

Puritan Reading I

Timothy L. Goad

TH745

Dr. Chris Mills

The North American Reformed Seminary

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the information contained in two Puritan Classics: *The Bruised Reed* by Richard Sibbes and *The Christian's Great Interest* by William Guthrie. The writer addresses these works with the aim of interacting with the doctrines presented within as well as presenting methods whereby those doctrines might be applied to one's life. While an exhaustive treatment of these works is not possible given the limited parameters of this assignment, it is hoped that a summary presentation of the most salient points in each work will be beneficial to the reader.

The Bruised Reed

In the Publisher's Foreword to this particular work, C. H. Spurgeon once remarked that "[Richard Sibbes] never wastes the student's time. He scatters pearls and diamonds with both hands" (p. vii). A reading of *The Bruised Reed* certainly corroborates this lofty opinion. Before discussing this classic work in greater detail, a bit of biographical information will no doubt be beneficial to understanding its context.

According to Beeke and Pederson (2006), "Richard Sibbes was born in 1577 at Tostock, Suffolk, in the Puritan county of old England" (p. 534). Son of Paul Sibbes, a wheelwright by trade and a Christian himself, Richard might have followed in his father's steps, were it not for his incurable fascination with books. This fascination reportedly bothered his father so much that the elder Sibbes attempted to dissuade him by promising to supply him with his own wheelwright tools. Undaunted by his father's loving attempt at bribery, Richard entered St. John's College, Cambridge, in 1595. Sometime during his studies, Richard was converted under the ministry of Paul Baynes. According to Beeke and Pederson (2006), Sibbes referred to Baynes as his "father in the gospel" (p. 534). Graduating with a Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1610,

Sibbes accepted an appointment as a lecturer at Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge. Despite several attempts to have him removed from this position because of his Puritan tendencies, Sibbes held the post until his installation as minister of the gospel at Gray's Inn, London, in 1617. Sibbes held this position until he decided to return to Cambridge in 1626, where he assumed the title of Vicar of Holy Trinity Church. In 1627, Sibbes was granted a Doctorate in Divinity. According to the aforementioned Publisher's Foreword, he was thereafter "frequently referred to as 'the heavenly Doctor Sibbes,' on account of both the matter and the manner of his preaching" (p. viii). Sibbes continued his ministry at both Gray's Inn, London and Holy Trinity, Cambridge until his death in 1635, at the age of 58 years. According to Beeke and Pederson (2006), English writer Izaak Walton would later write of Sibbes, "Of this blest man, let this just praise be given: heaven was in him, before he was in heaven" (p. 535).

In Isaiah 42:3, the prophet writes, "A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth." *The Bruised Reed* is thought by many to be the best exposition of this verse ever written. As Beeke and Pederson (2006) note:

Richard Baxter said that God used the reading of this treatise to effect his own conversion. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote, 'I shall never cease to be grateful to Richard Sibbes who was 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... I found at that time that Richard Sibbes, who was known in London in the early seventeenth century as the 'Heavenly Doctor Sibbes' was an unfailing remedy... *The Bruised Reed* quieted, soothed, comforted, encouraged, and healed me.' (p. 541)

What makes this particular work stand out among similar works is not merely the author's meticulous exegesis of the aforementioned passage but the obvious concern that he has for his

readers. His is a work, not characterized by the cold orthodoxy of a disinterested academician, but of a man who clearly sought to have the truth of God's word resonate in the hearts and minds of those for whom he wrote. According to Packer (1990), this sentiment is what led many during his day to refer to him as "the sweet dropper" (p. 179).

Sibbes (2011) begins this work by pointing out that the words of Isaiah 42:1-3 "are alleged by Matthew as fulfilled now in Christ (Matt. 12:18-20). In them are propounded, first, the calling of Christ to his office; secondly, the manner in which he carries it out" (p. 1). Christ, the author maintains, was called as God's servant. In fact, He was called to perform the greatest service ever rendered in making atonement for the sins of His elect. In this service, Sibbes (2011) observes, not only is God satisfied with the work of His servant, but He is likewise pleased with the beneficiaries of it:

What a support to our faith is this, that God the Father, the party offended by our sins, is so well pleased with the work of redemption! And what a comfort is this, that, seeing God's love rests on Christ, as well pleased in Him, we may gather that He is well pleased with us, if we be in Christ! (p. 2)

Sibbes (2011) is also quick to add that what provides the sinner with an added measure of assurance is that redemption is not something arranged exclusively between the Father and the Son but was actually "founded upon the joint agreement of all three persons of the Trinity" (p. 2). The Father gave a commission to Christ, Christ willingly accepted His commission as God's servant, and the Holy Spirit superintended the entire series of events that ultimately led to redemption's being accomplished and applied.

Sibbes (2011) then refers to the manner in which Christ pursued His calling. Contrary to what the Jewish world's expectations might have been in their anticipation of a Deliverer, Christ

did not arrive on the scene as a conquering king bent on the destruction of His enemies and determined to free the Jews from Roman oppression. In fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, while He would in fact "bring forth justice to the nations" (Is. 42:1), He did not "cry out or raise His voice, nor make His voice heard in the street" (Is. 42:2). Instead, the Lord's arrival was without particular fanfare. He came quietly and calmly, saying, "Come to Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden" (Matt. 11:28). As Sibbes (2011) indicates, Christ came to deal with mankind:

...as bruised reeds and smoking flax; not trees, but reeds; and not whole, but bruised reeds. The church is compared to weak things: to a dove amongst the fowls; to a vine amongst the plants; to sheep amongst the beasts; to a woman, which is the weaker vessel.
(p. 3)

People today seldom speak of things like reeds¹ (whether bruised or otherwise) and flax² (whether of the smoking or non-smoking variety), but they are quite illustrative in making Isaiah's point. By way of analogy, the prophet used these materials to describe how Christ came, not to harm the weak and vulnerable but to nurture them and use them in His service. This particular point brings to mind the apostle's words in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29:

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

¹ A "reed" is considered to be a blade or stem of any variety of tall grass that normally grows in wet or marshy area. A "bruised reed" then is a reference to one of these blades of grass that has been weakened either by the wind, by being trampled by animals, etc. (Source: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reed>).

² "Flax" refers to a fibrous plant that was often harvested for the production of wicks that were used in oil lamps (Source: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/flax>).

It is on this basis that the author begins to expound further upon Isaiah's prophecy.

The bruised reed, Sibbes (2011) suggests, is "a man that for the most part is in some misery, as those were that came to Christ for help, and by misery he is brought to see sin as the cause of it" (p. 3). This man is one who, being aware of his sin and the bruising that results from it and seeing no way of helping himself, hopes that he might find help in another. As Sibbes (2011) points out, this man's "spark of hope being opposed by doubtings and fears rising from corruption makes him as smoking flax; so that both these together, a bruised reed and smoking flax, make up the state of a poor distressed man" (p. 4). This man, the author writes, is spoken about in Matthew 5:3 as being "poor in spirit." The reader must here acknowledge that, contrary to what is a fairly common belief, in this particular passage, Jesus is not speaking in prescriptive but descriptive terms. In other words, He is not suggesting that for one to receive God's blessing, he must become poor in spirit. On the contrary, only those who recognize that they are, in fact, by nature, poor in spirit will receive God's blessing. Lloyd-Jones (1959) is particularly helpful here, writing:

There is no one in the kingdom of God who is not poor in spirit. It is the fundamental characteristic of the Christian and of the citizen of the kingdom of heaven, and all the other characteristics are in a sense the result of this one. (p. 33)

Thus, anyone who would be a citizen of heaven must be a bruised reed and a smoking flax. As Sibbes (2011) notes, "This bruising is required before conversion that so the Spirit may make way for himself into the heart by leveling all proud, high thoughts, and that we may understand ourselves to be what indeed we are by nature." In addition to leveling those who are saved, this bruising also makes the sinner that much more aware of the preciousness of Christ and the truly good news of the gospel.

It is not as though this bruising is merely a prerequisite to salvation. Even those who have known the grace of God in salvation are in need of periodic “bruising” so that, in the words of Sibbes (2011), “reeds may know themselves to be reeds, and not oaks.” This distinction is certainly in keeping with Hebrews 12:6 which assures the believer, “For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives.” Thus was Peter bruised when reduced to bitter tears in Matthew 26:75. As Sibbes (2011) observes, “This reed [Peter], till he met with this bruise, had more wind in him than pith when he said, ‘Though all forsake thee, I will not’ (Matt. 26:33)” (p. 5). David was similarly bruised until he confessed his sins, acknowledging that he had sinned against God and God alone (Ps. 51:4).

