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***FEAR OF THE LORD IN UNION WITH  
CHRIST: SPIRITUAL FRUIT AND ROOT***

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The Fear of the LORD in the Writings of John Calvin (1509-1564) and Richard  
Sibbes (1577-1635)



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## Thesis

This paper will focus generally on John Calvin's definition of spirituality and piety, and specifically how this piety is manifested in the fear of the LORD. We will be interested in tracing some of the Medieval influences on Calvin's spirituality, particularly in his understanding of the fear of the Lord. Then we shall compare and contrast Calvin's teaching on the fear of the LORD with Richard Sibbes, one of the Puritan "affectionate" theologians, and conclude with practical lessons from both of these men's teachings that might prove helpful to the church today.

## John Calvin (1509-1564): True Piety

To understand John Calvin's teaching on the fear of the LORD, we should begin by thinking about Calvin's understanding of true and biblical piety.<sup>1</sup> For Calvin, fear of the Lord is an important and foundational aspect of biblical or Christian piety. What is piety? Piety is *godliness*.<sup>2</sup> Calvin warmly asserted that "True piety exists when men recognize that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by His fatherly care, that He is the Author of their every good." Piety is "reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of His benefits induces".<sup>3</sup> Joel Beeke writes that for Calvin, theological understanding and practical piety, truth and usefulness, were

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<sup>1</sup> There has been some neglect and confusion concerning Calvin's spirituality. See Richard C. Gamble, "Calvin and Sixteenth-Century Spirituality: Comparison with the Anabaptists." In *Calvin Studies Society Papers 1995, 1997: Calvin and Spirituality, Calvin and His Contemporaries*. Edited by David Foxgrover (Grand Rapids: Calvin Studies Society, 1998), 335-37.

<sup>2</sup> There have been two terms used in the history of the Christian church to describe an earnest desire after God: *devotion* and *pietas*. *Devotio* signified a total dedication and devotion to God in worship and service. This was a fundamental attitude of the creature before his Creator. *Devotio* in the medieval period ultimately meant to leave the world for the monastic life. In distinction, the term *pietas*, or piety described godliness, devoutness, religiousness. Humility was the foundation of true *pietas*. The term used by Calvin was *pietas* because of the monastic associations of the other term *devotio*, though the person who possess *pietas*, would possess *devotio* but just not in the monastic context for Calvin. See Lucien Joseph Richard, *The Spirituality of John Calvin* (Atlanta, Ga: John Knox Press, 1974), 78-88, 93.

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.2.1, Kindle Edition.

inseparable.<sup>4</sup> Consequentially, where there is no true piety, there is no true knowledge of God. In fact, as one Calvinian scholar wrote, “Piety is the context for all of Calvin’s theology.”<sup>5</sup> The true knowledge of God, wrote Calvin, “should serve first to teach us fear and reverence” of God.”<sup>6</sup>

Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* are not strictly a “Summa theologia” (as with Thomas Aquinas), but more precisely a “Summa Pietatis”.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the subtitle of the first edition of the *Institutes* states, “Embracing almost the whole sum of piety & whatever is necessary to know of the doctrine of salvation: A work most worthy to be read by all persons zealous for piety” [my emphasis].<sup>8</sup> Note the specific twofold intention of this title: (1) to embrace the whole sum of piety, and (2) to be read by all persons zealous for piety. For John Calvin, true and biblical piety is a proper attitude toward God and obedience to Him.<sup>9</sup> Piety is devoted living unto God. Piety is a godliness that is lived out from one’s knowledge of God’s character and especially in light of His saving mercies in Christ. Piety for Calvin was the essence of true biblical Christianity. It is living “self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age” because God’s grace has appeared in Christ to make believers “zealous for good works” (Titus 2:11-14).<sup>10</sup> From Calvin’s earliest writings, we

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<sup>4</sup> Joel Beeke, *The Soul of Life: The Piety of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books), 2013, pgs. 28-52.

<sup>5</sup> Dennis E. Tamburello, *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 102. Hesselink noted that “It could be said that *pietas* was [Calvin’s] entire theological direction and goal, rather than merely one theme in his theology.” Quoted in I. John Hesselink, *Calvin’s First Catechism: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2001), 45.

<sup>6</sup> Elsie Annie McKee, ed. *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), Kindle Edition, 2016, Location 979.

<sup>7</sup> The *Institutes* are not a summary of theology, like merely doctrinal or systematic theology, but a summary of piety, or what it means to live the spiritual life with God.

<sup>8</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1536 Edition (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust), 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Beeke, *The Soul of Life*, 30-31.

<sup>10</sup> See Calvin’s fuller exposition of Titus 2:11-14 in his *Institutes*, 3.6-8.

see this idea of piety emphasized and encapsulated. For instance, in Calvin's first catechism he wrote for Christians to learn the basics of the Christian faith, he wrote:

*True piety consists in a sincere feeling which loves God as Father as much as it fears and reverences Him as Lord, embraces His righteousness, and dreads offending Him worse than death.*<sup>11</sup>

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What was the goal of piety for Calvin? The glory of God, lived out by faith in union with Christ by the Spirit. *Soli Deo Gloria* (all for the glory of God ultimately), the knowledge of God, knowledge of ourselves, and the good of His people was Calvin's goal for life.<sup>12</sup> This goal of life was summarized in Calvin's motto: "I offer thee my heart, Lord, promptly and sincerely."<sup>13</sup>

Calvin's spirituality or piety was not completely new but consistent to some degree to earlier devotional writers of the Medieval period. We see in John Calvin a piety or spirituality that is particularly Reformed and catholic, and consistent with much good spiritual teaching that came before him, particularly in Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) and Thomas a Kempis (d. 1471). Calvin stood in a stream that flowed broad and deep from faithful servants of the Middle Ages. Bernard and Thomas were not, strictly speaking, forerunners of the Reformation, but they contributed a pre-reformation devotional legacy that should be appreciated, especially as we see their tremendous influence in both Calvin (and later Richard Sibbes).<sup>14</sup> Calvinian scholar, Professor

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<sup>11</sup> I. J. Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism: A Commentary*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox), 46-47. It is interesting to note that even earlier than this summary, Calvin wrote in 1536: "True godliness [consists]...of a pure and true zeal which loves God as a real Father and looks up to him as a real Lord; it embraces his righteousness and detests offending him more than it does dying." From *Truth for All Time: A Brief Outline of the Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2008), 4. This shows that for Calvin early in his Christian life and theology, the fear of the Lord was understood to be a glorious combination of zeal for God, and a looking up humbly in submission to him as Lord.

<sup>12</sup> Beeke, *The Soul of Life*, 30.

<sup>13</sup> Beeke, *The Soul of Life*, 31.

<sup>14</sup> Arie de Riveur, *Sweet Communion: Trajectories of Spirituality from the Middle Ages through the Further Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 102.

Dennis Tamburello writes that the Reformation was at least as much a “spiritual phenomenon as it was a dogmatic one. The Reformers drew from the well of medieval spirituality in numerous ways, perhaps not all of them direct or even conscious.”<sup>15</sup> In fact, particularly a Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ* served as a channel through which Augustinian, Bernardian, and Franciscan spiritualities influenced the sixteenth century and those who followed.”<sup>16</sup>

But there are significant differences as well.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to Medieval spirituality or piety, especially as it has been handed down to us in Thomas a Kempis’ devotional classic *The Imitation of Christ*, we see differences primarily of theological emphases: the focus is on Christ primarily, and the believer’s union with Him. This too, is in Calvin. For Calvin, the priority was placed more on Christ as Mediator, and substitutionary, atoning sacrifice for sinners, than upon His example for Christians to learn piety. As de Reuver wrote helpfully that for Thomas and other Medieval spiritual teachers: “...The soteriological dimension of Christ’s saving work was overshadowed by

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<sup>15</sup> Dennis E. Tamburello, *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 108.

<sup>16</sup> Lucien J. Richard, *The Spirituality of John Calvin* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1974), 21.

<sup>17</sup> Tamburello offers some helpful comparisons and contrasts between Bernard and Calvin’s spirituality. This is helpful in seeing the great similarities in Bernard and Calvin, the influence of them upon Calvin and Sibbes, but this also highlights the *significant differences*: 1) For Calvin, union with Christ is not of works but all of grace; 2) Not a union of essences, but of a spiritual union, not a union of equals (Creator-creature distinction is present in Calvin); 3) A union of wills; 4) We are to seek to love God unselfishly for His glory; there is to be reverence joined with love of God; 5) Authentic love manifests itself in a love of neighbor; 6) True knowledge of God is experiential; 7) Union with God is specifically union with Christ the Mediator; 8) Church is indispensable context for union (with some differences); 9) Sanctification is a life-long work; 10) The spiritual marriage imagery for spiritual intimacy with Christ is useful. Differences particularly between Bernard and Calvin: 1) Bernard more interested in contemplative life, whereas Calvin’s teaching is for every person; 2) Calvin has a disdain for the monastic life and to be withdrawn from one’s vocation in the world; 3) Bernard’s thoughts on union pivots on love, Calvin’s focus is more on faith; 4) Calvin emphasizes the ordinary means of grace more than Bernard; 5) Bernard subsumes sanctification under justification, Calvin distinguishes justification and sanctification without separation or confusion. *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 105-108.

its exemplary features...”<sup>18</sup> As we shall see clearly, union with Christ was central for Calvin’s piety generally, and the fear of the LORD particularly.

