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Richard Baxter 1615-1691

The seventy-six years of Richard Baxter's life spanned an era in English history that was, to an extraordinary degree, tragic, heroic, and pathetic. It was a time of revolution and counter-revolution in church and state, of brutal religious persecution and fierce controversy in print about almost everything. It was also a time of disruptive socio-economic shifts which nobody at the time understood, of widespread bad health, growing towns innocent of hygiene, and nightmarishly primitive medicine. In short, it was a time of hardship for just about everyone. And at the head of the list of factors that led to the tragedies, the heroisms, and the miseries stood rival understandings of Christianity. That is a sad thing to have to say, but it is true.

Had you been a Christian of consistent principles, whatever they were, living through those seventy-six years, you, too, would have had a rough ride. If you had been a Roman Catholic, you would have been an object of general distaste in the community all the time, constantly suspected of being a political subversive. Had you been a High Anglican, wedded to the Prayer Book, the ministry of bishops, and the royal supremacy in church and state, you would have watched your side lose the Civil War in the 1640's. You would have wept over the (to you) traitorous act of executing the king for treason against his people. You would have seen both Prayer Book and episcopacy at one stage outlawed by the Parliament, and if you had been a clergyman you would have lost your living for the best part of twenty years before the Restoration in 1660. And if, like Baxter, you had been a Puritan, practicing and propagating the religion of St. Augustine on the basis of the theology of John Calvin, you would have had to endure the Arminianizing of Anglican leadership for two decades before the Civil War, the ejecting of almost 2,000 Puritan-type clergy from English

parishes at the Restoration, the consequent Anglican slide away from the gospel, and the great persecution of Protestant nonconformists that put tens of thousands in jail for not using the Prayer Book in their worship of God during the quarter century before toleration came in 1689. Whatever your principles, you would have experienced much unhappiness during those years.

A moment ago I called Richard Baxter a Puritan. Since that word still carries prejudicial overtones for many, as it did throughout Baxter's own life, I had better say at once that my reason for using it is simply that it was as a Puritan that Baxter saw himself. Noting in 1680 that two of his opponents in print had called him (in Latin) a dyed-in-the-wool Puritan and one who oozed the whole of Puritanism from every pore, he responded by commenting, "Alas, I am not so good and happy." Though he was, as we would say, ecumenically oriented, sympathetically alert to all the main Christian traditions, and happy to learn from them all, he constantly equated the Puritan ideal with Christianity—"mere Christianity" to use his own phrase, which C. S. Lewis later borrowed—and all his writings display him as the classic mainstream Puritan that he ever sought to be.

What, then, was Puritanism? Matthew Sylvester, the not-too-competent editor of Baxter's posthumous narrative of his life and times, (published as *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, 800 folio pages, in 1696) notes in his preface that in matters of history, as in everything else, Baxter had "an Eagle's Eye, an honest Heart, a thoughtful Soul, a searching and considerate (i.e. reflective) Spirit, and a concerned frame of Mind to let the present and succeeding Generations duly know the real and true state and issues" of things.¹ What description of Puritanism, then, would Baxter have acknowledged as fair and true? The question is not too hard to answer. Puritanism, as Baxter understood it and as modern scholarship, correcting centuries of caricature, now depicts it, was

a total view of Christianity—Bible-based, church-centered, God-honoring, literate, orthodox, pastoral, and Reformational—that saw personal, domestic, professional, political, churchly, and economic existence as aspects of a single whole, and that called on each person to order every department and every relationship of his life according to the Word of God, so that all would be sanctified and become "holiness to the Lord." Puritanism's spearhead activity was pastoral evangelism and nurture through preaching, catechizing, and counselling (which the Puritans themselves called casuistry), and Puritan teaching harped constantly on the themes of self-knowledge, self-humbling, and repentance, faith in, and love for, Jesus Christ the Savior, the necessity of regeneration, and of sanctification (holy living by God's power) as proof of it, the need for a conscientious conformity to all God's law, and for a disciplined use of the means of grace, and the blessedness of the assurance and joy from the Holy Spirit that all faithful believers under ordinary circumstances may know. Puritans saw themselves as God's pilgrims traveling home, God's warriors battling against the world, the flesh, and the devil; and God's servants under orders to do all the good they could as they went along. This was the Christianity with which Baxter identified, and of which he was a shining example throughout the vicissitudes of his own long life.

