

Richard Baxter

"I preached ... as a dying man to dying men."

Richard Baxter never received a higher commission than that of parish pastor to loom workers in Kidderminster. Still, he was the most prominent English churchman of the 1600s. He was a peacemaker who sought unity among Protestants, and yet he was a highly independent thinker—and at the center of every major controversy in England during his lifetime.



Born in Rowton to parents who undervalued education, the first ten years of Baxter's life were spent in the village of Rowton at the home of his maternal grandfather. Shortly before his son's birth, the senior Baxter had come under conviction regarding the importance of divine truth. In his autobiography Baxter states that his father's conversion "was effected chiefly through the instrumentality of reading the Scriptures," but had few opportunities to attend the ordinary means of grace. This scriptural basis established by his father set the wheels in motion for Baxter's own conversion. From his early days he remembered his father acquainting him with the historical facts of the Bible and drawing him to love the Book.

But as his convictions gathered strength so did his sins. It was during the early days of his youth that the publication of *The Book of Sports* impacted the piety of his Puritan home. In it profanations of the Lord's Day were encouraged by Royal proclamation. These recreations distracted him from the study of the Word and prayer. Baxter stated, "Many times my mind was inclined to be among them, and sometimes I broke loose from conscience, and joined with them; and the more I did it the more I was inclined to it."

It was within these losses of conscience that he first heard the word "Puritan" assigned to his father. This word pricked his conscience as he realized his father's reading of the Scripture was better than the dancing under the Maypole and the playing of pipe and tabor in the street. Baxter cited that he was converted at the age of fifteen while reading *Bunney's Resolutions*. "In reading this book," he observed, "it pleased God to awaken my soul, and show me the folly of sinning, and the misery of the wicked, and the inexpressible weight of things eternal, and the necessity of resolving on a holy life, more than I was ever acquainted with before."

His early education, much to his later disdain, was neglected. He was persuaded not to attend college, but rather pursued his studies at Ludlow Castle. Upon leaving he took charge of a grammar school at Wroster. Under the advice of a friend, Baxter accepted the position of headmaster at a new grammar school in Dudley, Worcestershire. It was while at Dudley that he applied and received his ordination. But after only three quarters of a year, he was invited to preach at Bridgnorth. At Bridgnorth "he found the people dead and unresponsive." It was here that he began to come to terms with his modifications of Church government and worship. It was also while at Bridgnorth that he found it necessary to abstain from signing the *et cetera* oath. He "read the Common Prayer, but did not celebrate, nor baptize with the sign of the Cross, nor wear a surplice." Baxter found freedom from the things he scrupled at Bridgnorth, the congregation often applauding his sermons yet refusing to reform.

Baxter, who was largely self-taught, eventually studied at a free school, then at royal court, where he became disgusted at what he saw as frivolity. He left to study divinity, and at age 23, he was ordained into the Church of England.

Within the Anglican Church, Baxter found common ground with the Puritans, a growing faction who opposed the church's episcopacy—and was itself breaking into factions.

Baxter, for his part, did his best to avoid the disputes between Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and other denominations, even convincing local ministers to cooperate in some pastoral matters. "In necessary things, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; in all things, charity," he was fond of saying. The interest in cooperation was not due to a lack of conviction. On the contrary, Baxter was opinionated in his theology, which was not quite Separatist and not quite Conformist. Among his more than 200 works are long, controversial discourses on doctrine. Still, he believed society

was a large family under a loving father, and in his theology, he tried to cut between the extremes. He eventually registered himself as "a mere Nonconformist" ("Nonconformist" was a technical term meaning "not Anglican"), breaking with the Church of England mainly because of the lack of power it gave parish clergy.

Baxter also found himself as a peacemaker during the English Civil Wars. He believed in monarchy, but a limited one. He served as a chaplain for the parliamentary army, but then helped to bring about the restoration of the king. Yet as a moderate, Baxter found himself the target of both extremes.

He was still irritated with the episcopacy in 1660, when he was offered the bishopric of Hereford, so he declined it. As a result, he was barred from ecclesiastical office and not permitted to return to Kidderminster, nor was he allowed to preach.

Still, he continued to preach: "I preached as never sure to preach again", he wrote "and as a dying man to dying men."

Baxter became even better known for his prolific writing. His devotional classic *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* was one of the most widely read books of the century. When asked what deviations should be permitted from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, he created an entirely new one, called *Reformed Liturgy*, in two weeks. His *Christian Directory* contains over one million words. His autobiography and his pastoral guide, *The Reformed Pastor*, are still widely read today.

Baxter never compromised his love for the church with romance while he was shepherd. And in 1662, a woman providentially entered his life that God used mightily to assist his servant over the next nineteen years. This woman was Margaret Charleton. The story of their relationship is a wonderful romance of which little can be said here except that she was a magnificent support and blessing to his work. The Baxters became very transient in the ministry at this time, moving frequently through the vicinity surrounding London. During all this, Baxter met continually in the organized church and would supplement this preaching with his own teaching after the service in his home. This caused him to be arrested and to spend six months under house arrest in New Prison in Clerkwel. Upon his release Baxter continued this sporadic preaching throughout London. The times were hard. Margaret often struggled to raise support for the family and for her husband's work. Yet, God blessed her husband's preaching and publications.