The ungodly (i.e., those ignorant of God’s ways), failing to understand God’s disciplining of His children, are prone simply to write them off as being miserable people. Conversely, God’s children cannot help but recognize God’s discipline as a continuing work of His transformative grace. In fact, these periodic bruising are necessary to conform the believer to Christ who was bruised for them (Is. 53:5).

Not only does Christ not break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax, He cherishes those with whom He deals in this manner. As Sibbes (2011) relates, Christ is not unlike the doctor who, while he does occasionally have to inflict pain on his patients, does so only to make them whole again. One is reminded here of Paul’s poignant observation in his letter to the Romans wherein he assures the believer, “And we know that God causes all things [including those which may bring pain and suffering] to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28). What is more, even when the infliction of pain is inevitable, the good doctor will attempt to be as gentle as possible. This gentle nature can also be seen in Christ, not only in His actions, but the designations assigned to

Him in Scripture. For example, He is often referred to as a lamb (John 1:9, 36; 1 Pet. 1:19; Rev. 5:12, 13:8). Isaiah referred to Him prophetically as the “Prince of Peace.” In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says of Himself, “I am gentle and humble in heart” (Matt. 11:29).

Christ’s gentle spirit appears throughout His ministry. As previously mentioned, His first coming was not accompanied by tremendous fanfare followed by the swift and sure destruction of His enemies. He did not come to establish His sovereign rule over the nations (at least not in the physical sense). Instead, Christ came to earth as a baby, born in obscurity, and grew in stature and wisdom. When the time was right, He began what would only be an approximately three year period of ministry characterized by meekness and gentleness. As Sibbes (2011) observes:

See the gracious way he executes his offices. As a prophet, he came with blessing in his mouth, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’ (Matt. 5:3), and invited those to come to him whose hearts suggested most exceptions against themselves, ‘Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden’ (Matt. 11:28). How did his heart yearn when he saw the people ‘as sheep having no shepherd’ (Matt. 9:36)! He never turned any back again that came to him, though some went away of themselves. He came to die as a priest for his enemies... He is a meek king; he will admit mourners into his presence, a king of poor and afflicted persons. As he has beams of majesty, so he has a heart of mercy and compassion.

In spite of these particular descriptors, one must be careful to remember that the Lamb of God is also the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev. 5:5). As Sibbes (2011) reminds his readers, Christ will “tear into pieces those that will not have him rule over them (Luke 19:14). He will not [however] show his strength against those who prostrate themselves before Him” (p. 9).

Under the heading, “Who are the Bruised Reeds?” the author asks and answers several fundamental questions concerning the truths he has presented thus far in his book. The first question the author poses is, “How shall we know whether we are such as may expect mercy?” Every man is a sinner by nature and as such he will, from time to time, suffer the consequences of his sin. However, only those who have been redeemed can expect mercy. What are the surest signs that one can indeed expect God’s mercy? Sibbes (2011) suggests eight conditions that indicate that a man can expect God’s mercy:

(1) The man who has been bruised will be content with nothing but with mercy from him who has bruised him. (2) A man who has been bruised judges sin the greatest evil and the favor of God the greatest good. (3) He would rather hear of mercy than of a kingdom. (4) He has poor opinions of himself, and thinks that he is not worth the earth he treads on. (5) Towards others he is not censorious, as being taken up at home, but is full of sympathy and compassion to those who are under God’s hand. (6) He thinks that those who walk in the comforts of God’s Spirit are the happiest men in the world. (7) He trembles at the word of God (Is. 66:2) and honors the very feet of those blessed instruments that bring peace unto him (Rom. 10:15). (8) He is more taken up with the inward exercises of a broken heart than with formality, and is yet careful to use all sanctified means to convey comfort. (p. 11)

In short, the man who can expect God’s mercy when in sin is the man who truly understands what sin is, what he deserves for committing it and is thus broken by it. Once broken, he realizes that there is nowhere else to turn but to Christ.

Sibbes (2011) then addresses the question concerning how one comes to this state of mind. In answering this question, he points out that one’s bruising is a state into which God

brings the sinner and, at the same time, a duty to be performed by the sinner. In other words, while it is certainly true that God chastises the sinning saint, the sinner who recognizes God's chastisement will also be inclined to chastise himself. He will see himself much as the apostle Paul did, declaring himself a "wretched man" in need of deliverance from his "body of death" (Rom. 7:24). He will likewise "discipline [his] body to keep it under control" (1 Cor. 9:27) lest he further dishonor the Lord. Far from being a mere ascetic, thinking that there is something worthy of merit in abusing the body, what Paul reveals here is very simply an abject detestation of the remaining sin that still plagued him. Sibbes (2011) goes on to write, "We must join with God in bruising ourselves. When he humbles us, let us humble ourselves, and not stand out against him, for then he will redouble his strokes" (p. 11).

In the third chapter of this work, the author turns his attention to explaining Christ's dealings with the smoking flax. As defined previously, the "flax" to which Isaiah refers in this Messianic prophecy is a fibrous plant that was often harvested for the production of wicks that were used in oil lamps. Thus a "smoking flax" refers to a wick that was previously burning brightly but, having lost its flame, merely smolders. Speaking of Christ's relationship to the smoking flax, Sibbes (2011) writes:

In pursuing his calling, Christ will not quench the smoking flax, or wick, but will blow it up till it flames. In smoking flax there is but a little light, and that weak, as being unable to flame, and that little mixed with smoke. The observations from this are that, 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; but that Christ will not quench this smoking flax.

Sibbes (2011) goes on to observe that Christians exist in several “ages.” Some are like newborn babes, some are young men, and some are mature. Like the mighty oak tree that arises from a small, seemingly insignificant acorn, all Christians begin as small, seemingly insignificant new creations and are yet capable of growing into mighty men and women of God. Sibbes’ (2011) point is that those who believe should not be discouraged by the small beginnings of grace but:

...look upon ourselves as elected to be ‘holy and without blame’ (Eph. 1:4). Let us look on our imperfect beginning only to enforce further striving to perfection, and to keep us in a low opinion of ourselves as Christ does, who looks on us as those he intends to fit for himself. Christ values us by what we shall be, and by what we are elected unto. We call a little plant a tree, because it is growing up to be so. ‘Who has despised the day of small things?’ (Zech. 4:10). Christ would not have us despise little things. (p. 17)

If believers learn little else from Sibbes’ (2011) offerings, this is without a doubt one of the most necessary in light of what is (tragically) often experienced between new believers and their allegedly more mature brethren. Why do those demanding that new believers be more doctrinally astute before being accepted as fellow believers often call into question the sincerity and authenticity of their simply worded testimonies? Why do some place unrealistic demands on those who, like the man born blind in the ninth chapter of John’s gospel, know little more than that they were once blind but now they see? As Sibbes (2011) notes:

The glorious angels disdain not attendance on little ones – little in their own eyes, and little in the eyes of the world. Grace, though little in quantity, yet is much in vigour and worth. It is Christ that raises the worth of little and mean places and persons. (p. 17)

Where there is but a small, smoldering ember causing the flax to smoke instead of burn brightly, the mature believer, like Christ, will not seek to quench it but will exhaust all available means to

fan it into full flame. The mature believer will recognize, as Sibbes (2011) observes, that the Christian categorized as a smoking flax is not one in whom there is no grace, but one in whom there is a mixture of grace and corruption. In this sense, all believers, at one time or another, can be thus characterized as smoking flaxes. As Sibbes (2011) writes:

The reason for this mixture is that we carry about us a double principle, grace and nature. The end of it is especially to preserve us from those two dangerous rocks which our natures are prone to dash upon, security and pride, and to force us to pitch our rest on justification, not sanctification, which, besides imperfection, has some stains. Our spiritual fire is like our ordinary fire here blow, that is, mixed. Fire is most pure in its own element above; so shall all our graces be when we are where we would be, in heaven, which is our proper element. (p. 19)