Union with Christ was emphasized in Medieval teachers such as Thomas a Kempis, but for Calvin this union brought about both justification and sanctification in the believer, both a declaration of a righteous standing and a growing in that righteousness. Whereas for Medieval teachers such as Thomas sanctification was given priority over justification; in fact, justification was completely subsumed under justification. Calvin has been rightly called the “Theologian of the Holy Spirit” because he stressed the Spirit-wrought faith that God must give to believers to take hold of Christ as Savior and Mediator, over Thomas’ and other Medieval teachers’ stress merely on love. And whereas the Medieval teachers were primarily teaching how to live the monastic life in separation and complete hatred of the world, Calvin taught that we serve the Lord and fulfill our call to pious lives in the world, in living out our godliness in our families, congregations and workplaces. For Calvin, piety was an “everyman’s pursuit” not just a pursuit of a select and spiritual elite who would turn away from marriage to enter the monastery. Hesselink writes that Calvinist piety “embraces all the day-by-day concerns of life, in family and neighborhood, education and culture, business and politics.”<sup>19</sup> These differences should be noted between Calvin and the Medieval teachers while appreciating the catholic unity and work of the Holy Spirit throughout church history. As has been noted, the Reformation was a piety and spiritual reformation as well as a dogmatic one.

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<sup>18</sup> de Reuver, *Sweet Communion*, 148.

<sup>19</sup> Hesselink, *Calvin’s First Catechism*, 47.

## John Calvin and True Piety in the Fear of the Lord

For Calvin, pure and real religion was described as a piety that is demonstrated through faith and the fear of the Lord. As Calvin wrote, “Faith so joined with an earnest fear of God that this fear also embraces willing reverence, and carries with it such legitimate worship as is prescribed in the law.”<sup>20</sup> The Reformation during Calvin’s time was about both doctrine and life. In Calvin’s time, men learned about God and came to love Him by His grace in Christ, but they also were to fear Him and to live for Him in complete obedience. Calvin wrote,

*True piety does not consist in a fear which willingly indeed flees God’s judgment, but since it cannot escape is terrified. True piety consists rather in a sincere feeling which loves God as Father as much as it fears and reverences Him as Lord, embraces His righteousness, and dreads offending Him worse than death. And whoever have been endowed with this piety dare not fashion out of their own rashness any God for themselves. Rather, they seek from Him the knowledge of the true God, and conceive Him just as He shows and declares Himself to be [my emphasis].<sup>21</sup>*

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For Calvin, there can be no true love of God without a true fear of God. In other words, the Bible stresses not merely the love of God that believers have in Christ, but an important aspect or manifestation of that love is through the fear of the Lord. For Calvin, true fear of the Lord is wisdom that brings obedience. Calvin wrote: “... [The godly] mind restrains itself from sinning not out of dread of punishment alone; but because it loves and reveres God as Father, it worships and adores Him as Lord. Even if there were no hell, it would shudder at only offending Him.”<sup>22</sup> As a child seeks to demonstrate love to a father through pleasing him through obedience, so this is the fear of the

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<sup>20</sup> Elsie Annie McKee, ed. *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001). Kindle Edition, 2016, Location 997. Also, Joel Beeke, *The Soul of Life: The Piety of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Hesselink, *Calvin’s First Catechism*, 46-47.

<sup>22</sup> Hesselink, *Calvin’s First Catechism*, 46-47.



Lord. It is a pious fear that loves God so much that she seeks not to offend Him. It is a wonderful truth that fear of the Lord was such a vital part of Calvin's piety and his own love for God, that even up until his death, he had thoughts of the fear of the Lord. He wrote at the end of his life in his final will and testament:

*I have had many infirmities, which you have been obliged to bear with, and what is more, all I have done is worthless. The ungodly will seize on that, but I repeat that all that I have done has been worthless and that I am a miserable creature. But certainly tainly I may say this: that I have meant for the best, that my vices have always displeased me, and that **the root of the fear of the Lord has always been in my heart.** You may say "he meant well" and I pray that my evil may be forgiven and that if there was anything good you may confirm yourselves by it and have it as an example [my exphasis].<sup>23</sup>*

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We can get a better understanding of Calvin's understanding true and biblical piety revealed in the fear of the Lord by looking particularly at his commentaries on Holy Scripture.

### **Fear of the Lord: A Benefit of Union with Christ**

From Calvin's writings, particularly his commentaries, we learn that the fear of the Lord brings a proper emphasis on Christ's Spirit and the benefits of union with Him.<sup>24</sup> In Isaiah, the prophet spoke thus: "*And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear...*" (my emphasis, ESV Isaiah 11:2-3). It is important to know that for Calvin, union

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<sup>23</sup> G. R. Potter and M. Greengrass, John Calvin (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), 172-173; translated from G. Baum, E. Caunitz, and E. Reuss, Co1pus Reformatorum (Opera Calvini), 59 vols. (Braunschweig [Brunswick]: 1863-84), vol. 37, cols. 890-894. Quoted in Burk Parsons. *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine, Doxology* (Kindle Locations 345-349). Kindle Edition.

<sup>24</sup> Calvin's *Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah*, [Isaiah 11:2-3] (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998 reprint) pgs. 374-76.

with Christ is the heart of the Christian religion; union with Christ is the blessed fount out of which all of the benefits of Christ flow from God the Father by the Holy Spirit for the expression of godly piety. The faith that God gives to believers in regeneration takes hold of Christ. Calvin wrote: "...We must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from Him, all that He has suffered and done for salvation...remains useless and of no value to us."<sup>25</sup>

Calvin taught that fear of the Lord is a benefit of Christ's anointing His people by the Spirit (Isa. 11:2-3). For Calvin, the believer's fear of God must be rooted in the work of the Spirit, particularly as she is united to Jesus Christ by faith. Jesus Christ is the preeminent "believer" or the "blessed man who fears the LORD *par excellence*."<sup>26</sup> Christ the man was enriched with the fullness of the Spirit so that those for whom he loved would also possess these Holy-Spiritual blessings and benefits in union with Him. The Savior is called Christ because He is Anointed One, and makes us "anointed ones" or "Christians". Therefore, for Calvin, fear of the Lord is Christ-Focused, Christ-centered, Gospel-Driven. Christ the man was enriched with the fullness of the Spirit so that those for whom he loved would also possess these Holy-Spiritual blessings and benefits in union with Him. Jesus redeemed us from lawlessness and sin to purify us and to make us God-fearers and worshippers of Him by the same Holy Spirit. As Calvin wrote, "The fear of the LORD means a sincere desire to worship God".<sup>27</sup> As Christ feared the LORD, so we learn to fear the LORD in reverence, awe, and obedience to our Father and Majestic Lord.

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<sup>25</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1, Kindle Edition.

<sup>26</sup> Calvin wrote, "The Father gives believers the Spirit for the Son's sake, and yet has bestowed the whole fullness of the Spirit upon the Son to be minister and steward of His liberality" in *Institutes*, 3.1.2, Kindle Edition.

<sup>27</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah*, [11:2-3], (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998 reprint), pg. 375.

## Fear of the Lord: Develops a Life of Repentance and Faith

For Calvin, it is important to remember that repentance is the whole of the Christian life. Repentance is not a one-time event, but a daily one. Repentance is a realization of one's new life in Christ being lived out in the fear of God. For Calvin repentance is regeneration in that having been made alive with Christ and united to Him by faith, the believer grows in sanctifying grace through the Spirit's work. Calvin wrote, "...I interpret repentance as regeneration, whose sole end is to restore in us the image of God that has been disfigured and all but obliterated through Adam's transgression."<sup>28</sup> In the believer's union with Christ, there is both faith and repentance, mortification and vivification. According to Calvin, true repentance arises from a fear of God and fear of God produces more repentance and obedience in the Christian life.<sup>29</sup> This means that true repentance is a hatred of not merely punishment for sin, but also sin itself. Calvin teaches that the repentant sinner changes his whole attitude toward sin; he is induced by the 'fear of God' to repent of sin in his life.<sup>30</sup> Fear of the Lord in Calvin helps us to understand that repentance is the life-long, ongoing characteristic of regenerate folks possessed by Christ's Spirit. The true fear of the Lord also brings growth in faith and repentance: "...Since the fear of the Lord is said to be the beginning, and as it were the way that leads to a right understanding of His will (Psa. 111:10), according as any one desires to increase in faith, so also let him endeavor to advance in the fear of the Lord."<sup>31</sup> By learning to fear the LORD the believer learns to grow in their desire for obedience, and in their actual obedience to the LORD by His grace.

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<sup>28</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.9, Kindle Edition.

<sup>29</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.7, Kindle Edition.

<sup>30</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.7.4, Kindle Edition.

<sup>31</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, [Psalm 25:14], pg. 430.