II

Let us get a little closer to Baxter. Here are the key personal facts. Summarized in *Who's Who* fashion, with a few intrusions as we move through them, they are as follows:

"Baxter, Richard, gentleman" (for his father owned a small estate); "born 12 November, 1615, at Rowton, Salop; educated at Donnington Free School, Wroxeter, and privately" (Baxter never went to a university); "ordained dea-

con by Bishop of Worcester, 1638; curate of Bridgnorth, 1639-40; lecturer—that is, salaried preacher—“of Kidderminster, 1641-42; with the Parliamentary army, 1642-47; vicar of Kidderminster, 1647-61”—a ministry during which he just about converted the whole town—“at Savoy Conference, 1661” (this was the abortive consultation between Puritan and Anglican leaders for the improving of the Prayer Book for the restored Church of England); “lived privately in or near London, 1662-91; married Margaret Charlton (1636-81), 1662; imprisoned for one week in Clerkenwell gaol, 1669, for twenty-one months in Southwark gaol, 1685-86; died 8 December 1691; author of *The Saints’ Everlasting Rest* (1650)”, an all-time devotional classic on how thoughts of God and heaven can renew the heart for service here below, an 800 page volume that sold an edition a year for the first decade of its life; *The Reformed Pastor* (1650), another all-time classic admonishing, motivating, and instructing the clergy; *A Call to the Unconverted* (1658), the first evangelistic pocket-book in English, which in its year of publication sold 20,000 copies and brought an unending stream of readers to faith during Baxter’s lifetime; *A Christian Directory* (1673), a unique million-word compendium of Puritan teaching about Christian life and conduct; and over 130 other books including special interests such as pastoral care, Christian unity, hobbies, medicine, science, and history. Such was the man who died three hundred years ago.

Is it important for later generations to remember Baxter? In 1875 in Kidderminster they thought it was, and a fine statue of him preaching was erected in the town center. The inscription reads as follows:

BETWEEN THE YEARS 1641 AND 1660
THIS TOWN WAS THE SCENE OF THE LABOURS OF
RICHARD BAXTER

RENOWNED EQUALLY FOR HIS CHRISTIAN LEARNING
AND PASTORAL FIDELITY.

IN A STORMY AND DIVIDED AGE
HE ADVOCATED UNITY AND COMPREHENSION
POINTING THE WAY TO THE EVERLASTING REST.
CHURCHMEN AND NONCONFORMISTS
UNITED TO RAISE THE MEMORIAL, A.D. 1875.

The phrases used show what it was about Baxter that was thought worth remembering in 1875. “Christian learning,” for instance, points to the fact that he was an omnivorous polymath, always studying, reading quickly, and remembering well what he had read, and consistently thoughtful and discerning in the opinions he expressed on what the books set before him. Once he complained that the loss of time for study due to many illnesses (for he was a sick man all his life) was the greatest burden he had to bear. Anyone, however, who observes his mastery of biblical material, of the entire Christian tradition, and of the dozens of positions that he controverts, will marvel at the amount of studying that he actually accomplished. He was, in fact, the most voluminous English theologian of all time. In addition to the approximately four million words of pastoral, apologetic, devotional and homiletic writing that are reprinted in his *Practical Works*, he produced about six million more on aspects of the doctrines of grace and salvation, church unity and nonconformity, the sacraments, Roman Catholicism, antinomianism, millenarianism, Quakerism, and politics and history, not to mention a systematic theology in Latin. In all of these writings, whether or not one finally agrees with Baxter’s positions, one finds oneself confronted with the mature judgment of a clear, sharp, well-stocked, wise mind, as distinguished for intellectual integrity as for spiritual alertness. I do not think Baxter was always right, but I see him, as did the memorialists of 1875, as one of the

most impressive of Christian thinkers, and I urge that there is just as much reason to honor him as such today as there was 116 years ago.