The primary reason Christ will not quench the smoking flax is because “the least spark of grace is precious” (p. 20). Indeed, the biggest, most beneficial flames all begin with the tiniest spark. For this reason, Jesus refrains from putting them out, no matter how difficult they may be to discern. Jesus demonstrates this gentle approach in His notable patience with Thomas, who doubted His very presence (John 20:27). Jesus did not excoriate or belittle the young disciple but offered him tangible proof that He had risen from the dead and was now standing right in front of him. Likewise, Jesus exhibited great patience with the two men on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24) who, in their despondency, had begun to doubt whether Jesus had come to redeem Israel. Instead of upbraiding them for their lack of faith, Jesus, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). Responding to this tremendous event, the two men, having recognized Jesus, asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the

Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32). Instead of quenching them, Jesus had quite obviously fanned these two “smoking flaxes” into full flame! Sibbes (2011) sees in these examples a wonderful pattern for the believer to follow and yet, at the same time, he is not so naïve as to believe that this is sometimes not the case. He writes:

Here see the opposite dispositions in the holy nature of Christ and the impure nature of man. Man for a little smoke will quench the light. Christ, we see, even cherishes the least beginnings. How he bore with the many imperfections of his poor disciples! If he did sharply check them, it was in love, and that they might shine the brighter. Can we have a better pattern to follow than this from him by whom we hope to be saved? (p. 22)

As Sibbes (2011) goes on to point out, “It would be a good contest amongst Christians, one to labour to give no offense, and the other to labour to take none. The best men are severe to themselves, tender over others” (p. 23).

In his fifth chapter, Sibbes (2011) sharpens the focus on these matters to their pastoral application. Preachers, he says, should be very careful how they deal with young believers, being careful not to “pitch matters too high, making things necessary evidences of grace which agree not to the experience of many a good Christian, and laying salvation and damnation upon things that are not fit to bear so great a weight” (p. 26). Additionally, Sibbes (2011) opines, the truth is most beautiful and powerful when it is presented in its clearest form. This idea is exemplified very clearly in the apostle Paul, who, while no doubt a very learned man, spoke very plainly to his readers. As he says to the Thessalonian Christians in his first letter to them, “But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children” (1 Thess. 2:7) and “...you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children” (1 Thess. 2:11). Following the example of Christ, who came

down from heaven, emptying Himself, as it were, of the majesty that was rightly His and teaching with all gentleness and patience, Paul became all things to all men (1 Cor. 9:22) in hopes that he might win some to Christ. As Sibbes (2011) notes, many preachers insist on engaging in “doubtful disputations” (Rom. 14:1) intended to make themselves look more intelligent, all the while leaving their hearers in relative ignorance concerning what the word of God says. As in Sibbes’ (2011) day, what is most needful in today’s church is simply the clear presentation of gospel truth by preachers who trust that, even in its simplest form, if faithfully delivered, God’s word will not return to Him void but shall accomplish that which He pleases (Is. 55:11).

Not only should those who preach do so in a way that does not quench the smoking flax, everyone in a position of authority in the church should act so as to prevent the same. As Sibbes (2011) writes:

In the censures of the church, it is more suitable to the spirit of Christ to incline to the milder part, and not to kill a fly on the forehead with a mallet, nor shut men out of heaven for a trifle. The very snuffers (wick-trimmers) of the tabernacle were made of pure gold, to shew the purity of those censures whereby the light of the church is given for edification, not destruction. (p. 30).

The author goes on to point out that insolent behavior exhibited toward those characterized as “smoking flax” is not only unseemly in any who themselves look for mercy, but also denies the reality that Christians are in fact debtors to the weak in many ways. For example, the weak play a part in curbing the sinful tendencies of the believer. Given that believers are taught not to do anything in their liberty that might perhaps make the “weaker brother” stumble, the weaker brother can often remind one of the unprofitable nature of his own deeds. Sibbes

(2011) puts it thusly: “A holy aim in things neither clearly right nor wrong makes the judgments of men, although seemingly contrary, yet not so much blamable” (p. 32). In summarizing this point, suffice it to say that those who are weak can still teach a thing or two to the strong. Thus, they should not always be censured but dealt with patiently. As Sibbes (2011) writes, “The Holy Ghost is content to dwell in smoky, offensive souls. Oh, that that Spirit would breathe into our spirits the same merciful disposition!” (p. 33).

How does one determine if he is a smoking flax that Christ will not quench? Sibbes (2011) provides three rules that are most effective in making this all-important determination. First, he writes, “We must have two eyes, one to see imperfections in ourselves and others, the other to see what is good.” Secondly, the believer must not judge himself according to how he feels. If subjective feelings (as opposed to objective truth) determine his standing in grace, the believer may often see “nothing but the smoke of distrustful thoughts” (p. 35). Thirdly, the believer must not fall prey to false reasoning. In other words, simply because one’s fire does not burn as brightly as another’s does not mean that there is no fire present at all. As Sibbes (2011) observes, “By false conclusions we may come to sin against the commandment in bearing false witness against ourselves” (p. 35).

What is the primary rule governing how the believer is to examine himself to determine whether he is to be characterized as smoking flax or devoid of grace altogether? According to Sibbes (2011) he should measure himself according to the covenant of grace. Sadly, Christians often measure themselves, not against God’s standard, but against other believers. This activity, Sibbes (2011) argues, simply should not be. Contrary to popular sentiment, the Christian life is not a competition in which one engages with his fellow believers as a means of determining spiritual fitness. The real question is not how much grace one can exhibit but whether or not he

has been made a partaker of the covenant of grace through the atoning work of Christ. As Sibbes (2011) observes:

A weak hand may receive a rich jewel. A few grapes will show that the plant is a vine, and not a thorn. It is one thing to be deficient in grace, and another thing to lack grace altogether. God knows we have nothing of ourselves, therefore in the covenant of grace he requires no more than he gives, but gives what he requires, and accepts what he gives... What is the gospel itself but a merciful moderation, in which Christ's obedience is esteemed ours, and our sins laid upon him, wherein God, from being a judge, becomes our Father, pardoning our sins and accepting our obedience, though feeble and blemished? We are now brought to heaven under the covenant of grace by a way of love and mercy. (p. 36)

Bridges (1991) provides some helpful insight by comparing the modern prevailing sentiment to what he refers to as the "performance treadmill":

All true Christians readily agree that justification is by grace through faith in Christ. And if we stop to think about it, we agree that glorification is also solely by God's grace. Jesus purchased for us not only forgiveness of sins (justification) but also eternal life (glorification). But sanctification – the entire Christian experience between justification and glorification – is another story. At best, the Christian life is viewed as a mixture of personal performance and God's grace. It is not that we have consciously sorted it all out in our minds and have concluded that our relationship with God, for example, is based on 50 percent performance and 50 percent grace. Rather it is a subconscious assumption arising from our own innate legalism – reinforced and fueled by the Christian culture we live in. (pp. 19-20)

If, after measuring oneself according to the covenant of grace, one determines that he is indeed in possession of said grace, ten corroborating truths will be in evidence.

First, there will be a recognition that “if there be any holy fire in us, it is kindled from heaven by the Father of lights, who ‘commanded the light to shine out of darkness’ (2 Cor. 4:6)” (p. 38). What an amazing thing indeed God has done in those who believe. The same power used by God to command the light to shine out of the darkness is at work in the believer’s heart “to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

Secondly, there will be a recognition that “the least divine light has heat with it in some measure” (p. 38). In other words, a little of the Holy Spirit’s illumination is capable of going a long way in terms of helping the believer avoid temptation and mortify sin. As Sibbes (2011) writes, “This is the reason why Christians that have light that is little for quantity, but heavenly for quality, persevere, when men of larger apprehensions sink” (p. 39).

Thirdly, Sibbes (2011) offers, “Where this heavenly light is kindled, it directs in the right way” (p. 39). That is, after all, the purpose of the light that Christians possess as a result of the indwelling Holy Spirit. As Jesus told His disciples in the sixteenth chapter of John’s gospel, “When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13).

Fourthly, the author maintains, “Where this fire is, it will sever things of diverse natures, and show a difference between such things as gold and dross” (p. 40). In other words, the fire that one possesses, no matter how seemingly insignificant it may be thought to be, is nevertheless capable of helping the believer to distinguish between what is profitable and what is not.