Fear of the LORD causes believers to live before God humbly and repentantly, seeking to live by faith in reliance upon His grace, knowing the terrible consequences of sin, seeking to be careful, watchful, prayerful as God's dear children (Deut. 8:1a, 11). The Apostle Paul writes in his second epistle to the Corinthian congregation: "Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God" (ESV 2 Corinthians 7:1). As Calvin reflects upon 2 Corinthians 7:11, he notes that godly repentance includes "earnestness, carefulness, excuse, indignation, fear, longing, zeal, and avenging. He wrote that godly sorrow makes men careful, arouses them to diligence and attention to obedience, confession and indignation seeks forgiveness through the blood of Christ for sinful behavior, and a sinner become angry with himself that he sinned against such a kind and merciful God.<sup>32</sup> Then more particularly focused on the fear of God, Calvin wrote:

*There is a renewed sense of the fear of God [in godly sorrow and repentance] that leads to humility and makes us more cautious thereafter. There is a readiness to obey and a zeal to say in light of God's mercy, 'What have I done?!'<sup>33</sup>*

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## **Fear of the Lord: A Fear of Sweetness and Delight for God's children**

Fear of the Lord should be done in "sweet delight" of God as Father and Master/Lord. This is not a servile fear or dread of punishment, but a filial fear of God as father through adoption in union with Christ. Calvin uses images of children (submissive and obedient to their father) and yokes (that have been shaken off by the servants in disregard to their master). "...He who would duly worship Him will try to show himself both an obedient son to him and a dutiful servant. Let

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<sup>32</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.15, Kindle Edition.

<sup>33</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.16, Kindle Edition.

us have a reverence compounded of honor and fear”.<sup>34</sup> Calvin in his commentary on Malachi’s Prophecy demonstrates this biblical fear that God reveals to Israel.<sup>35</sup> The Prophet Malachi wrote, “A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, ‘How have we despised your name?’ [my emphasis] (<sup>ESV</sup> Malachi 1:6).

For Calvin, the fatherly love of God must be embraced in order for us to rightly fear God aright. We might think of a tension between God’s fatherly love and the fear of God,<sup>36</sup> but both are important aspects of the believer’s union with Christ. One cannot love God as father without fearing Him as Lord. Yet for Calvin, the loving goodness and graciousness of God the Father should have the priority in all of our thoughts. A believer cannot look on the majesty and greatness of God without first knowing of His generosity towards sinners in Jesus Christ. Calvin wrote, “...He alone is truly a believer who, convinced by a firm conviction that God is a kindly and well-disposed Father toward him, promises himself all things on the basis of his generosity.”<sup>37</sup> Calvin comments on the Apostle Paul’s command to the believer to “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12). What is this “fear and trembling” before a generous and gracious heavenly Father? For Calvin this “means that [God] demands only that we become accustomed to honor

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<sup>34</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.26, Kindle Edition.

<sup>35</sup> Calvin, *Calvin, Commentaries of John Calvin on the Prophet Malachi* [Lect. CLXXI, Malachi, chap. 1:6-8] (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998 reprint), 484.

<sup>36</sup> Especially if we confuse fear having to do with punishment, and fear of God as father (servile vs. filial fear): <sup>ESV</sup> 1 John 4:18-19: There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us. Calvin made this important distinction: “...When the love of God is by us seen and known by faith, peace is given to our consciences so that they no longer tremble and fear”; “...Perfected in love”: Unbelief causes our hearts to tremble and gives us a “disturbed mind”; “For the love of God, tranquilizes the heart” [with peace].” Quoted in Calvin, *Commentaries on Epistles of John*, [1 John, 4:18], 247-48.

<sup>37</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.16, Kindle Edition.

the Lord's power, while greatly humbling ourselves...For not only does piety beget reverence toward God, but the very sweetness and delightfulness of grace so fills a man who is cast down in himself with fear, and at the same time with admiration, that he depends upon God, and humbly submits himself to His power" [my emphasis].<sup>38</sup> For Calvin then, fear of the Lord is a fear characterized by the sweetness and delight of being God's children: Because believers are God's children, they do not fear the judgment of God, but do fear to displease God because of love for Him (Deut. 8:5-6).

### **Fear of the Lord: A Humble Reception and Obedience to God's Word**

It should be remembered importantly that Calvin's spirituality or piety is a word-shaped piety. Calvin's spirituality and piety are teachings derived from God's word. For Calvin, true biblical spirituality and piety is faith reacting with new life to the Word of God. Piety is not a doctrine merely of the tongue, but a way of life and must find a seat of affection in the person's heart. The truth gets down in the heart of the believer, and the corresponding reaction to this grace, faith lives itself out. Calvin taught that the believer experiences communion with God created by the word and the Spirit. From this, piety or godliness is produced in the Christian's life. This was a mysticism or spirituality that was "drenched in the Scriptural word."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.23, Kindle Edition.

<sup>39</sup> Arie de Reuver. *Sweet Communion: Trajectories of Spirituality from the Middle Ages through the Further Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 281-83. It should be remembered that Calvin's piety or spirituality in the trajectory of Christian spirituality was a "via media" or middle way between individualism and sacramentalism on the one hand (e.g. Quakers, or "fanatics" who stressed individualistic interpretations of scripture and experiences of the Spirit), and Roman Catholicism on the other.

Calvin sought to close the gap between godly knowledge and living a godly life by demonstrating that a pursuit of God's word should always promote piety, and piety should be shaped by God's Word. Even when one comes to the Word of God in an academic pursuit, there should be a piety cultivated. If the Word of God is present, true piety reacts to the Word through fear and obedience. There is a primacy of faith in Calvin that receives God's word. God speaks His word of promise, warnings, admonitions, Gospel peace. Believers receive this. This is fear before God with regard to His Word. Calvin wrote: "The nature of faith is to yield obedience to God, and to listen to him attentively and patiently when He speaks..." When we are puffed up and proud, having a vain confidence in ourselves, "we have no piety or fear of God..."<sup>40</sup> And so the true fear of God manifests itself in humbly listening and obeying God's word.

As the Scriptures teach, fear of the Lord brings humility before God and His Word (Isa. 66:2). In Calvin's sermon on the Virgin Mary's song in Luke 1:49-51, he demonstrates the humble attitude that believers should possess as they receive God's word: "...[God's] mercy is from generation to generation on those who fear Him... [my emphasis]" (1:50), Calvin wrote that fearing God through His word is a fruit of the true root of godliness and a response of obedience to God's covenant promise and salvation to believers in Christ.<sup>41</sup> In fact, as the Prophet Isaiah says, God's people are to "tremble at God's commandments": "...*But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word* [my emphasis]."<sup>42</sup> Calvin commented: "By these words he describes inward purity of heart and sincere desire of godliness, and at the same time

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<sup>40</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Prophecy of Isaiah*, [Isaiah 66:2], 414.

<sup>41</sup> John Calvin, *Songs of the Nativity: Selected Sermons on Luke 1 & 2, translated by Robert White* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2008), 36, 38.

<sup>42</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Prophecy of Isaiah*, [Isaiah 66:2], 413-14.

shows in what way we ought to be prepared to please God”<sup>43</sup> Nothing is more “sweet or gentle than the word of the Lord, so Calvin asks: “Why would we tremble?” He explains that there are two kinds of trembling: 1. One by which they who are terrified hate and flee from God; 2. Those who tremble and it affects their hearts, and promotes obedience from the will, and is characteristic of those who truly reverence and fear God. He wrote: “True godliness consists in having our senses brought into a state of obedience to God, and in making no boastful claims for ourselves”. Those who would say that they reverence and fear God, but actually disregard it in their thoughts and actions are to be warned. They show in their actions they are “despisers of God”. “All the reverence that we owe to God must be paid to His word, in which he wishes to be fully recognized as in a lively image”.<sup>44</sup>

### **Summary of Calvin’s Understanding of Fear of the Lord**

To summarize Calvin’s view on the fear of the Lord. Fear of the Lord is true piety, and is especially and more particularly an aspect of the love to God as Father. It is the love to God made manifest in the believer’s reverence and awe. It is a fear that flows completely from union with Christ to the believer. Fear of the Lord brings true repentance, and is an aspect or fruit of ongoing repentance in the Christian life. Fear of the Lord is the sweet delight of children obeying and loving their Heavenly Father without the fear of anger, punishment, and condemnation from Him. Fear of the Lord especially is promoted by, and is reflected in hearing, learning and obeying God’s Word in submissive humility before God.

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<sup>43</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Prophecy of Isaiah*, [Isaiah 66:2], 414.

<sup>44</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Prophecy of Isaiah*, [Isaiah 66:2], 414; cf. Psalm 51:17.



## Richard Sibbes (1577-1635): An Affectionate Theologian

Having looked at Calvin's piety in general, and particularly his understanding of the fear of the Lord, another purpose of this paper is to compare Calvin's teaching on fear of the Lord with Richard Sibbes, a prominent Elizabethan Puritan "affectionate theologian". Is the fear of the Lord as present and as prominent in the writings of an affectionate theologian such as Richard Sibbes? While Richard Sibbes did not write a manual of doctrine or piety as John Calvin did, and though he did not write commentaries on the Holy Scriptures as John Calvin, nevertheless, he wrote voluminously, and in his writings we can sufficiently compare the teachings of John Calvin and Richard Sibbes. Let us begin by focusing on Sibbes' particular emphasis and interest in true biblical "affective" spirituality, then take a more specific look on how this affective spirituality might manifest itself in the fear of the Lord.

