

The Life and Ministry of Richard Baxter

by Lynell Friesen

At the turn of the seventeenth century, the Church of England was in a very troubled state. Henry VIII, some seventy years earlier, had set in motion changes that brought the tensions of the Reformation into this nation that had yet to be stilled. The battle between Rome and the Prelacy vacillated with each successor to the throne until Elizabeth firmly grasped the reigns of both Church and state, calling herself the “Supreme Governor.” Under her brother Edward VI, Cranmer had instituted the *Act of Uniformity* in 1549. This Act had compelled the Church of England to replace the existing Roman liturgy with the English Service as laid out in the Prayer Book of 1549. Under Elizabeth’s half sister, Mary Tudor, the *Act of Uniformity* was repealed in 1554, restoring the Roman liturgy and the Pope’s jurisdiction over the Church of England. But once Mary was deposed, Elizabeth enacted the *Act of Supremacy* and the *Act of Uniformity* in 1559, once again restoring the rights of the Crown over the Church.

This Elizabethan Settlement was wholly unsatisfactory to those who had been forced into religious exile. These men did not want to overthrow the English church as Mary had intended, but only wished the Church to comply more fully with changes that were occurring on the Continent. Upon the death of Elizabeth in 1603, James VI of Scotland was invited to unite the thrones of Scotland and England. “Though a son of Mary Queen of Scots, James had little sympathy with the Papal party, whose loyalty he always suspected. He had seen enough Scottish Presbyterianism to know that Puritanism would do him no good.”¹ And so James allied himself with the Church of England. From the first James was suspicious of Roman Catholics, but hoped to reconcile the Church. These hopes were dashed by Guy Fawkes in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, when on the eve of the opening of Parliament it was discovered that, under his leadership, plans had been made to blow up King, Lord and Commons in one enormous explosion. It was into this tension that Richard Baxter was born ten years and five days later.

The Early Years

It was on the 12th of November, 1615, that Richard was born to Beatrice Adeney and Richard Baxter in his mother’s home at Rowton in the County of

¹ John R.H. Moorman, *A History of the Church in England*, Morehouse Publishing: Harrisburg, PA, 1980, p. 222.

Shropshire. “The year after he was born William Shakespeare died, and twelve years before his birth Thomas Cartwright, the great puritan leader of Elizabeth’s reign had died.”² The cause of Puritanism in England now seemed lost. “The great Elizabethan Puritan courtiers had long since passed away, and the prevailing tendency at Court was to support the Episcopal party”³ of Andrews and Laud.

The first ten years of Baxter’s life were spent in the village of Rowton at the home of his maternal grandfather. His father “had the competent estate of a freeholder, free from the temptations of poverty and riches,” but Richard confessed that his father “having been addicted to gaming in his youth, and his father before him, it [the estate] was so entangled by debts, that it occasioned some excess of worldly cares before it was freed.”⁴ 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,”⁵ 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*⁶ 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.”⁷ 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 *Bunny’s Resolutions*.⁸ “In reading this book,” he observes, “it pleased God to awaken my soul, and show me the folly of sinning, and the misery of the wicked, and the

² Irvonwy Morgan, *The Nonconformity of Richard Baxter*, The Epworth Press: London, 1946, p. 37.

³ Ibid., p. 37.

⁴ Richard Baxter, *Autobiography*, Christian Focus Publications, 1998, p. 7.

⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

⁶ The publication date of this work is varied. Footnotes in *Richard Baxter’s Autobiography* cite the work’s publication in 1618 whereas Hugh Martin in *Puritanism and Richard Baxter* (SCM Press Ltd., London, 1954, p. 23) date the work in 1633.

⁷ Op. Cit., Baxter, pp. 9-10.