Fifthly, Sibbes (2011) observes, “So far as a man is spiritual, so far is light delightful to him” (p. 40). Indeed, to the extent that the Christian is striving to walk, not according to the

flesh, but according to the Spirit, the Spirit's illumination will be a precious thing. As Sibbes (2011) notes, "In the case of a carnal man, the light breaks in on him, but he labors to block its entrance. He has no delight in coming to the light" (p. 40). The believer, on the other hand, embraces the light and depends on it as a guide for godly conduct.

In the sixth place, Sibbes (2011) points out that "Fire, where it is present, is in some degree active" (p. 42). Granted, where little fire exists, there will be little ability to fend off temptation and sin, but it is nonetheless able to do so in some measure. This ability, small though it may be, is what makes diligence so important for the believer in terms of his routinely availing himself of God's means of grace (e.g., prayer, Bible study, fellowship, etc.), which are able to fan what little spark may exist into full flame.

Seventhly, the author writes, "Fire makes metals pliable and malleable" (p. 42). Like fire, grace operates in a similar fashion in that it makes the heart more receptive to the things of God. One of the most necessary of the believer's fundamental characteristics is a malleable and teachable heart.

In the eighth place, Sibbes (2011) insists that the one in whom there is yet fire should acknowledge that "Fire, as much as it can, sets everything on fire" (p. 42). This contention is simply the author's way of saying that true believers are capable of infecting anything and everything with their fire. As the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians in his first epistle, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

Ninthly, Sibbes (2011) writes, "Sparks, by nature, fly upwards" (p. 42). In like manner, the Spirit of grace can carry the believer's soul to heaven and set before him "holy and heavenly aims" (p. 42). The believer is enabled, for example, "to believe, to love God, not

because of a particular emergency... but as a loving heart is carried to the thing loved for the sake of some excellency in it” (p. 43).

Finally, Sibbes (2011) observes, “Fire, if it has any matter to feed on, enlarges itself and mounts higher and higher, and, the higher it rises, the purer is the flame” (p. 43). Where God’s grace is, it will grow both in measure and purity.

In the next chapter of work, Sibbes (2011) continues with an offering of help for the weak Christian. He writes:

By meditation on [the aforementioned] rules and signs, much comfort may be brought to the souls of the weakest. That it may be in greater abundance, let me add something to help them over some few ordinary objections and secret thoughts against themselves which, getting within the heart, oftentimes keep them low. (p. 45)

The author then addresses this particular issue under two separate headings: “Temptations which Hinder Comfort” (p. 45) and “Weakness Should not Keep us from Duty” (p. 50).

Under the first heading, Sibbes (2011) relates to his readers four common temptations which often negatively impact the believer’s comfort. In the first place, he writes, there are some who “think they have no faith at all because they have no full assurance” (p. 45). This notion, however, is without merit because, no matter how mature the believer may be, there will always be a remnant of the old man with whom he must deal. The apostle Paul exemplifies this truth perfectly in the seventh chapter of his Epistle to the Romans when he writes, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (Rom. 7:15). All believers would do well to understand that salvation does not make one perfect this side of heaven, rather it renders the sinner acceptable unto God on the basis of Christ’s righteousness.

Secondly, Sibbes (2011) notes, “In weakness of body some think grace dies, because their performances are feeble, their spirits, which are the instruments of their souls’ actions, being weakened” (p. 45). What believers in this category need is a more thorough understanding of the true nature of God’s saving grace which, like all of His gifts, is without repentance. Normally, this particular temptation is most often experienced by those who believe that they were themselves responsible for securing God’s saving grace. It only stands to reason, therefore, that if they secured it, they could just as easily forfeit it through poor performance. This notion, of course, does not square with what is a wealth of Scriptures to the contrary (e.g., John 6:37-39, 44; Rom. 8:29-30, 35-39; Phil. 1:8; etc.).

Thirdly, Sibbes (2011) maintains, “Some are haunted with hideous representations to their imaginations, and with vile and unworthy thoughts of God, of Christ, of the Word, which, as busy flies, disquiet and molest their peace” (p. 46). As the author insists, Satan is quite adept at commandeering the believer’s thoughts. Once he has gained a foothold in the mind, those thoughts very often lead to actions that further fuel the imagination with corruption. As Sibbes (2011) indicates, Satan is generally effective in this regard because “this is an aggravation of the sinfulness of natural corruption, that is so deeply rooted and so generally spread in our nature” (p. 47). Only a mind held captive to the Word of God and reminded consistently of God’s grace will be able to deflect this ploy of the devil.

The fourth temptation that the believer often faces which negatively affects his comfort is as follows: “Some think, when they become more troubled with the smoke of corruption than they were before, therefore they are worse than they were” (p. 49). Sibbes (2011) argues that, while this is a common temptation, precisely the opposite is true. In other words, the more one

recognizes corruption, the more mature he is. As the author writes, “None are so aware of corruption as those whose souls are most alive” (p. 49).

Sibbes (2011) next chapter is entitled, “Duties and Discouragements.” In this chapter, not only does the author reiterate the Christian’s duty to persist in carrying out his responsibilities and duties as a child of God, he also provides a great deal of helpful information on dealing with the discouragements that are sure to befall all believers from time to time. He begins by identifying the source of discouragements. These discouragements do not, for example, derive from the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit. More often than not, Sibbes (2011) argues, discouragements are the result of a vexation of scruples. For the reader who is perhaps unfamiliar with the term, a “scruple” is a feeling of doubt or hesitation prompted by a feeling of wrongdoing. In other words, scruples involve one’s second-guessing a particular course of action. What the author suggests is that Christians are often frightened into inaction when it involves even their best duties. It is as if Satan has thrown “dust in their eyes in their way to heaven” (p. 57). In other cases, particular diseases of the body may hinder the Christian from his duties. In still other instances, ignorance plays a significant role in discouraging the believer from his duties.

Whatever the actual cause of discouragement, Sibbes (2011) offers a few words of encouragement to those in this category. He reminds his readers that “Weaknesses do not break covenant with God,” nor do they “debar the believer from mercy” (p. 58). In fact, the opposite is true as weaknesses incline God to us all the more (Ps. 78:39). The author also notes that “If Christ should not be merciful to our weaknesses, he should not have a people to serve him” (p. 58). This truth is one of the most comforting of all as it reminds the believer that he has a merciful Savior who is longsuffering and quick to forgive.

Sadly, but certainly not surprisingly, not all who profess to know Christ appreciate His mercy. In the tenth chapter of this work, Sibbes (2011) moves on to a discussion of “the various sorts of men that offend deeply against this merciful disposition of Christ” (p. 67).

The first individual in this category is the man who sees himself beyond the reach of Christ’s mercy and thus continues, unrepentant, in sin. As Sibbes (2011) points out, however, “None are damned in the church but those that are determined to be” (p. 67).

Secondly, there are those who believe that they can act contrary to the law of God and yet maintain a certain entitlement to mercy. These individuals might best fit into the category of what is today referred to as the “carnal Christian.” While it is true that Christians do in fact wrestle with remaining issues of the flesh, the true believer will, by virtue of the indwelling Holy Spirit, strive to avoid sin at all costs and repent of it when it does happen to occur. Sibbes (2011) provides a bit of necessary clarification on this topic as well, writing:

The best of us all may offend against this merciful disposition if we are not watchful against that liberty which our carnal disposition will be ready to take from it. Thus we reason, if Christ will not quench the smoking flax, what need we fear that any neglect on our part can bring us into a comfortless condition. (p. 69)

The author concludes, however, that the believer must never presume on Christ’s mercy for such activity is tantamount to quenching the Holy Spirit in violation of Paul’s clear admonition in 1 Thessalonians 5:19.

One of the more interesting portions of this chapter is Sibbes’ (2011) warning against the dangers of one’s taking advantage of the bruised. As the author observes, the Roman Catholic Church is one of the chief offenders in this regard as their insistence on confession, satisfaction, merit, and purgatory are either “physicians of no value, or tormentors and not physicians at all”

(p. 75). It is as if they take advantage of the misery of others as a means of “raising temporal advantage to themselves” (p. 75). Lest one look with too much disdain upon the Roman Catholic Church, all believers would do well to understand the innate tendency that they may yet possess to take advantage of those who are bruised, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Often, the best course of action is simply to commit oneself to praying for the bruised while, at the same time, assuring them of the availability of a listening ear and loving counsel.