Theologian and minister of the Gospel Richard Sibbes (1577-1635) was affectionately known as the "Sweet Dropper" and this moniker speaks volumes about his heart and even emphasis in his ministry.<sup>45</sup> Sibbes has been distinguished among the Puritans as the "Heavenly" Dr. Sibbes because he was famous for his affective spirituality.<sup>46</sup> Affective spirituality is a focus on the affections or the desires as they are transformed by the Spirit of God motivating believers to joyful obedience in Christ. An "Affectionate theologian" such as Richard Sibbes is one who is concerned for believers to have a heart-felt knowledge of God's truths. As with Calvin, true spirituality would be manifested in a transformative effect on the heart and the life of the believer, producing good fruits in the life. For the Puritans, particularly Richard Sibbes, our affections should cause us to

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<sup>45</sup> Packer, J. I. *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 179.

<sup>46</sup> Kopic, Kelly M. and Gleason, Randall C., Edited. *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 79.

desire after God.<sup>47</sup> Sibbes' theology and ministry was particularly characterized by a focus on the affections.<sup>48</sup> Simply put, an affectionate theologian like Richard Sibbes, is interested in focusing on the interior life of the heart, particularly the desires. Affectionate theologians like Sibbes, desired to place emphasis on the experiential, heart-felt nature of faith knowledge.<sup>49</sup> You could summarize what this means in one short and simple quotation of Sibbes: "*Nothing characterizes a Christian so much as holy and blessed desires*" [my emphasis].<sup>50</sup> In fact, renewed affections through the Spirit of God would produce loving obedience. Sibbes wrote succinctly and characteristically that "*Action follows affection*".<sup>51</sup> He meant that whatever we desire the most, we follow, we obey, we long to please, etc.

But where do we get these holy desires? Sibbes taught that holy desires come from "a taste of sweetness in communion with Christ".<sup>52</sup> Affective knowledge [is] a "knowledge with a taste."<sup>53</sup> Sibbes said that God looks upon a soul as he desires. God values men by their desires.<sup>54</sup> "Our

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<sup>47</sup> For Sibbes, in God we can find by His grace and mercy, happiness, all of our desires fulfilled, felicity, sweet experiences, and we can behold by faith the sweet, alluring, beauty of God. In Sibbes' devotional classic sermon "A Breathing After God," an exegesis and application of Psalm 27:4: "One *thing* have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to enquire in his temple" (KJV), he describes the affections as a "breathing after God" and he uses these endearing and sweetly devoted terms to describe the soul's affections are longings and the results of seeking after and finding contentment, joy, felicity, happiness, and satisfaction in God: "searchings of the heart", "felicity", "desire and expectation", "beating of the pulse of desires", "sweetest manner", a "sweet experience", "the sweet, alluring, beauty of God", "delightful and sweet", "ravishe" to "relish spiritual things". From Richard Sibbes, *A Breathing After God in The Works of Richard Sibbes* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, reprint 2004), II: 210-48.

<sup>48</sup> Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes: Puritanism and Calvinism in Late Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000), 139.

<sup>49</sup> Here is also where we should note the continuity of affective spirituality with the medieval fathers such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas a Kempis. See de Reuver, *Sweet Communion: Trajectories of Spiritualities from the Middle Ages through the Further Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 51. As Jonathan Edwards wrote in *The Religious Affections*, "True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections" (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2013), Kindle Edition, Location 346.

<sup>50</sup> Sibbes, *The Souls Conflict with Itself* in *Works*, I:338.

<sup>51</sup> Sibbes, *Bowels Opened* in *Works*, Vol. II, Kindle Edition, Location 12053.

<sup>52</sup> Sibbes, *Christ is Best* in *Works*, I:338

<sup>53</sup> Sibbes, *The Fountain Opened* in *Works*, V:478

<sup>54</sup> Sibbes, *The Spiritual Favorite* in *Works*, VI:98

desires are holy if they exercised about spiritual things...Desires show the frame of the soul more than anything.<sup>55</sup> Sibbes' anthropology "held that the mind and will are merely instruments of the affections.<sup>56</sup> The affections are powerful in this way. If possessed by God and ravished by His holiness, and satisfied in His love, then the affections will cause believers to be motivated to seek Him, to pray to Him, to seek the means of grace, to love Him and others. Renewed, transformed affections would have great power in compelling believers to love and to serve God in order to please Him.<sup>57</sup> For Sibbes, the heart that was changed through regeneration would produce loving affections and thus godly actions for God. He wrote at length:

*[The affections] are the springs of all spiritual worship. Then the affections are well-ordered, when we are fit to have communion with God, to love, joy, trust, to delight in Him above all things. The affections are the inward movings of the soul, which then move best when they move us to God, not from Him, they are the feet of the soul, whereby we walk, and before God.<sup>58</sup>*

As if Sibbes had been recently reading John Calvin's description of love and fear of God, especially dreading to offend God worse than death, Sibbes emphasized:

*Our affections are then in best temper, when they become so many graces of the Spirit, as when love is turned to a love of God, joy, to a delight in*

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<sup>55</sup> Sibbes, *Meditations in Works*, VII:187

<sup>56</sup> Kapic and Gleason, *The Devoted Life*, 89.

<sup>57</sup> Richard Sibbes wrote thoughtfully as an example of Puritan thinking on the mind affecting the heart and the will of the soul of man: "Desires are the issues of the heart. Thoughts and desires are the two primitive issues of the heart, the births of the heart. Thoughts breed desires. Thoughts in the mind or brain, the brain strikes the heart presently. It goes from the understanding to the will and the affections. What we think of, that we desire it, if it be good. So thoughts and desires, they immediately spring from the soul; and where they are in any efficacy and strength, they stir up motion in the outward man. The desires of the soul, being the inward motion, they stir up outward motion, till there be an attaining of the thing desired, and then there is rest...When motion comes once to rest, it is quiet (satisfied). So desire, which is the inward motion, it stirs up outward motion, till the thing desired be accomplished, and then the soul rests in loving contentment, and enjoying of the thing desired." Sibbes, *A Breathing After God*, in *Works*, II: 218.

<sup>58</sup> Sibbes, *The Soul's Conflict with Itself* in *Works*, I:159.

the best things, *fear, to a fear of offending God more than any creature, sorrow, to a sorrow for sin, etc. [my emphasis]*<sup>59</sup>

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For Richard Sibbes, the fear of God was a true affection wrought by the Spirit of God that would cause believers to desire to please God and avoid offending Him.

## Sibbes and Union with Christ

Before we look specifically at Sibbes' teaching on fear of God from his *Works*, it should be helpful to look briefly at how Medieval spiritual teachers such as Bernard and Thomas a Kempis influenced him. As with Calvin, the medieval spiritualities of Bernard and Thomas a Kempis greatly influenced Richard Sibbes and other Puritans. Sibbes lived in a "post-monastic" world that was a climate which relished mystical thought, and particularly influential were Augustine and Bernard.<sup>60</sup> It is important though in making a distinction that though the Puritans had much to say about mystical union with Christ in continuity with catholic spiritualities before them, the adjective "mystical" primarily meant "mysterious" as in Ephesians 5:32 when referring to the believer's union with Christ.<sup>61</sup> Gordon Wakefield wrote "...When the Puritans borrow from Catholic or mystical writers, they make the expressions serve the purpose of their own evangelical piety."<sup>62</sup> Sibbes has been described as a "moderate mystic" when being compared to Bernard, a Kempis,

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<sup>59</sup> Sibbes, *The Soul's Conflict* in *Works*, I:159.

<sup>60</sup> Theodore Dwight Bozeman, Theodore Dwight, *The Precisianist Strain: Disciplinary Religion and Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 101. Bozeman describes further the post-monastic world of Sibbes as "in effect a world, informal monk- or nunhood of all believers", 103. H. P. Shelly, "Richard Sibbes: Early Stuart Preacher of Piety," PhD. Diss., Temple University, 1972, 51-52.

<sup>61</sup> Mark Dever makes important and clear distinctions between what an "Affectionate Theologian" was such as Sibbes, and a mere Christian "mystic"; Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes*, 135-37.