⁸ *Bunny’s Resolutions* was written by Parsons the Jesuit and corrected by Edmund Bunny.

inexpressible weight of things eternal, and the necessity of resolving on a holy life, more than I was ever acquainted with before.”⁹

His early education, much to his later disdain, was neglected. He was persuaded not to attend college, but rather pursued his studies under Mr. Wickstead at Ludlow Castle. Baxter remembers that he “allowed him books and time but never seriously attempted to instruct his mind.”¹⁰ Baxter remained under the tutelage of Wickstead for a year and a half. Upon leaving he took charge of a grammar school at Wroxter, later coming under the charge of Mr. Garbett the minister there. 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 in Shropshire. At Bridgnorth “he found the people dead and unresponsive.”¹¹ 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.”¹² Baxter found freedom from the things he scrupled at Bridgnorth, the congregation often applauding his sermons yet refusing to reform.

Kidderminster and Chaplaincy

God again changed the direction in Baxter’s life when the people of Kidderminster drew up a petition against their minister and his two curates whom they considered unfit for the ministry. Before giving up his position, the Vicar compromised by promising to pay for a lecturer, and Baxter was unanimously chosen for the post. His time at Kidderminster was not without controversy. Irvonwry Morgan cites that “the people [were] raging mad at him for preaching the doctrine of original sin, which they interpreted as meaning that God hated and loathed infants!”¹³

Baxter’s tenure at Kidderminster had been less than two years when Civil War broke out. Not far to the north in Nottingham shots broke out between Royalist and Parliamentary forces. Both sides claimed to be for the King. Baxter’s “instincts were Royalist, but his sympathies were Parliamentary.”¹⁴

⁹ Op. Cit., Baxter, p. 11.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 13.

¹¹ Hugh Martin, *Puritanism and Richard Baxter*, SCM Press, Ltd: London, 1954, p. 37.

¹² Ibid., Morgan, p. 40.

¹³ Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 41.

These sympathies angered the Royalists in Kidderminster, and they drove him out more than once. After the battle in Naseby in 1645, Baxter determined to accept the call to the chaplaincy of the Parliamentary forces. Two years prior, Oliver Cromwell had “purposed to make their Troop a gathered Church, and they all subscribed an invitation to [Baxter] to be their Pastor.”¹⁵ Baxter set out to combat the growth of sectarianism in the Parliamentary army, but mediating the diverse religious radicalism became too great a task for him. His greatest opponents in this new calling were the Levelers, who “vehemently declaimed against the [Calvinist] doctrine of Election, and for the power of Free Will ... they as fiercely cried down our present Translation of the Scriptures ... and they vilified almost all our worship.”¹⁶

Worcester fell to the King’s troops in 1646 and Baxter continued to act as chaplain for an additional eight months, until in February 1647 he was taken ill. The remainder of Baxter’s days were plagued by continuing bouts of illness. He, not unlike Augustine, attributed this to an excessive love for fruit. And also not unlike Augustine, in his youth had joined a “gang of young hooligans who set out periodically to rob a neighbor’s orchard.”¹⁷ The severity of his illness cut short Baxter’s military career. He was brought to the home of Sir Thomas and Lady Rous where he was graciously nursed back to health.

After this time of convalescence, Baxter returned to his beloved Kidderminster. The next thirteen years were probably the most profitable years of his life. Not only was he able to write some of his greatest works during this time, but his unequalled ministry set a standard that countless godly men have pursued as their goal. Packer writes that Baxter had “the most fruitful Puritan pastorate anywhere recorded,” and “wrote constantly, becoming the most voluminous of all British theologians.”¹⁸ Referring to this period, Baxter wrote that prior to the wars he preached “twice each Lord’s Day; but after the war, but once, and once every Thursday.”¹⁹ An additional small group meeting of young people was held where they privately prayed for three hours. On Saturday night another group met again to review the sermon of the previous week, to pray and prepare for the following Lord’s Day. In addition, two days every week Baxter and his curate took fourteen families between them for private catechizing. He would start at one end of the village, and his assistant at the other. This was normally done on Mondays and

¹⁵Don Gilbert, “Baxter as an Army Chaplain”, *Baxter’s Notes and Studies*, Richard Baxter Society. htm.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Florence Higham, *Faith of Our Fathers*, Student Christian Movement Press: London, 1939, p. 92.