Then, again, the 1875 inscription celebrates Baxter's constant pleas, uttered both *viva voce* and in print over more than forty years, for "unity and comprehension." In his own day, Baxter's pleading on these topics went unheeded, partly because of the sharpness of the rhetoric in which much of it was couched, but mainly because it was an age in which party spirit and dog-eat-dog wrangling were taken as proper signs of Christian seriousness. By 1875, however, the basic right-mindedness of what Baxter was saying had become apparent, and it ought to be even more apparent today. Baxter's call to unity depended on distinguishing tolerable from intolerable differences among professing Christians and churches. His plea was, first, that love, peace, and communion should be maximized on the basis that in reality all Christian essentials are already held by those who accept the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer, as fixing the shape of their Christianity and, second, that all would henceforth observe the maxim, "unity in necessary things, liberty in non-necessary, charity in all things," (Rupertus Meldenius originally). Baxter's call for comprehension depended on his view of the Church of England as being what its first Reformers saw it to be—namely, a federation of congregations standing for "mere Christianity," that is, a Christianity defined in terms of the essentials and no more, and committed together to the task of evangelizing and discipling the English. Here his plea was for a relaxation of the restored Anglican uniformity of 1662 that would allow Presbyterian, Independent, and Baptist groups a place within the federation, for the furtherance of the common calling. His reasoning was noble and cogent in itself, and more than timely during those years in which all nonconformists (120,000 or

so, according to one estimate) faced fines and imprisonment if they were caught worshipping in company in their own way. Baxter's pitch was spoiled by Anglican hatred and suspicion of nonconformists as all being revolutionaries at heart; by the prevalence among Anglicans of High Church theology, which saw non-episcopal churches as no churches and their ministers as no ministers; and by non-conformist bitterness and contempt for the persecuting Church of England and unwillingness ever to associate with it again. The result was that his argumentation was ignored throughout his lifetime. But we can see why, in 1875, before the hurricanes of unbelief laid waste great sections of both the Free Church and the Anglican worlds and permanently changed the shape of the comprehension issue, the memorialists wished to celebrate the witness Baxter had borne.

And what, now, of ourselves? Are Baxter's theological attainments, pastoral strengths, arguments for unity and comprehension, and testimonies to the supreme importance of fixing one's hopes on the saints' everlasting rest worth our remembrance today? I maintain not only that they are worth remembering in themselves as inspiring examples of vision, vitality, and wisdom in Christ, but that Baxter has more to say and to give to those who remember him today than was the case with men and women in 1875. Why? Precisely because we have drifted further from that vision, vitality, and wisdom than they had. The title of this piece is "A Man for All Ministries." I propose to devote my attention to looking more closely at Baxter the man and at the serving roles that he fulfilled, and my suggestion at each point will be that we today need to learn from him in the way that small, superficial, shallow people always need to learn from the giants. To this agenda I now turn.

III

Often described as seraphic, because of the way his

rhetoric soars when he is dilating on the grace of God and the blessings of the gospel, Baxter appears throughout his ministry to be the very epitome of single-minded ardor in seeking the glory of God through the salvation of souls and the sanctification of the church. To contemplate the independence, integrity, and zeal with which the public Baxter fulfilled his ministry is fascinating and inspiring. Even more fascinating and inspiring to my mind, at any rate, is contemplation of the private Baxter, the man behind the ministry, who, in an elaborate self-analysis, written it seems in 1665 when he was fifty, and published posthumously as part of his *Reliquiae*, opens his heart about the changes he sees in himself since his younger years in Christian service. In general, what he delineates is a progress from raw zeal to ripe simplicity, from a passionate narrowness that was somewhat self-absorbed and majored in minors to a calm concentration on God and the big things, and a profound capacity to see those big things steadily and whole. I subjoin some extracts from this gem of humble, honest witness to the transforming work of God in a human life so that you may get the flavor of Baxter directly, and judge for yourself whether I exaggerate in what I have just said.²

“I have perceived that nothing so much hindreth the reception of the truth as urging it on men with too harsh importunity, and falling too heavily on their errors.”