The remainder of Sibbes’ (2011) work focuses on the comfort that one finds in the reality of reigning grace. He offers numerous suggestions for how the believer, in times of seeming spiritual defeat and despondency might gain true victory through the victory of Christ. A statement at the end of this work makes for a fitting end to this review. Sibbes (2011) writes:

Let us then bring our hearts to holy resolutions, and set ourselves upon that which is good, and against that which is ill, in ourselves or others, according to our callings, with this encouragement, that Christ’s grace and power will go along with us. What would have become of that great work of reformation of religion in the latter-spring of the gospel if men had not been armed with invincible courage to overcome all hindrances, with this faith, that the cause was Christ’s, and that he would not fail to help his own cause?... The very belief that faith shall be victorious is a means to make it so indeed. Believe it, therefore, that, though it is often as smoking flax, yet it shall prevail. If it prevails with God himself in trials, shall it not prevail over all other opposition? Let us wait a while, ‘stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord’ (Exod. 14:13). (p. 127)

The Christian’s Great Interest

William Guthrie is believed to have been one of the greatest of the Scottish divines. Born at Pitforth in the shire of Angus in 1620, Guthrie was the eldest of five sons born to James

Guthrie, three of whom became ministers. According to Beeke and Pederson (2006), Guthrie graduated from St. Andrews in 1638 with a Master of Arts degree. Once he found himself called to the ministry, Guthrie gave his family inheritance to a younger brother “so that he would be free to minister unencumbered by earthly cares” (p. 709). Licensed to preach in 1642, Guthrie ministered for more than twenty years in Fenwick where hundreds of people routinely gathered to hear him preach. Shortly after marrying Agnes Campbell, Guthrie was called to serve as a chaplain during the Scottish Civil War. Despite falling gravely ill while serving in this capacity, Guthrie was providentially preserved and, after the war, resumed his ministry at Fenwick.

According to Beeke and Pederson (2006), “In 1657, a collection of Guthrie’s unedited notes from his sermons on Isaiah 55 were published without his consent” (p. 711) under the title of *A Clear, Attractive, Warning Beam of Light*. Soon thereafter, Guthrie had this work republished under the title of *The Christian’s Great Interest*. As Beeke and Pederson (2006) further observe, “John Owen was much impressed with these writings. He said Guthrie’s little book contained more divinity than all of his own writings combined. ‘He is one of the greatest divines that ever wrote,’ Owen said” (p. 711).

On a visit to his hometown of Pitforthly to tend to family matters, Guthrie fell gravely ill and on October 10, 1665, he died at the age of forty-five. Sadly, the majority of Guthrie’s unpublished works were, according to Beeke and Pederson (2006), “destroyed in 1682 by a soldier searching his widow’s home” (p. 712).

The Christian’s Great Interest is written in two parts, each of which seeks to answer a single question. Part I, entitled “The trial of a saving interest in Christ” and comprised of six chapters, addresses the question, “How shall a man know if he has a true and special interest in Christ, and whether he has, or may lay claim to, God’s favor and salvation?” Part II, entitled

“How to attain a saving interest in Christ” and covering four chapters, addresses the question, “What shall they do who want the marks of a true and saving interest in Christ already spoken of, and neither can nor dare pretend unto them?”

In the first chapter in Part I, Guthrie begins answering the question concerning how one may know if he has a claim to God’s favor in salvation. He does this by first stipulating several important presuppositions that one must observe to arrive at a satisfactory answer. Each of these presuppositions is addressed in summary form below.

The first thing one must know to determine whether or not he has a claim to God’s favor in salvation is that contrary to the opinion of many, man can know this. This realization, Guthrie (2002) maintains:

...may be more easily attained unto than many imagine; for not only hath the Lord commanded men to know their interest in Him...but many of the saints have attained unto the clear persuasion of their interest in Christ, and in God as their own God. (p. 23)

According to Guthrie (2002), “Whosoever receive Christ are justly reputed the children of God” (p. 24). This position is certainly validated by John 1:12, “But as many as received Him, to them gave He the power to become the sons of God.” In short, the author maintains, Scripture is, in fact, sufficient to convince a man that he has an interest in Christ.

The second of Guthrie’s (2002) presuppositions is that “to be savingly in covenant with God is of the highest importance” (p. 25). As Jesus expressed in Matthew’s gospel, “the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matt. 7:14). This singular truth should cause every man to consider very seriously whether he is in a right relationship with God and, if not, to seek Him with his whole heart. The sad reality is that man, fallen in sin, is thus unaware of the seriousness of his predicament without Christ and lacks the

faculties with which to respond to biblical truth. The author clarifies this truth in his next premise.

Guthrie's (2002) third presupposition is that "We must allow our state to be determined by Scripture" (p. 25). Although Guthrie made this his third presupposition, one could very well argue that it should stand as the primary or overarching presupposition involving the truth of man's innate condition. Unless a man believes the Bible to be true concerning his fallen nature, he will simply deny it, all the while being blissfully unaware of his peril. If, on the other hand, a man agrees with Scripture's assessment of his condition, he may indeed be assured of his interest in the grace of God.

In the fourth place, Guthrie (2002) offers five reasons why so few attain to a distinct knowledge of their interest in Christ. These include: (1) "Ignorance of God and His ways" (p. 26). The author writes that man is ignorant of the fact that salvation is the result of God's love freely given to him and not because of anything in man himself. Man is also ignorant concerning how that love effectually discovers itself to his heart (p. 27). In other words, man fails to recognize the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit (as opposed to anything he can do for himself) as the catalyst required to awaken him to the knowledge that he has an interest in the Savior's love; (2) Men who fail to attain a knowledge of their interest in Christ are guilty of "Dealing deceitfully with God and their own consciences" (p. 30). The author is referring here to the danger associated with so-called "secret sins." If one harbors unrepentant sin in his heart, knowing full well that he is doing so, he has no reason to suspect that God will grant him an assurance of his interest in Christ. As Guthrie (2002) indicates:

It is the thing which hinders them, marring their confidence and access in all their approaches unto God. 'Ye have forsaken Me, and served other gods: wherefore I will

deliver you no more.’ [Judges 10:13.] The idolatries of the people are cast up to them by the Lord, and their suit rejected thereupon. (p. 31)

Such besetting sins are to be abandoned if one desires to be sure of his interest in Christ; (3) Men who lack assurance of their interest in Christ are often guilty of “Slothfulness and Negligence” (p. 32). As the author observes, there are many who lack a certain knowledge of their interest in Christ who, while complaining of the same, do absolutely nothing to gain such assurance.

Scripture is quite clear in its teaching that one’s gaining and maintaining a settled assurance of his interest in Christ is achieved only through due diligence. As Paul exhorted the Corinthians (and indeed, by extension, all who believe), “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” (2 Cor. 13:5). Likewise, the apostle Peter urged his readers to make their “calling and election sure” (2 Pet. 1:10). Guthrie (2002) provides those who fall into this category with the following sage wisdom:

Be ashamed, you who spend so much time in reading of romances, in adorning your persons, in hawking and hunting, in consulting the law concerning your outward state in the world, and it may be in worse things than these; Be ashamed, you that spend so little time in the search of this, whether ye be an heir of glory or not; whether you be in the way that leadeth to heaven, or that way which will land you in darkness forever. You who judge this below you, and unworthy of your pains, any part or minute of your time, it is probable, in God’s account, you have judged yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, so that you shall have no lot with God’s people in this matter. (p. 33)

It seems as though even many professing believers today have little to no interest in spiritual matters apart from their weekly pilgrimage to the local church. This “Sunday only” mentality is

certainly indicative of the spiritual malady described by the author. If one who professes Christ would be assured of his interest in Him, he must sacrifice the more frivolous expenditures of his time and dedicate it to growing his faith. Piper (1997) is instructive in this regard:

The revelation of Christ to the heart that makes faith possible is a gift (Matthew 16:17; 2 Corinthians 4:4, 6). This does not mean faith is static or that we should not pursue it more and more. In 2 Thessalonians 1:3, Paul says, “Your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another.” In 2 Corinthians 10:15, Paul says that he hopes their faith will “increase.” Therefore, it is clear that faith should grow and not remain static. The fact that God gave you yesterday’s level of faith does not mean that his will for you today is the same measure of faith. His purpose for you today may be far greater faith. His command is to “trust in Him at all times” (Psalm 62:8, RSV) and to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18, RSV).