<sup>62</sup> Gordon S. Wakefield, *Puritan Devotion: It's Place in the Development of Christian Piety* (Epworth Press, 1957) 103. See also Sibbes, *Works*, I: 12. H. P. Shelley wrote that "the mind of Sibbes belonged to the Reformed tradition, but his soul belonged to that mystical or contemplative tradition which also looked to Augustine for sustenance"; "Richard Sibbes: Preacher of Piety", 51.

and other medieval spiritual writers.<sup>63</sup> Sibbes stressed union with Christ out of which all the blessings of the Christian life flow and this in itself was a very important ingredient and aspect of medieval piety.<sup>64</sup> Mystical marriage between Christ and the believer defined Sibbes' covenantal theology that stressed Christ-likeness, obedience to God's commandments, growth in grace. This mystical marriage between Christ the Bridegroom and his beloved bride was a tremendous influence on Sibbes' expositions of the *Songs of Songs* that make up a large part of his works.<sup>65</sup>

Why would we focus on the influence of the union with Christ in Sibbes if we are seeking to understand his teaching on fear of God? Because for Sibbes the Covenant of Grace, with the marriage metaphor of union with Christ central in his sanctified imagination, was the ground of the entirety of the Christian life both in justification and sanctification, and this relates to understanding how he would have thought of obedience to God's word generally, and the teaching of the fear of the Lord particularly.<sup>66</sup> This means that if we overlook this, we might misunderstand Sibbes' own understanding of what union with Christ and the life lived in covenant with God in Christ actually meant. For Sibbes, to say that one was growing more in the love of God in Christ, the affections being stimulated more for desiring God, meant that one was growing in the fear of the LORD and in the desire to keep his commandments, though this might be as

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<sup>63</sup> Ronald Norman Frost, "Richard Sibbes' Theology of Grace and the Division of English Reformed Theology." PhD diss. King's College of the University of London, 1996, 177. Frost wrote specifically of medieval influences on Sibbes that he was "clearly influenced by Gregory of Nazianzus and Augustine as well as Bernard of Clairvaux."

<sup>64</sup> R. N. Frost wrote that the "unio mystica" of Christ and the Church was the existential nerve of Puritan piety. "Richard Sibbes' Theology of Grace", 178. See also R. Tudor Jones, "Union with Christ: The Existential Nerve of Puritan Piety," Tyndale Bulletin 41 (1990) 186-208 (97).

<sup>65</sup> See Richard Sibbes, *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes, D.D. Master of Catherine Hall, Cambridge; Preacher of Gray's Inn, London*. Edited, with "Memoir", by the Rev. Alexander Grosart. 7 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), Reprint, 2004, Volume 2. See R. N. Frost, "Richard Sibbes' Theology of Grace", 107. Bernard in his medieval spirituality identified the church and Christ as partners in the Song of Songs as well. Frost, 109; See also, Dever, 143.

<sup>66</sup> Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes: Puritanism and Calvinism in Late Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000), 2, 114-15.

explicitly stated and emphasized as with Calvin and this is important for contrast and comparison (as well as with other Reformed writers in general and the Puritans specifically). For Sibbes, fundamentally and foundationally in the Covenant of Grace were to be found both justification and sanctification, “both forgiveness of sins and principle favour with God...the Covenant of Grace was to have God for your God”.<sup>67</sup> Sibbes sought to show that God’s testaments were “testimonies of His love, and the conditions of the covenant were the Savior’s wooing the Beloved. Sins against God were actually more precisely in this covenantal theology a “spiritual adultery and breach of the covenant with God.”<sup>68</sup> In all of Sibbes’ sermons the Covenant of Grace was always central and the believer lived out this covenant in response to God’s grace in the fear of the Lord manifesting itself in obedience.<sup>69</sup> In fact, in this Covenant of Grace, sincerity to God’s commands, in obedience to His word, was accepted in Christ as perfection.<sup>70</sup>

For Sibbes, Christianity was first and foremost a covenantal love story between God and His people in Christ. In continuity from the Medieval spirituality of Bernard and Thomas a Kempis, God was essentially a husband to His people. Dever writes that Sibbes realized in the writing sermons on Song of Solomon that “sensual language was a powerful metaphor for the love between God and the soul.”<sup>71</sup> To put it clearly, affections were very important for *Heavenly Dr.* Sibbes but so was obedience to God’s Word in the fear of the Lord. In fact, true obedience from the heart would come from loving desires and affections after God in Christ. Sibbes stresses union with Christ and

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<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes*, 114-15.

<sup>68</sup> Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes*, 115. See also Bert Affleck, who writes: “Uniquely, Sibbes more narrowly defines the thrust of the covenant by using it as the vehicle for presenting his doctrine of God that grows out of his Christology ...Without Christ in the Covenant of Grace, there can be no intercourse between God and us in love.” “Theology of Richard Sibbes (1577-1635),” PhD Diss., Drew University, 1969, 115, 126.

<sup>69</sup> Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes*, 112.

<sup>70</sup> Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax*, in *Works* I:59, quoted in Dever, *Richard Sibbes*, 113.

<sup>71</sup> Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes*, 143.

the importance of obtaining the Spirit of God only in and through Christ Jesus. Christ “dispenses and gives the Spirit unto others...all receiving the Spirit from Him as the common root and fountain of all...” In fact, the Lord Jesus Christ as both God and man, both gives and receives the Spirit of God in order for His own to be holy and obedient before God.<sup>72</sup> Sibbes wrote that whatsoever Christ is, or has, all is for His church and children.<sup>73</sup>

Though he may have not emphasized fear of God in the same way as Calvin before him, he nevertheless described the biblical teaching of fear of God. He wrote, “A sincere heart will offer itself to trial...What we are afraid to do before men, we should be afraid to think before God...Usually inward comfort is a note of inward security.”<sup>74</sup> Though Sibbes focused primarily on the internal workings of the heart, he was nevertheless, very focused on cultivating obedience in the Christian’s life. “Love will constrain us to obedience,” Sibbes wrote. Sibbes told his congregation to “Get love...It melts us into the likeness of Christ. It constrains, it hath a kind of holy violence in it...it is a glorious grace.”<sup>75</sup> Love of God brings the fear of God. In Sibbes’ major writing *A Christian’s Portion; or, the Christian’s Charter*, he carefully lays out the design of the Christian life in way that is similar to Calvin’s *Institutes*. Here he develops his thinking of the Christian life from the foundation of union with Christ similar to Calvin before him. He wrote:

*“Christ is the Father’s, and we are the Father’s in Christ; and all things are ours in Christ...All comes downward through Christ from God to us. God doth all in Christ to us. He chooseth us in Christ, and sanctifies us in Christ; He bestows all spiritual*

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<sup>72</sup> Sibbes, *The Excellency of the Gospel Above the Law in Works*, Vol. IV, Kindle Edition, Location 38583-88.

<sup>73</sup> Sibbes, *The Excellency of the Gospel Above the Law in Works*, Vol. IV, Kindle Edition, Location 38636.

<sup>74</sup> Sibbes, *The Soul’s Conflict in Works*, I:161.

<sup>75</sup> Sibbes, *The Excellency of the Gospel above the Law*, in *Works*, IV: 274-75, quoted in Dever, 150.

*blessings on us in Christ, as members of Christ. To Christ first, and through Him, He conveys it to us...for Christ is complete, and in Him we are complete.*"<sup>76</sup>

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Commenting on Isaiah 11:2 concerning the Christ possessed with the Spirit of God, Sibbes wrote that the in the believer's being united to Jesus Christ, Christ sets up His throne in the believer's heart by His Holy Spirit. He makes His subjects good, but teaches them to be good. The Christian's life is a commentary on his inward man. This fear of God displayed in obedience flows from union with the Christ who has the Spirit without measure who is the "Spirit of wisdom and understanding, and the Spirit of the fear of the Lord" (Isa. 11:2).<sup>77</sup>

We should also appreciate the biblical teaching of fear of God in Sibbes' section in *The Soul's Conflict with Itself* where he speaks of the importance of a "Gospel imagination". Sibbes wrote that a Gospel imagination would live before God with great thoughts of both the grace and the majesty of God similar to Calvin before him. Sibbes wrote that a Gospel imagination consisted in five important aspects. In daily meditation upon these truths the soul will be prepared to have right conceits of things, hence will arise *true affections in the soul, true fear of God, true love and desire after the best things* [my emphasis]: 1) To consider the greatness and goodness of Almighty God and His love to us in Christ; 2) The joys of heaven and the torments of hell; 3) The last and strict day of account; 4) The vanity of all earthly things; 5) The uncertainty of our lives.<sup>78</sup> This demonstrates that for Sibbes when he speaks of proper affections and desires after God, he specifically means that a man will fear the LORD, or seek to keep His commandments out of love for God.

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<sup>76</sup> Richard Sibbes, *A Christian's Portion; or, A Christian's Charter*, in *Works*, IV: 32-33.

<sup>77</sup> Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax*, in *Works*, Kindle Edition, Location 1793.

<sup>78</sup> Sibbes, *The Soul's Conflict* in *Works*, I:181-85.