¹⁸ J.I. Packer, *New Dictionary of Theology*, InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL, p. 82.

¹⁹ Op. Cit., Baxter, p. 42.

Tuesdays, with an hour spent with each family alone. Baxter “first heard them recite the words of the catechism, and then examined them about the sense, and lastly urged them, with all possible engaging reason and vehemence, to answerable affection and practice.”²⁰ In addition, Baxter spent considerable time acting as their physician. For five or six years he was so crowded with patients he could do little else in the ministry. He eventually procured a physician for Kidderminster and resolved no longer to practice medicine.

Restoration, Ejection and Persecution

Early in April 1660, Baxter ceased his ministry in Kidderminster. Of his reason for leaving little is known, but there is much speculation of it having some connection with the state of public affairs. “Oliver Cromwell died in 1658. His son Richard, who succeeded him as Protector was a failure and resigned in 1660.²¹ Charles II, the son of Charles I who had been beheaded by Cromwell, was restored to office May 29, 1660. The Laudians who had supervised Charles’ education in exile would eventually seize control of the religious situation in England. In the meantime, Charles made several Presbyterian ministers chaplains in ordinary to him, among whom was Baxter. Baxter addressed Parliament on numerous occasions in this capacity. Later, the Lord Chancellor offered him a bishopric which he declined, asking only to be restored to his old charge in Kidderminster.

In April, 1661, Baxter took part in the *Savoy Conference*. It was attended by twelve divines and twelve puritans. The discourse that followed centered on the concerns of restoring unity within the Church of England. The divines assumed the restoration of the Prayer Book, leaving it to the Puritans to state their objections. Baxter’s list of *gravamina* ran many pages of print.

“Among them was the abolition of the surplice, the cross in Baptism and the habit of kneeling at Communion, a demand for extemporary prayer and the running of collects and the Litany into one long prayer, the alteration of the word ‘priest’ and ‘minister’, ‘Sunday’ into ‘Lord’s Day’, and so on. The zeal of the Puritans was unbounded; but it went too far. The bishops were bored by Baxter’s pedantry and his interminable speeches on matters which were really of very little significance.”²²

²⁰ Ibid., p. 43.

²¹ Op. Cit., Moorman, p. 248.

²² Ibid., p. 250

This was the beginning of the end. The bishops refused to budge. The winter session revised the Prayer Book and ordered its use from St. Bartholomew's Day, 1662, under penalty of deprivation. "The act required all clergy and schoolmasters to make a declaration that they believe it to be unlawful to take arms against the king, that they would use the Prayer Book of 1662 and that the Solemn League and Covenant was an unlawful oath."²³ Baxter's conscience would not allow him to sign. And in May 1662 he set the standard which many would follow in the Great Ejection of August 24, 1662.

Baxter never compromised his love for the church with romance while he was shepherd. Then 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. The ejection followed by the plague and the London fire was a time when many Nonconformists guarded the flock while their Conformist vicars fled their pulpits for safety. 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 1672, the Nonconformists felt some relief. Charles, seeking to appease his ministers and to maintain more popular support for the Crown over the Parliament, exercised his Royal Prerogative over the church by issuing a Declaration of Indulgence for all Nonconformists. This declaration allowed preaching licenses to be issued for preaching as long as there was no seditious preaching and no one preached against the Church of England. Baxter and others were suspicious of this. Upon prodding from his friends, Baxter applied for license on the condition that he could have it without title of Presbyterian or Independent but only as a Nonconformist. He was chosen to preach at Merchant's Lecture in Pinner's Hall in London. But the Indulgence was doomed. As the king had issued the Indulgence with out Parliament, when Parliament reconvened in 1673 they force the king to withdraw. The remainder of Baxter's life was one of persecution until the abdication of James II.

²³ Ibid., p. 252.

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 L190 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,”²⁴ 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. 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 the saints in light.”²⁵

²⁴ Op.Cit. Morgan, p. 72.

²⁵ Marcus L. Loane, *Makers of Religious Freedom*, Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, MI, 1961, p. 33.