Therefore let us press on to the greatest faith possible with all the means of grace God has given. Let us be like Paul and strive “with all the energy which he mightily inspires within [us]” (Colossians 1:29, RSV). (pp. 39-39)

(4) Men who lack assurance of their interest in Christ can often be attributed to “Their having no fixed idea of what evidence would satisfy them” (p. 33). Scripture is replete with that which can satisfy. As John wrote in his first epistle, in God’s word there are “so many things written, that our joy may be full” (1 John 1:4) and “that those who believe,” may “know that they have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). If one will not avail himself of the Scriptures, however, he will remain in ignorance concerning whether or not he has a genuine interest in Christ; (5) “The fifth thing,” the author notes, “that helps to keep men in the dark with respect to their interest in Christ is, They

pitch upon some mutable grounds, which are not so apposite³ proofs of the truth of an interest in Christ” (p. 34). In other words, some believe that those who do have a true interest in Christ are immune to the influence of sin. Others believe that those who are most assured of their interest in Christ must have more of the Holy Spirit’s ministry in their lives. This, the author writes, is simply not true as all believers possess the indwelling Holy Spirit who “bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God” (Rom. 8:16).

Wrapping up his discussion of these five reasons why so few attain to a distinct knowledge of their interest in Christ, Guthrie (2002) observes: “As long as people hold fast these principles, and the like, they can hardly come to the knowledge of their gracious state, which God hath warranted people to prove and clear up to themselves” (p. 35).

Guthrie’s (2002) fifth presupposition or premise concerns the removal of “Some mistakes concerning an interest in Christ” (p. 35). In his estimation, there are five such mistakes that one can identify and remove fairly easily.

First of all, the author observes, it is a mistake to think that everyone who is in Christ has full assurance that they are in Him. As John has written, “These things are written to them that believe, that they may know they have a title to eternal life” (1 John 5:13). Again, Scripture is full of such encouragements allowing those of weakened faith to gain full assurance of their interest in Christ.

In the second place, Guthrie (2002) notes, “It is a mistake to think that all who come to the knowledge of their interest in Christ do attain an equal certainty about it” (p. 35). Both the amount and quality of faith possessed by those who believe will vary from person to person. While one believer may agree with Paul’s assessment that “He is persuaded that nothing present,

³ Apt in the circumstances or in relation to something (Source: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apposite>).

or to come, can separate him from the love of God” (Rom 8:38), another believer may routinely pray, “Lord, I believe, help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24).

Thirdly, Guthrie (2002) explains, “It is a mistake to think that every one who attains a strong persuasion of his interest doth always hold there” (p. 36). As Spurgeon (1888) astutely observed:

We are at times chicken-hearted. We play the man today and the mouse tomorrow. Lord, have mercy upon us. We are an inconsistent people, fickle as the wind. The Lord would have us abide always in Him with strong and mighty confidence, being rooted and built up in Him. He would have us trust courageously... Oh, for a boundless trust in the infinite God! We need more of a venturesome faith, the faith to do and dare. Often we see the way of power but have not the faith that would be equal to it.

As the reader can surely attest, faith can indeed be a fickle thing.

The fourth common mistake the author presents is that “It is also a mistake to think that every one who attains a good knowledge of his gracious state can formally answer all objection made to the contrary” (p. 36). In other words, once saved, believers are not gifted with the spontaneous ability to answer every objection or argument made against what they believe. That said, however, “they may and will hold the conclusion steadfastly and justly; so it is in the case in hand” (p. 36).

Fifthly, Guthrie (2002) relates, “It is no less a mistake to imagine, that the vain groundless confidence, which many profane, ignorant atheists do maintain, is this knowledge of an interest in Christ which we plead for” (p. 36). As Guthrie (2002) further asserts, there are many who falsely claim God as their Father and many who have high hopes of heaven who “are

beguiled, like the ‘foolish virgins’ (Matt. 25:12)” (p. 36). These false assertions, however, should not be grounds for thinking that all knowledge of an interest in Christ is delusional.

Having thoroughly addressed how one may know if he has a claim to God’s favor in salvation, in the second chapter of this work, the author next turns his attention to addressing the various ways by which men are drawn to Christ. The author further subdivides this chapter into three sections, each of which addresses a different aspect of the issue under consideration.

In the first section of this second chapter, Guthrie (2002) notes that some individuals are drawn to Christ without a conscious preparatory work of the law. Ordinarily, the author maintains, the law plays a pivotal role in preparing a man to be saved. As common as this method is, however, there are exceptional cases in which men are otherwise drawn to Christ. For example, some, Guthrie (2002) maintains, are called from the womb. While John the Baptist would be one such example, the author maintains that he need not be the only example. Similar examples are often reflected in those who “are usually from their childhood kept free from ordinary pollutions, as swearing, lying, mocking of religion and religious persons, etc., with which children are often defiled” (p. 38). Religion, as it were, is believed to be natural to these children who, instead of resisting it, seem to run willingly to it.

In addition to those who are saved at an early age, Guthrie (2002) writes that “Some are called in mature life, in a sovereign gospel-way” (p. 39). Like Zaccheus in Luke 19, there are some who, in later life, develop a desire to see Christ. Christ then speaks to their heart, draws them to Himself, and they are forever changed from their previous disposition.

Some, Guthrie (2002) maintains, are “graciously called as death approaches” (p. 41). One of the best examples of this is the thief on the cross of Luke 23 fame. While these so-called

“deathbed salvations” are not unusual and are indeed to be celebrated, as the author observes, it must be carefully noted that:

As this example may encourage some to wait for good from God, who cannot as yet lay clear claim to any gracious work of His Spirit; so we entreat all, as they love their souls, not to delay their souls’ salvation, hoping for such assistance from Christ in the end, as many do. (p. 42)

There are many who live their entire lives with the idea that, as they approach death’s door, knowing that the end is near, they will simply ask the Lord to save them at that time. Such presumptions on God’s grace, however, are most often doomed to failure. Guthrie (2002) employs Proverbs 1:24-26 in defense of this ill-advised position, wherein the Lord says:

Because I have called and you refused, I stretched out my hand and no one paid attention; and you neglected all my counsel and did not want my reproof; I will also laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your dread comes.

In the second section of this chapter, the author suggests that “Men are ordinarily prepared for Christ by the work of the Law” (p. 43). This particular point needs little explanation except to point out that the most common means of salvation involves the conviction of sin, an awakening of one’s conscience, and a work of humiliation – all of which are effected by a recognition that one is in violation of God’s Law. This awareness is brought about by the Holy Spirit who, working in the heart of the unconverted, convinces him that he is at enmity with God and desperately needs to be reconciled to Him if he is to live.

In the third section of this chapter, Guthrie (2002) differentiates “between the preparatory work of the law which leads to salvation and the temporary convictions of those who relapse” (p. 53). Simply stated, there are individuals in whom the law of God appears to be doing a

preparatory work, and yet that is not the case at all. The preparatory work of the law that manifests itself in true conviction of sin will result in one's possessing a fervent desire to be delivered from his "body of death" (Rom. 7:24). Those who merely fall under a temporary conviction of wrongdoing have no such desire. As Guthrie (2002) notes:

It will generally be found that the convictions which are in hypocrites either are not so serious as that some other business will not put them out of mind before any satisfaction is gotten; as in Cain, who went and built a city, and we hear no more of his conviction (Gen. 4); Felix went away until a more convenient time, and we hear no more of his trembling (Acts 24:25); or, if that work becomes very serious, then it runneth to the other extremity, even despair of relief, leaving no room for escape. So we find Judas very serious in his convictions, yet he grew desperate, and hanged himself (Matt. 27:4, 5). But where the Lord prepares His own way, the work is both serious, that the person cannot be put off it, until he find some satisfaction, and yet under that very seriousness he lies open for relief. (p. 55)

It is critically important that one be able to recognize the difference between God's use of His law as a preparatory work leading to salvation and one's simple regret or remorse at having committed a particular act of wrongdoing. The former will most certainly lead to salvation; the latter will, at best, only lead to a temporary placation of one's conscience.

In the third chapter of this work, Guthrie (2002) addresses "some more clear and sure marks by which men may discover their gracious state and interest in Christ" (p. 60). He begins with a discussion of faith as an evidence of one's interest in Christ. To this end, Guthrie (2002) explains some of the more common mistakes regarding the true definition and characteristics of saving faith.