## Sibbes: Training and Transformation by the Spirit through the Word of God

Sibbes also importantly emphasized that a knowledge of Scripture was for training and teaching God's will to man in order to make men holy. Though he had a focus on the affections, truths should be transformative by the Spirit of God. It was through the word of God that the Spirit of God would change hearts, desires, affections and cultivate true fear of God through transformation in the believer. He wrote that "...True knowledge is a transformation knowledge."<sup>79</sup> Like Calvin, truth of God's word was to be lived out and if truly believed, it would have a transforming effect upon both the heart and the life of the believer. For Sibbes, the primary purpose of both the teaching and preaching of God's Word was for the purpose of changing a man's heart so that the believer might possess an obedient Christ-likeness. A knowledge of Scripture was very important, but not as important as the knowledge informing the affections and warming the heart. Sibbes wrote:

*A man knows no more in religion than he loves and embraces with the affections of his soul...Therefore, let us never think our state good, till we find our hearts warmed with the goodness of divine supernatural truths...That knowledge is only saving knowledge that works the heart to a love, to a joy and delight, that works the whole man to practice and obedience; that is the only spiritual knowledge.*<sup>80</sup>

Professors Kacic and Gleason summarized this emphasis well when they wrote that "Sibbes' heart-based anthropology...held that spirituality is the fruit of supernaturally transformed affections that would always satisfy the demands of morality but never rely on them as guideposts."<sup>81</sup> Sibbes clearly understood that duty and obedience in the Christian life can only be sustained if it is

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<sup>79</sup> Sibbes, *The Marriage Feast Between Christ and His Church in Works*, Vol. II, Kindle Edition, Location 20285.

<sup>80</sup> Sibbes, *The Fountain Opened in Works*, Kindle Edition, Location 56383-87.

<sup>81</sup> Kacic and Gleason, *The Devoted Life*, 81.

supported by the motivation of desire.<sup>82</sup> Against both errors of moralism and antinomianism in his time, Sibbes confidently taught that grace surely leads to holiness”.<sup>83</sup> If one was truly a Christian, one’s actions would follow one’s affections or desires.<sup>84</sup> If there be a true love for Christ in the heart that has been wrought by the Holy Spirit, Sibbes wrote that “it will discover itself in the outward man, one way or other.<sup>85</sup> Our actions will show that our “calling and election is sure” (cf. 2 Pet. 1:3-9-11).

*If there be any affection of love and piety to God, there will be eyes lifted up, knees bended down, and hands stretched forth to heaven.*<sup>86</sup>

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If a person truly has the Spirit of Christ, then they will do their duties with joy, and this will be evident to themselves and to all! Sibbes wrote, “So it will be with Christians: the more spiritual they grow, the more lightsome [“carefree, merry”] and courageous [they will become]; the stronger, the more lively, and vigorous to all duties.”<sup>87</sup> Sibbes wrote, “He is the best Christian that is the most reverent Christian, the most careful Christian, most jealous over his own heart. Usually those are the richest in grace.”<sup>88</sup> When the affections are well ordered, then believers are fit to have communion with God, to love, joy, trust, to delight in him above all things. Obedience to God’s word could come through imitation, or gazing upon Christ. Sibbes wrote, “Let us look upon our nature as it is in Christ, in whom it is pure, sweet, calm, meek, every way lovely. This sight is a changing sight; love is an affection of imitation; we affect a likeness to Him we love.”<sup>89</sup> The Spirit

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<sup>82</sup> Kapic and Gleason, *The Devoted Life*, 82.

<sup>83</sup> Shelly, “Richard Sibbes,” 68.

<sup>84</sup> Sibbes, *Bowels Opened* in *Works*, II:110

<sup>85</sup> Sibbes, *Bowels Opened* in *Works*, II:110

<sup>86</sup> Sibbes, *Bowels Opened* in *Works*, II:110

<sup>87</sup> Sibbes, *Excellency of the Gospel* in *Works*, IV:213

<sup>88</sup> Sibbes, *A Fountain Sealed* in *Works*, V:423

<sup>89</sup> Sibbes, *The Description of Christ* in *Works*, I:168.

uses the word of God to transform affections and desires of the heart that reveal both a Christ-like love for God and the fear of God.

### **Sibbes: Fear of the LORD, the Fruit of Godly Affections**

Fear of the Lord in Sibbes then is a fruit of godly affections that have been produced by the Spirit through the word in union with Christ. Sibbes wrote that feeding upon serious truths from God's word causes an increase of "*true affections in the soul, true fear of God, true love and desire after the best things...*" [my emphasis].<sup>90</sup> In *The Spiritual Favorite at the Throne of Grace*, commenting on Nehemiah's prayer in chapter one, Sibbes wrote that God values men by their desires. He taught that the believer's ultimate desire ought to be to "fear thy name" speaking to God from a humble disposition and heart of prayer. He wrote:

*"The greatest part of Christianity is to desire to be a sound Christian with all his heart. Religion is more in the affections of the soul than in the effects and operations. It is more in the resolutions and purpose of the soul, than in any effects we can yield to God. There is much desire in all our performances. Therefore saith the holy man here, 'We desire to fear thy holy name'".<sup>91</sup>*

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In fact, the fear of God is a "waking affection" that will awaken all the others. So, the fear of the Lord for Sibbes is a thoughtful, reverent love of God from the heart. Fear is a "waking affection"; in fact, it is "one of the wakefullest".<sup>92</sup> Sibbes encouraged the believer to keep their souls and graces awakened by "laboring to preserve the soul in the fear of God". The fear of the LORD is an expression of love for God just as it is in Calvin's definition of a feeling sense of the love of God and a reverence and awe that does not want to offend God. Sibbes teaches that the

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<sup>90</sup> Sibbes, *The Soul's Conflict with Itself*, in *Works*, Kindle Edition, Location 3946.

<sup>91</sup> Sibbes, *The Spiritual Favorite at the Throne of Grace*, in *Works*, Kindle Edition, Location 60010.

<sup>92</sup> Sibbes, *Bowels Opened* in *Works*, Kindle Edition, Location 10616-32.

very practical aspect of the believer's fear of God is that it will never grow spiritually sleepy or lethargic, but will grow in "sweet communion" with Christ and not grieve the Spirit of God.<sup>93</sup> Sibbes says that where there is least fear of God there is "most danger always".<sup>94</sup>

Sibbes instructs believers very precisely to meditate upon the fear of the Lord so that there will be true obedience from the heart.<sup>95</sup> Sibbes wrote "Next to hell is the greatest judgment; which should draw us to the greater reverence and fear of displeasing God."<sup>96</sup> We desire to fear displeasing God.<sup>97</sup> The Spirit of Christ works the desires of the heart to fear displeasing God. The faith that God gives to believers in regeneration is an "effectual working grace" that commands all the powers of the soul. The believer wants to please God above all other things. Like Calvin taught, the believer is to offer child-like service of obedience and fear to God the Father. As the Heavenly Father, believers are to make God their trust, their love, joy, delight, fear, and all.<sup>98</sup> God as the believer's father wants to possess the whole heart as His own. The affections and desires from the heart are "the wind that carries the soul to every duty", so wrote Sibbes:

*...Let us make it good that we are the servants of God, especially by our affections, and chiefly by this of fear, which is put for all the worship of God.*<sup>99</sup>

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For Sibbes, as for Calvin before him, true obedience comes from the fear of God.

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<sup>93</sup> Sibbes, *Bowels Opened in Works*, Kindle Edition, Location 10625.

<sup>94</sup> Sibbes, *Bowels Opened in Works*, Kindle Edition, Location 10653.

<sup>95</sup> Sibbes, *The Description of Christ*, in *Works*, Kindle Edition, Location 806.

<sup>96</sup> Sibbes, *The Soul's Conflict with Itself*, in *Works*, Kindle Edition, Location 3119 cf. 3407.

<sup>97</sup> Sibbes, *The Soul's Conflict with Itself*, in *Works*, Kindle Edition, Location 5002-5011.

<sup>98</sup> Sibbes, *The Soul's Conflict with Itself*, in *Works*, Kindle Edition, Location 6086.

<sup>99</sup> Sibbes, *The Soul's Conflict with Itself*, in *Works*, Kindle Edition, Location 59983-91.

## Calvin and Sibbes: A Contrast and Comparison on their Teachings

How are Sibbes and Calvin related in their understanding of the fear of the LORD? Are there similarities--differences? What are these? I think we can clearly say that for both Calvin and Sibbes, union with Christ is foundational for all of their theology. In fact, it is union with Christ that brings all of the blessings of the Holy Spirit to the believer, particularly the blessings of faith and obedience through a renewed heart that is desirous of God and stimulated by His grace. We can see similarities in their Medieval influences. Both Calvin and Sibbes sought to wade and be refreshed in deep streams of mystical-affectionate theology from both Bernard and Thomas a Kempis. They were both Reformed (*Reforming?*) catholics, but remained distinctly Reformed in doctrine and life. Yet they were both catholic and reformed in the best sense.<sup>100</sup> Both taught in this trajectory of spirituality from Bernard and Thomas that true humility before God was manifested in a true fear of God through obedience before Him.<sup>101</sup> In contrast to the Medieval teachers, both Calvin and Sibbes saw the spiritual, pious life of fear of the LORD to be something that all Christians can enjoy in their hearts, homes, congregations and workplaces or vocations. Spirituality, particularly as one lived out it in their obedience to God's Word from the heart, was an "everyman's (or woman's) spirituality, and not reserved for the monastic elite."<sup>102</sup>

We can also see a unity of thought between Calvin and Sibbes in the importance of the internal work of the Spirit of God through regeneration and repentance bringing change in the human heart. Though Sibbes arguably focused the attention more on the interior heart than Calvin,

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<sup>100</sup> There were three particular influences that we can trace between Bernard and Thomas of the Middle Ages and John Calvin and Richard Sibbes in the early Modern period: 1) Christological emphasis; 2) Meditative disposition; and 3) Yearnings to experience God's presence (while understanding sinfulness, and the knowledge of God and self). See de Riveur, *Sweet Communion*, 57-58; cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, Book I:1-2.