In June of 1681 his beloved wife succumbed to illness and died. Baxter fought illness consistently for the next six months. In 1682, he was arrested and fined for preaching five sermons. They tried to drag him off to jail, but were stopped by his physician who appealed to the king on the severity of his illness. Charles determined to "let him die in bed," and allowed his guards to take his bed to pay his fine. When Charles died in 1685, his brother James, a convinced Catholic, took the throne determined to reinstate Catholicism. He soon found the Protestant Dissenters his greatest enemy. Finding a ready tool in Judge Jefferies, they set about to crush this Protestant opposition. Baxter, now 70 and tired of controversy, asked only to be left alone with a quiet place to die. As always in moments of sickness, Baxter set about to write. This time his work consisted of a *Paraphrase of the New Testament*. The work proved to be his political undoing.

On February 28, 1685, Baxter was committed to King's Bench prison. In May, he was brought to court and was not allowed a jury of his peers to assess the doctrinal and grammatical quality of the work. Judge Jefferies bantered him, refusing to hear any defense in his behalf. Jefferies wanted to have the old saint whipped through the city, but the jury would not have it. They fined Baxter 500 marks and sentenced him to remain in the prison until it was paid. Baxter, his books sold and furniture gone, was unable to pay the fine. In November, 1686, Baxter was released from prison. He spent his last years in ill health still laboring with his pen. His last days were spent in misery and pain until the Lord took him home on December 8, 1691. "He was buried beside his wife in the ruined Chancel of Christ Church Newgate Street: but his spirit passed away; away from a life of pain and trouble to the everlasting rest of Christ.

Consider some thoughts on Baxter and on the gospel he preached.

Quoting J. I. Packer: 'The content of Baxter's gospel message was not in any way distinctive. It was the historic, Puritan, evangelical New Testament message of ruin, redemption and regeneration'. This certainly comes across to us very plainly as we read Baxter's Call. It raises the question, why then was it so successful? There was nothing remarkable in the content of what he says other than that he was preaching the good old evangelical message which we are so familiar with today, and yet which in our age appears not to be anything like as successful as it was in Baxter's time. What have we to learn as lessons for our own day?

First of all, Baxter was direct. He spoke as if he were at someone's side. He took his hearers almost by the throat. He addressed them as 'you', he spoke to their innermost thoughts, he searched their hearts and he exposed them to themselves. That surely is one of the greatest gifts as a preacher that he had.

He also brought forth reasons for everything. Baxter was a great exhorter but he never ranted. He did not simply shout or make an assault on the will or emotions. He addressed the mind of his hearers. This is characteristic of Puritan preaching. Man, they said, is a rational being and he needs to know why he is being called on to turn to God, and then he needs to be informed how he must turn. So reasons are brought forward, everything is explained, opened up and elucidated.



Baxter ripped up the conscience of his hearers as with a ploughshare. Almost every word and sentence was a challenge to the conscience of sinful men. It drove them out of every refuge of lies and summoned them before God's judgment-seat. It exposed them and made them see their need to flee to Christ. He was a master at unmasking sin. He showed sin to be exceeding sinful. He showed that it is delightful only when seen in a false light and that the essential character of sin is hateful and detestable. God is the enemy of those who persist in it. He made sin appear to be sin.

He also dealt with primary truths. He spoke frequently about heaven and hell, God and Christ, faith and repentance, sin and the evils of it, as well as the judgment to come and God's knowledge of men's hearts. With these great and central Gospel facts, he cornered and set upon his hearers. He was in full pursuit like a lion after his prey.

He had a deep compassion and profound pastoral concern. He cared deeply for the lost state of men. He had a burning heart of love to Christ-less sinners. This adds unction and gives peculiar tenderness and sweetness even to his most direct approaches to the consciences of men.

How important was he in his day? John Wilkins, Bishop of Chester concluded, "If [Baxter] had lived in the primitive time he would have been one of the fathers of the church." A biographer of Baxter says about him that "he came nearer to the apostolic writings than any man in the age." How important is he for today? Packer and Beougher tell us: "As two students of Baxter who cannot be sufficiently thankful for the impact [Baxter] has made in our lives, we would say to every believer, get to know Baxter, and stay with Baxter. He will always do you good."

Baxter captured as well as anyone the worldview focus of Christian discipleship. He understood that all of life must be faithfully integrated because Christ is the Lord of all of life. Packer writes, "The sheer brilliance of Baxter's achievement in crystallizing a proper form for the life of faith on a canvass as broad as life at a very high level of intelligent, Bible-based, theologically-integrated wisdom, and with unfailing compressed clarity, is dazzling to the mind. Baxter had a high view of "the unity of human life before the Lord." Packer says that there is no world-denial with Baxter. Instead, what Baxter calls for "is the sanctification of all life through bringing all its manifold activities into the unity of a single

overmastering purpose - loving God, and laying hold of eternal life in its fullness. That can be put the other way round, by saying that what Baxter calls for is a branching out of the converted Christian's heart's desire, to know and love and please God, into biblically informed and situationally appropriate action in every department of life."

"The Gospel dieth not when I die: the church dieth not: the praises of God die not: the world dieth not: and perhaps it shall grow better," he wrote near the end of his life. "It may be that some of the seed that I have sown shall spring up to some benefit of the dark unpeaceable world when I am dead."

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