular fellowship with other believers, the practice of spiritual disciplines, consistent attendance to hear preaching, and the exercise of grace through spiritual obedience.

5. Keep Christ at the Center

In Jesus alone, Sibbes proclaimed, "All perfections of mercy and love meet."¹⁵ He spoke often of Christ and tied his expositions to the Son's person and work. By drawing the

¹² Ibid., 1:184.

¹³ Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed*, 33.

¹⁴ Ibid., 13.

¹⁵ Ibid., 62.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

heart's attention to the mercy of Christ, Sibbes could counter discouragements, calm scruples, and conquer the heart's deepest fears. Whatever the spiritual infirmity, the work of Christ supplies the cure: "There is more mercy in Christ than sin in us."¹⁶

Sibbes recognized the importance of both engaging the mind and stirring the affections with truths about Jesus. "Because knowledge and affection mutually help one another," he argued, "it is good to keep up our affections of love and delight by all sweet inducements and divine encouragements; for what the heart likes best, the mind studies most."¹⁷ His preaching clearly aimed to inspire hearts to love Christ above all.

4

"UNDER THE SUNSHINE OF THE GOSPEL"

Sibbes and other Puritans provide a faithful example of gospel-centered preaching for pastors today. Though their context is surely different, they addressed the same concerns pastors see in ministry.

Pastor, there are bruised reeds in your midst. Will you lend them strength or increase their burdens? There are smoldering wicks before you every week. Will you fan them into life or snuff them out? Your own heart is sure to grow cold at times. If your sermons will be gospel-centered, you must heed Sibbes' counsel: "Be always under the sunshine of the gospel." Bear this in mind and rest in the tender mercy of our Savior as you endeavor to lead others toward his light and easy yoke.

Editors' note: This article [originally appeared](#) at 9Marks.

Michael D. Haste is Associate Professor of Biblical Spirituality and Biblical Counseling (2020) and Director, Professional Doctoral Studies, at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Haste returned to Southern in 2019 after serving as a professor and pastor in Columbia, South Carolina for four years. He has over a decade of pastoral ministry experience, having served in College Ministry, Adult Discipleship, and as Pastor of Preaching at churches in Kentucky and South Carolina.

He is co-author (with Robert L. Plummer) of *Held in Honor: Wisdom for your Marriage from Voices of the Past* (2015) and co-author (with Shane W. Parker) of *The Pastor's Life: Practical Wisdom from the Puritans* (2019). His work has been published at The Gospel Coalition, *Puritan Reformed Journal*, the *Journal of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, the *Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry*, and *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*.

© 2022, Southern Equip. All rights reserved, July 8, 2022. Retrieved July 13, 2022.

<https://equip.sbts.edu/article/5-puritan-prescriptions-for-gospel-centered-preaching/>

¹⁶ Ibid., 33.

¹⁷ Ibid., 103.