<sup>101</sup> de Riveur, *Sweet Communion*, 80.

<sup>102</sup> See L. J. Richard, *The Spirituality of John Calvin*, 29,180ff, and Tamburello, *Union with Christ*, 102ff.

nevertheless, both of them agreed that the saving work of Christ produces changed hearts, affections, and desires from which true fear of the Lord will proceed. Both Calvin and Sibbes agreed on the importance of true spirituality and fear of the Lord coming forth from the word of God. Both Calvin and Sibbes emphasized the importance of both the love of God and the fear of God, that you could not have one without the other. Both could have written what Calvin summarized:

*For not only does piety beget reverence toward God, but the very sweetness and delightfulness of grace so fills a man who is cast down in himself with fear, and at the same time with admiration, that he depends upon God, and humbly submits himself to His power.<sup>103</sup>*

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The big difference between the two seems to be the historical context and atmosphere in which they ministered the Gospel. This is important for understanding both of these men and their individual emphases. Distinctly and differently were the historical contexts into which Calvin and Sibbes lived and ministered. Calvin sought to advance the third use of the law through an understanding of fear of God in a time when the Roman Catholics criticized the Reformers for a justification without works, or a justification that would not necessarily entail a sanctified, obedient life. In other words, a main concern of John Calvin was showing how justification will lead to good works in union with Christ. Thus, the fear of the Lord was emphasized as an important fruit of a good life. Sibbes on the other hand directed his ministry with a more gentle voice and compassionate heart to “bruised reeds” as he understood his situation. As Mark Dever has written, Sibbes was a “cautious reformer” and a “moderate” Puritan, and he was rarely polemical

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<sup>103</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.23, Kindle Edition.

because he was more concerned with comfort than controversy in his historical context as a gospel minister [my emphasis].<sup>104</sup>

Because Sibbes' historical context and atmosphere of his ministry was rife with moralism and an accentuation upon the behavior in the larger church some fifty to sixty years after Calvin, he emphasized the inner life of desire and affections.<sup>105</sup> In contrast to the much moralistic preaching in his time, Sibbes had a wonderful reputation in the 1600s as one who preached "sweet, soul-melting Gospel-sermons" that refreshed the saints, awakened the apathetic, and encouraged the troubled. He was known for his very experimental ("experiential"), or practical sermons because he wanted to focus primarily on the heart and the desires—the affections.<sup>106</sup> Mark Dever quotes an introduction to the reader in Sibbes' works that describes his emphasis and importance:

*Sibbes seemed to stand above the tumult of the times, to preserve the vitals and essentials of religion, that the souls of his hearers, being captivated with the inward beauty and glory of Christ, and being led into an experiential knowledge of heavenly truths, their spirits might now evaporate themselves in endless, gainless, soul-unedifying, and conscience-perplexing questions.*<sup>107</sup>

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In this way, Sibbes' practical or "experiential" emphasis was to produce the obedience of faith that should be evident in a Christian's life.<sup>108</sup> For Sibbes, a man's ethics and morals are directed from within, not from without, and so the focus should be internally on the heart.<sup>109</sup> His emphasis to avoid both legalism and antinomianism was to emphasize Christ in His saving graces for the

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<sup>104</sup> Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes*, 1-2, 47-48, 88-89.

<sup>105</sup> See Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes*, "Sibbes and the Contentious Age, 1617-1635", Chap. IV, pgs. 71-95.

<sup>106</sup> Kapic and Gleason, *The Devoted Life*, 80.

<sup>107</sup> Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes* (Macon, GA: Mercer Univ. Press, 2000), 41-42.

<sup>108</sup> At the time of Sibbes there were nomists or legalists who were oriented toward a moralistic system that was more anthropocentric and its piety more extrinsic or external. See Ronald Norman Frost, Ronald Norman. "Richard Sibbes' Theology of Grace and the Division of English Reformed Theology." PhD diss. King's College of the University of London, 1996, 174.

<sup>109</sup> H. P. Shelly, "Sibbes: Preacher of Piety", 75.

sinner.<sup>110</sup> Though some scholars have criticized Sibbes for being a “semi-antinomian” and even going as far as to say that “personal purity derived from dutiful observance of the law finds no place in the writings of Sibbes,” nevertheless, there is sufficient evidence to point to his emphasis being internal on the heart and not drawing the conclusion he was an antinomian in any shape or form.<sup>111</sup> Because of the legalistic context, Sibbes strove to focus on the beauty and glory of Christ known through his teachings though this was not to turn away from God’s commands, only a different emphasis than John Calvin because of a different time period.

We could summarize by saying that John Calvin focused primarily on the godly fruits of the fear of God, whereas Sibbes focused on the inner man, soul, desires, or heart from which the godly fruits would come forth. Sibbes focused on the affections primarily. Mark Dever wrote that Sibbes “radically interiorized Christianity.”<sup>112</sup> Though Sibbes could be misunderstood in his interiorizing as not being concerned with holiness of actions, this is not true.<sup>113</sup> Sibbes’ scholar Harold Patton Shelly wrote that Sibbes’ primary emphasis as a preacher was the interior soul, a focus on the hearts, the affections, the desires of the soul toward God in Christ rather than an outward

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<sup>110</sup> Ironically, Sibbes, who ministered in a period characterized by great theological and civil conflicts, has been accused by scholars of being both an Antinomian and a Legalist, even an “semi-antinomian”. Sibbes’ scholar R. N. Frost emphasizes that Sibbes was not an Antinomian, but was ministering in a context that was rife with moralism, and so he emphasized the ministry of the Spirit from within men’s souls. Dever wrote that modern scholarship has wrongly presented Sibbes as a central, “though unwitting, figure in the development of moralism, emphasizing sanctification at the expense of justification. Dever rightly points out that “Sibbes was not...and unwitting representative of a nascent moralism. He was, rather, one of the last of the great Reformed preachers of England both to believe in theory and to know in practice an officially undivided covenant community. Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes*, 99; See also R. N. Frost, “*Richard Sibbes’ Theology of Grace and the Division of English Reformed Theology*,” PhD diss. King’s College of the Univ. of London, 1996, 134, 174-77.

<sup>111</sup> H. P. Shelly, “Sibbes: Preacher of Piety”, 75. Also, Bozeman who absolutely denies any antinomian leanings in Richard Sibbes because antinomians tend to “hail the supremacy of justification” over sanctification, *The Precisianist Strain* (Chapel Hill, Univ. of North Carolina, 2004), 189.

<sup>112</sup> Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes*, 157.

<sup>113</sup> Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes*, 158.



conformity to the law of God.<sup>114</sup> Sibbes did not undermine the law of God, nor did he make it a covenant of works.<sup>115</sup> Rather, he emphasized the law as it is written by the Spirit upon the heart that was promised to believers in Christ in the context of the Covenant of Grace as we have already observed above (cf. Heb. 8:8-13).<sup>116</sup>

Sibbes believed for his historical time that the primary attention of the Christian ought to be on the love of God as He is revealed in Christ. Shelly wrote: “Some earlier Puritans had emphasized the law of God and conformity to its precepts. The goal for which Sibbes strove was not external precision gained by following the law of God but *an internal holiness produced by the Spirit of God* (my emphasis). God’s love and mercy, not his law and judgment, ought to inspire the saint.”<sup>117</sup> Sibbes’ understanding of the Spirit of Christ’s work would produce obedience and fruitfulness that would fulfill the demands of the law in Christ, which is summarized as true love for God in Christ (cf. Rom. 13:8-10). The Spirit of Christ’s ministry was to convict, lead to confession, comfort with forgiving love and mercy, and conform believers to Christ. This was not an undermining of God’s holy law, but a different emphasis that Sibbes “contextualized” wisely in his time due to an imbalanced moralistic emphasis that sought to awaken apathetic people living in the Covenant of Grace in the national church.

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<sup>114</sup> Harold Patton Shelly, *Richard Sibbes: Early Stuart Preacher of Piety*, Ph.D. diss. (Temple University, 1972), 55-56.

<sup>115</sup> This was not an undermining of God’s law as some have argued. Sibbes taught that if grace had changed a man from the heart, the outward life would be obedient in conformity to God’s holy word. In Sibbes’ excellent study *The Excellency of the Gospel Above the Law* he does not do away with the law as a way of life in Christ. Rather, his focus is on how grace changes the believer’s heart in order to keep the law. The obedience to the law not as a covenant of works, but as a part of living out the Covenant of Grace in Christ Jesus.

<sup>116</sup> Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes*, 2.

<sup>117</sup> Harold Patton Shelly, *Richard Sibbes: Early Stuart Preacher of Piety*, Ph.D. diss. (Temple University, 1972), 55-56.