First, the author writes, some believe faith to be a difficult and highly mysterious thing that is nearly impossible to attain. However, as the author notes, saving faith is a gift and, as such, it is not at all difficult to attain. The fundamental problem that many have in understanding the true nature of saving faith is that they see it, not as a gift, but as something to be earned or merited. Scripture, however, consistently militates against this erroneous notion. For example, as Paul expresses in his letter to the Ephesians, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). Likewise, as Paul expresses in Romans 9:16, salvation “does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.” In John’s gospel, Jesus says, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent” (John 6:29). That which is freely given by God to the one believing can hardly be thought difficult to attain.

Secondly, Guthrie (2002) notes that some consider it presumptuous for one to claim to be in possession of saving faith. The author answers this charge very simply by pointing out that, far from being presumptuous, one who claims to have saving faith is simply acknowledging that, by God’s grace, he has been spared the condemnation that awaits those without saving faith. This acknowledgment, when expressed by a true believer, generally comes from a position of both humility and astonishment as opposed to any presumptuousness.

In the third place, the author explains that there are some who misunderstand the nature of faith because they consider it “a work of the greatest difficulty to find out where faith is” (p. 64). In other words, some are unable to comprehend where God has deposited saving faith in them. In rectifying this situation, the author suggests that one need only look to the Scriptures themselves. In 1 Corinthians 2:12, for example, the believer finds assurance that he has been given the Spirit of God “by which we know what is freely given unto us of God.” In John’s first

epistle, the apostle affirms that “These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). As Guthrie (2002) concludes:

[True saving faith] is discernible of itself, and by itself, to a judicious understanding person, with an ordinary influence of the Spirit: unless the Lord, for reasons known to Himself, overcloud a man’s reflex light, by which he should perceive what is in him. (p. 65)

Guthrie (2002) next turns his focus on describing true saving faith. Sometimes, he writes, faith is expressed by desiring to be united to God in Christ. This desire is what Isaiah referred to as looking unto God: “Look unto Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth” (Is. 45:22). True saving faith, the author writes, is also sometimes characterized in Scripture as both “hungering and thirsting after righteousness” (Matt. 5:6) and “willing” – “And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely” (Rev. 22:17). Additionally, faith is sometimes characterized by “the act of recumbency, or leaning on the Lord, the soul taking up Christ then as a resting-stone” (p. 66). At other times, faith may be in evidence through one’s waiting patiently on God. As expressed in Isaiah 49:23, “They shall not be ashamed that wait for me.”

In chapter four, Guthrie (2002) turns his attention to what is perhaps the greatest evidence that one has an interest in Christ: the new creature. As Paul expresses in his second Corinthian letter, “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature” (2 Cor. 5:17). This change, the author maintains, is a very real change that can be summed up in two statements. First of all, man’s becoming a new creature in Christ involves a renovation of the whole man in his person, soul, and body. His understanding is renewed, for example, enabling him to discern the things of God. Having undergone a heart transplant wherein his heart of stone was replaced with a heart of

flesh, the believer's affections are renewed as well. This change enables him to love the word of God, to love what God loves and hate what He hates, thus to know that he has been reconciled to the God with whom he was previously at enmity.

These internal changes will naturally manifest themselves in the believer's outward behavior. As Guthrie (2002) observes, his interests will be redirected, his worship will be enhanced, he will have a new diligence in his work to do everything as unto God instead of for himself, and "he becomes new in the way of his relations; he becomes a more dutiful husband, father, brother, master, servant, neighbor, etc." (p. 82). Finally, the new creature in Christ will display a new attitude toward his liberties. He will recognize, as did the apostle Paul, that "All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient; all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any" (1 Cor. 6:12). Guthrie summarizes this change in the believer saying:

This is the new creature, having a principle of new spiritual life infused by God into the heart, whereby it becometh new, and putteth forth acts of new life throughout the whole man, as we have said, so that he pointeth towards the whole law. (p. 83)

In the fifth chapter of this work, Guthrie (2002) further explores the subject of one's knowing whether or not he indeed has an interest in Christ by citing the differences between the true Christian and the hypocrite. The author begins by admitting that atheists and hypocrites may indeed exhibit certain behaviors that are common to those of the new birth. The atheist or hypocrite may have accumulated much knowledge. In fact, they may even be said to have been "enlightened," as the writer to the Hebrews reasons in Hebrews 6:4. Some in this category may even receive the Word of God with great joy, albeit in the way noted by the Lord in Matthew 13:20 as being "stony ground" hearers. Hypocrites may be those who are capable of "talking a

good game”; they may even periodically confess sin, much as King Saul did in 1 Samuel 26:21: “Then said Saul, ‘I have sinned: return, my son David; for I will no more do thee harm, because my soul was precious in thine eyes this day: behold, I have played the fool, and have erred exceedingly.’” The atheist and hypocrite may be charitable, even to a great degree; they may even appear to fall under conviction of sin just like Judas who admitted to betraying innocent blood (Matt. 27:3-5).

The difference between the aforementioned individuals and those who have an interest in Christ is that those in Christ have been given new hearts and are thus new creations in Him. Any similarities that may exist between the hypocrite (whether an atheist or not) and the true believer are the byproducts of two separate and distinct motivations. What motivates the believer is a desire to honor and glorify God in everything he thinks, says, and does. By contrast, the hypocrite is most often motivated by sinful self-interest. He is not, as Guthrie (2002) states, “broken in heart, and emptied of [his] own righteousness, so as to loathe [himself]” (p. 91), he has never taken up Christ “as the only treasure and jewel that can enrich and satisfy; and therefore, [has] never cordially agreed unto God’s device in the covenant, and so [is] not worthy of Him” (p. 91).

Guthrie’s sixth chapter in Part I of this work is dedicated to addressing some of the reasons why some believers doubt their interest in Christ. Here, the author utilizes a question and answer format that is very helpful considering that many no doubt share the same concerns expressed by the questioner. The first question presented is: “I am clear sometimes, I think, to lay claim to that mark of the new creature; yet at other times sin doth so prevail over me, that I am made to question all the work within me” (p. 95). As Guthrie (2002) points out in his response, it is fairly common to find those in Scripture who, at times, find themselves plagued

and perplexed by sins that threaten to unsettle their assurance. Paul is a fitting example of this particular problem. In Romans 7:25, one finds him lamenting that a law in his members leads him captive to sin. In the Old Testament, one reads of David who wrote, “Iniquities prevail against me; as for our transgressions, Thou shalt purge them away” (Psalm 65:3). Not wishing to be misunderstood, Guthrie (2002) is quick to point out that these examples should not promote the idea that one may continue sinning with impunity. Instead, such sins should arouse the believer to repentance. It is also necessary, he writes, to “make a difference betwixt gross outbreakings and ordinary infirmities or heart-evils, or sins that come unawares upon a man, without forethought or any deliberation” (p 95). This observation is especially important as it draws a critical distinction between those sins committed knowingly and willfully and those committed accidentally or unintentionally. As the writer to the Hebrews relates, “If we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries” (Heb. 10:26-27). As the apostle John points out in his first epistle, “No one who abides in Him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has seen Him or knows Him” (1 John 3:6). On chapter previous to this passage, the apostle writes, “Whoever says ‘I know Him’ but does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:4). As the astute student of Scripture will acknowledge, these passages do not suggest that the believer will not sin, rather that sin will not be an intentional or habitual thing for him.

The key to determining whether or not one has an interest in Christ, even though he still sins, lies in one’s reaction to that sin. The true believer, Guthrie (2002) observes, will recognize immediately “a party within [him] opposing these evils” (p. 97). In other words, as the apostle

Paul expressed in Romans 7, there will be a recognition that there is a battle being waged between the flesh and the spirit:

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want...I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. (Rom. 7:18-19, 23)

Having addressed in Part I the question, “How shall a man know if he has a true and special interest in Christ, and whether he has, or may lay claim to, God’s favor and salvation?” Guthrie (2002) continues in Part II by addressing the question, “What shall they do who want [or lack] the marks of a true and saving interest in Christ already spoken of, and neither can nor dare pretend unto them?” Guthrie (2002) prefaces this second part of this work as follows:

Having, in the former part of this Treatise, put every man’s state to the trial, it now remains that, in this following part, we give advice to those who neither can nor dare lay claim to the marks formerly mentioned. (p. 116)

The author provides the short answer to this question at the outset of this second part:

If men do not discover in themselves the marks of a saving interest in Christ, spoken of before, then it is their duty, and the duty of all that hear the gospel, personally and heartily to close with God’s device of saving sinners by Christ Jesus, and thus to secure their state. (p. 116)

This concise response is then greatly expanded upon in the four chapters that follow.