To summarize the differences between Calvin and Sibbes, this might be illustrated through a living and flourishing tree (cf. John 15:1ff). Often the Book of Proverbs uses the imagery of a tree of life for wisdom, fear of the LORD, good fruits produced by the godly person (Prov. 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; cf. Rev. 2:7). If we think of a tree, we might illustrate Calvin's emphasis being on the fruits of the tree, and Sibbes' emphasis on the roots of that same tree. For both, the tree was only living if it had both transformed roots and good fruits because of union with Christ by the Spirit. The life of that tree, whether the roots or fruits came from the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit!

### **Practical Implications/Applications for Today**

As we think about this teaching on the fear of the Lord, particularly as taught similarly by Calvin and Sibbes, yet with some important differences, what can we learn as a church on the way today? We might begin by thinking of piety itself. Do we seek to love God as Father as we desire to fear Him as Lord and to dread offending Him because He has been good and kind to us in Christ?! Related to this, is the important question: "Do we as believers truly fear the LORD?" The Bible teaches us that fearing the Lord is "*for [our] good always*" (Deut. 6:25; cf. Prov. 10:27).

*"And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always..." - Deuteronomy 6:25*

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Fear of the LORD is simply an important and foundational aspect of Christ-likeness. To state it as plainly as possible, one cannot truly love the true and living God and not fear Him. Jesus Christ says: "*If you love me, keep my commandments*" (John 15:9-11; 1 John 3:4-8; 2 John 4). This love that is revealed in obedience brings great joy, our Savior promises (John 15:11). Yet there are teachers in our time who are rightly concerned that many evangelical Christians just haven't understood that the fear of the LORD is essential to Christian life, though it is a "massive and

dominant theme in Scripture.”<sup>118</sup> Fear of the LORD is a vital fruit of the love of God and true and saving faith. It must not be overlooked. It must be taught, and it must be practiced both as an outward conformity to God’s word, and as an inward desire from the heart. Sadly, even for some confessing Reformed believers, there may be a problem of not having a fear of God before their eyes (cf. Rom. 3:18).

Fear of the LORD is most important for us as Christians to understand. The fear of the LORD is the “beginning of wisdom” (Psa. 111:10; Prov. 1:7) and it is how we are to live and to teach our children (Deut. 6:1-2, 13; Book of Proverbs). Perhaps the greatest weakness of the western church of Jesus Christ in our time is the lack of the fear of the LORD.<sup>119</sup> Reformed congregations in our time rightly seek to emphasize God’s love, but we should also remember that there cannot be a true love for God without a Spirit-formed fear of Him. God asks His people: *“A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you...”* (Malachi 1:6). Let us learn from this scripture. Let us fear God, and joyfully be as those described in Malachi 4:2: *“But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.”*

We should remember that the Christian’s “proof” or “evidence” or the fruit of our love for Christ will be in our fearing God and in seeking to do what He teaches us to do (Deut. 8:5-6). Let us think together on how often the fear of the LORD is taught throughout Scripture. For just a few places,

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<sup>118</sup> See Albert N. Martin, *The Forgotten Fear: Where Have All the God-Fearers Gone?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), Kindle Edition, Location 66.

<sup>119</sup> See Martin, *Forgotten Fear*.

let us meditate upon: Psa. 19:9; 34:11; Prov. 1:7; 2:5; 14:27; Isa. 11:2-3; 33:6; Acts 9:31; 2 Cor. 5:11). In one of these references, in the Book of Acts, the church is described by both fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit: *“So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied”* (ESV **Acts 9:31**). One would think that there might be a tension between comfort of the Spirit and the fear of the Lord. But fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Spirit both come from the work of the Holy Spirit as souls are more shaped and formed to be Christ-like. Fear of the Lord can establish and strengthen healthy Christian congregations with great spiritual (“Holy-Spiritual”) comfort: A congregation that is possessed by the love of God and the fear of God can walk with comfort from the Holy Spirit, knowing that no matter what trouble or tribulation may come in the lives of the saints, they are living honestly and faithfully in covenant with their God (Acts 9:31). The comfort comes in knowing that though there may be persecution, God is with us, and God is pleased. Though there is not perfection, there is a desire to do all out of love from a pure heart, a sincere faith, and a clear conscience (cf. 1 Tim. 1:5).

Additionally, fear of the Lord brings freedom to live as one was created to live: Fear of the LORD is the believer’s happiness to live before God as we were created to live before sin. Fear of the Lord brings freedom to be free from sinful fears of man and of trials/tribulations. Fear of the LORD reduces and can even completely take away the fear of man that we all possess to some degree (cf. Matt. 22:16). If we live with the fear of God, seeking to please Him, then we will be less apt to live our lives seeking the pleasures and compliments of men. As the Apostle Paul, we can aspire to live in union with Christ with an eye toward our accountability, and with a desire to please only God (cf. 2 Cor. 5:8-11). Calvin summarized this thinking:

*...This [righteous] mind restrains itself from sinning not out of dread of punishment alone, but because it loves and reveres God as Father, it worships and adores Him as Lord. Even if there were no hell, it would shudder at only offending Him [my emphasis].*<sup>120</sup>

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We should ponder the fact from our study that a confessing Christian can be characterized as either antinomian or legalist if there is not enough of an emphasis and focus on union with Christ. This we can learn from both Calvin and Sibbes. If one is focused on union with Christ as both Calvin and Sibbes were in their ministry and teaching, both aspects of the union, both justification and sanctification can be clearly seen and revealed as true benefits of union with Christ. Neither Calvin nor Sibbes undermined God's law, or undermined the biblical teaching on fear of God. Rather, both were seeking as God's servants to emphasize different aspects of Gospel truth in different historical-cultural time periods. Yet both were unfairly regarded as both legalist and antinomian. We should learn that though there may be unfair criticism, we are to seek to focus on Christ and His benefits to the believer that includes both the root and the fruits of holiness and fear of the Lord.

We can remember that there are different contexts and seasons of a congregation's life. Though all sound theology flows from preaching Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:1-5), there may be times to focus on the heart and affections primarily, and times to focus on the outward behavior, and these should not be in tension. Christ has come to be a "whole Savior", to be "of sin the double cure" to save us both from sin's "guilt and power". We can learn from both Calvin and Sibbes, if we understand their historical contexts, and yet still focus on the central important truth

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<sup>120</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on Epistles of John*, [1 John, IV.18], 247.

of the Christian religion which is union with the resurrected, ascended, enthroned Christ at God's right hand.

Fear of the Lord is certainly not the only fruit of godly affections and desires, but it is a foundational one. In our spiritual atmosphere here at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it seems that it is time for both to be addressed. When the affections are addressed with the love of Christ, there is less likelihood of folks to become legalists, and when fear of the Lord is addressed specifically as a manifestation of our love for God in Christ through the affections, there is no room for antinomianism. But let us be wise and careful here.

We must wisely seek to focus on both the roots and the fruits as being conformity of the Spirit's work in our union with Christ. As Dr. Sinclair Ferguson has warmly and carefully reminded us, when we try to combat legalism with a little antinomianism, or to combat antinomianism with a bit of legalism, we will fail miserably and lose the proper Gospel emphasis (cf. 1 Cor. 2:1-5). Both legalism and antinomianism are terrible, unbiblical errors. It's like putting one foot in front of the other to spiritually trip oneself up. What we need is a "whole Christ" who is a whole and complete Savior for both. We receive Him and all of His benefits in our union with Him, including both changed affections and an obedient life. Let us ponder this, let us live out of this, and let us make this known to the church today.<sup>121</sup>

Because of union with Christ, let us walk in the fear of the Lord all of our days. Let this be our chief desire from our affections, bringing forth the fruits of holiness in the fear of the Lord (2 Cor.

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<sup>121</sup> Ferguson, Sinclair B. *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, & Gospel Assurance--Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 49-56.

7:1) by God's good grace and Spirit. Calvin captured the mind of one who would humble themselves before God and walk in the fear of God all of their days:

*To serve my God is work enough. Supposing I had a much greater store of holiness, I could never fulfill a hundredth part of my duty. So I will aim no higher than God permits: he knows my capacity and my strength. From now on I will strive to walk in the fear of my God better than before. My life is short and I am still far from the goal he has set. Though I Try hard to reach it, the road is long and difficult.<sup>122</sup>*

**Let this be our prayer:** *“Grant, Almighty God, that as you have been pleased to adopt us as your people for this end, that we may be ingrafted as it were into the body of your Son, and be made conformable to our head,--O grant, that through our whole life we may strive to seal in our hearts the faith of our election, that we may be the more stimulated to render you true obedience, and that your glory may also be made known through us; and those whom you have chosen together with us may we labor to bring together, that we may unanimously celebrate you as the Author of our salvation, and so ascribe to you the glory of your goodness, that having cast away and renounced all confidence in our own virtue, we may be led to Christ only as the fountain of your election, in whom also is set before us the certainty of our salvation through your gospel, until we shall at length be gathered into that eternal glory which He has procured for us by His own blood. Amen.” – John Calvin*

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<sup>122</sup> John Calvin, *Songs of the Nativity: Selected Sermons on Luke 1 & 2, translated by Robert White* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2008), 45-46.

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