Chapter one of this second part of Guthrie’s (2002) treatise begins with “Some things premised for the information of the ignorant” (p. 117). The modern reader will understand that

the word “ignorant” was not automatically assumed to be a pejorative (as is the case today), but was used simply to distinguish the “aware” from the “unaware,” as it were. The particular premises laid down in this chapter can be summarized as follows: (1) In the beginning of man’s existence, the Lord made a covenant with Adam, commanding him not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil lest he die (both spiritually and physically). Despite the fact that Adam had been gifted at creation with the ability to obey this command, he ate of the tree, thus breaking covenant with God. This singular act, according to Scripture (Romans 5:12) plunged his entire progeny into sin, necessitating a Savior; (2) The Lord, from eternity past, purposed and intended to save men from their sins by Christ Jesus, through the covenant of grace. This covenant was first mentioned in Genesis 3:15 when God assured Adam and Eve that “the seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent’s head”; (3) Reconciliation to God is achieved only through faith in God’s provision of Jesus Christ and all who are His are joined into one body, the Church, and are forever secure in covenant relationship with God the Father; (4) Many declare falsely that they are in a saving relationship with God and yet they have not actually “closed with Him in Christ” (p. 119); (5) Many of those who feel that they have closed with Christ and therefore have a saving interest in Him will be woefully disappointed upon the realization that “Strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, and few there be who find it” (Matt. 7:14); (6) Only the elect will be recognized as those who have closed with God through Christ Jesus: “But the elect hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded” (Rom. 11:7), “No man can come to Me except the Father, which hath sent Me, draw him” (John 6:44). And yet, as Guthrie (2002) continues: The Lord hath left it as a duty upon people who hear this gospel, to close with His offer of salvation through Christ Jesus, as if it were in their power to do it; and the Lord, through these commands and exhortations, wherein He obliged men to the thing, doth

convey life and strength to the elect, and doth therein convey the new heart unto them, which pointeth kindly towards this new device of saving sinners...So then, it is a coming on our part, and yet a drawing on His part.” (p. 120)

In chapter two of this second part, Guthrie (2002) addresses what it means to “close with God’s Gospel plan of saving sinners by Christ Jesus, and the duty of so doing” (p. 122). He goes on to refine his argument by addressing (1) What it is to accept of and close with that noble plan; (2) That it is the necessary duty of those who would be in favor with God and secure their souls; (3) What is previously required of those who perform this duty; (4) What are the qualifications and properties of this duty, if rightly managed; and (5) What are the native consequences of it, if it be performed aright.

To summarize Guthrie’s (2002) five points, his arguments are based on the understanding that, according to Scripture, man is not invited to accept Christ as if doing so is merely a good idea, rather, he is commanded to do so. As Paul boldly declared in his sermon on Mars Hill:

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:30-31)

Contrary to what many tend to believe about such things, if a man would be saved, securing that salvation is his duty. While it is true that no man will exercise this duty apart from the internal, regenerative power of the Holy Spirit in compelling him to do so, believing on Christ as God’s device and remedy for sin remains his solemn duty.

This duty, Guthrie (2002) maintains, is not something that one should rush into without due consideration of all that it involves. Many, he argues, have deceived themselves into

believing that they have closed with God in Christ simply because they determined that doing so would be in their best eternal interest. The author suggests that a man must first acknowledge four things about himself if he would truly believe in Christ unto salvation: (1) “That as he was born a rebel and an outlaw unto God, so he hath by many actual transgressions disobeyed God, and ratified the forfeiture of His favor” (p. 128); (2) “The man must know that the wrath of God denounced in Scripture is standing in force against those very sins whereof he is guilty, and so, consequently, he is the party...against whom God hath denounced war” (p. 129); (3) “A man must know that he hath nothing of his own to procure his peace, and to set him free from the hazard under which he lieth” (p. 130). This is because, as Isaiah indicates, all his righteousnesses are as an unclean thing (Is. 64:6); (4) “He must know that, as he is void of all the saving graces of the Spirit...he wants faith in Christ, who taketh away the sins of all them who believe on Him” (p. 130). If a man does not have these presuppositions as the foundation for his desire to be saved, it is doubtful that the Holy Spirit is at work in him at all. As Guthrie (2002) points out, salvation is the most serious thing for a man to consider, and where this seriousness is not present, the Holy Spirit’s work is rarely evidenced.

In chapter three, Guthrie (2002) pauses to address a few of the more common objections and difficulties associated with one’s being saved. Among these is the objection based on one’s suspicion that he has sinned against the Holy Spirit, thus forfeiting any chance to be saved. In response to this particular objection, the author begins by stating what is not the sin against the Holy Spirit. First, he argues, it must be understood that any and every sin committed is committed against the Holy Spirit and yet they may not be *the* sin against Him. As examples supporting this contention, he cites the following: (1) “Blaspheming of God under bodily tortures” (p. 152). This sin, Guthrie (2002) maintains, was committed by some of God’s saints

throughout history, namely, the apostle Paul who, according to Acts 26:11, punished Christians often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; (2) “The hating of good in others” is not the sin against the Holy Spirit; (3) Self-love is not the sin against the Holy Spirit; (4) Falling into gross sin is not the sin against the Holy Spirit; (5) “Quenching, grieving, and vexing of the Spirit of God” does not necessarily constitute the sin against the Holy Spirit; (6) Murder (even self-murder or suicide) is not the sin against the Holy Spirit.

In answering the question of what constitutes the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit, Guthrie (2002) deduces that this sin is only committed by those who, having been enlightened regarding the truth about Christ, not only reject Him willfully maliciously, and finally but, in doing so, attribute His glorious works to the devil himself. The author uses the Pharisees as a prime example of those who committed this particular sin.

The final chapter in Guthrie’s (2002) great treatise concerns one’s personal covenanting with God in Christ. Of primary interest in this regard is Guthrie’s (2002) explanation that one’s covenanting with God will vary in terms of its formal expression. In other words, given that one’s transacting with God is something that takes place in the heart, one need not expect the outward expression of that to be uniform among all who have an interest in Christ. Guthrie (2002) even goes so far as to express his opinion that need not even express such covenanting with the mouth:

I grant this express covenanting and transacting with God is not absolutely necessary for a man’s salvation; for if any person close heartily and sincerely with God, offering himself in Christ in the gospel, his soul and state are thereby secured, according to the Scripture, although he utter not words with his mouth. (p. 169)

Guthrie (2002) explains this observation in the following manner:

This express covenanting with God by word of mouth is of no worth without sincere heart-closing with God in Christ joined with it; for, without that, it is but a profaning of the Lord's name, and a mocking of Him to His face, so 'to draw near unto Him with the lips, whilst the heart is far from Him.' (p. 170)

Lest the reader be unsettled by the author's beliefs in this regard, it must be clarified that he is not suggesting that the verbal expression of one's faith in Christ is not necessary, but simply that salvation itself is a work done in the heart of the believer before it is ever made manifest on the tongue.

In his conclusion to this remarkable work, Guthrie (2002) provides a very helpful summary of everything he has addressed therein under the heading of, "The whole treatise resumed in a few questions and answers" (p. 193). Of course, in true Puritan form, a "few" amounts to eighteen questions and answers. While the writer certainly recommends a reading of the entire book, simply reading Guthrie's (2002) conclusion will prove very beneficial to anyone who may be curious about its contents.

References

- Beeke, J. R. & Pederson, R. J. (2006). *Meet the puritans*. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books.
- Bridges, Jerry (1991). *Transforming grace*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.
- Guthrie, W. (2002). *The Christian's great interest*. Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust
- Lloyd-Jones, D. M. (1959). *Studies in the sermon on the mount*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company
- Packer, J. I. (1990). *A quest for godliness*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books
- Piper, J. (1997). *A godward life*. Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers
- Sibbes, R. (2011). *The bruised reed*. Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust
- Spurgeon, C. H. (1888). *The blessing of full assurance*. Retrieved from <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/2023.htm>