“In my youth I was quickly past my fundamentals and was running up into a multitude of controversies...But the elder I grew the smaller the stress I laid upon those controversies and curiosities (though still my intellect abhorreth confusion)...And now it is fundamental doctrines of the Catechism which I highest value and daily think of, and find most useful to myself and others. The Creed, the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments do find me now the most acceptable and plentiful matter for all my meditations. They are to me as my daily bread and drink...I value all

things according to their use and ends, and I find in the daily practice and experience of my soul that the knowledge of God and Christ, and the Holy Spirit, and the truth of Scripture, and the life to come and of a holy life, is of more use to me than all the most curious speculations...That is the best doctrine and study which maketh men better and tendeth to make them happy...”

“Heretofore I placed much of my religion in tenderness of heart, and grieving for sin, and penitential tears...but my conscience now looketh at love and delight in God, and praising him, as the top of all my religious duties...”

“My judgment is much more frequent and serious meditation on the heavenly blessedness than it was heretofore in my younger days...now I had rather read, hear or meditate on God and heaven than on any other subject...I was once wont to meditate on my own heart...poring either on my sins or wants, or examining my sincerity; but now, though I am greatly convinced of the need of heart-acquaintance...I see more need of a higher work, and that I should lookoften upon Christ, and God, and heaven, (rather) than upon my own heart.”

“I now see more good and more evil in all men than henceforth I did...I less admire gifts of utterance and bare profession of religion than I once did...I once thought that almost all that could pray movingly and fluently, and talk well of religion, had been saints. But experience hath opened to me what odious crimes may consist with high profession...”

“I was wont to look but little further than England in my prayers, as not considering the state of the rest of the world...But now, as I better understand the case of the world and the method of the Lord’s Prayer...no part of my prayers are so deeply serious as that for the conversion of the infidel and ungodly world...”

(He goes on to express admiration for the missionary

pioneer John Eliot, “the apostle of the Indians in New England,” whose work he helped to support financially, and to voice the wish that all 2,000 Puritan clergy ejected in 1662 could have become overseas missionaries.)

“I am deeper afflicted for the disagreements of Christians than I was when I was a younger Christian. Except the case of the infidel world, nothing is so sad and grievous to my thoughts as the case of the divided churches. And therefore I am more deeply sensible of the sinfulness of those prelates and pastors of the churches who are the principal cause of these divisions. The contentions between the Greek Church and the Roman, the Papists and the Protestants, the Lutherans and the Calvinists, have woefully hindered the kingdom of Christ.”

“Though my works were never such as could be any temptation to me to dream of obliging God by proper merit in commutative justice, yet one of the most ready, constant, undoubted evidences of my...interest in his covenant is the consciousness of my living as devoted to him. And I the easier believe the pardon of my failings through my Redeemer while I know that I serve no other master, and that I know no other end, or trade, or business, but that I am employed (*sic*) in his work, and make it the business of my life, and live to him in this world, notwithstanding my infirmities. And this bent and business of my life, with my longing desires after perfection in the knowledge and belief and love of God, and in holy and heavenly mind and life, are the two standing, constant, discernible evidences which most put me out of doubt of my sincerity.” (He means, of his being truly regenerate and born again.)

“And though I before told of the change of my judgment against provoking writings, I have had more will than skill since to avoid such. I must mention it by way of penitent confession, that I am too much inclined to such words in controversial writings which are too keen, and apt to pro-

voke the person whom I wrote against...And therefore I repent of it, and wish all over-sharp passages were expunged from my writings, and desire forgiveness of God and man.”

It is surely apparent that these are the words of a great and holy man, naturally gifted and supernaturally sanctified beyond most, humble, patient, realistic, and frank to a very unusual degree. The quiet peace and joy that shine through these almost clinical observations on himself are truly impressive. Here is an endlessly active man whose soul is at rest in God all the time as he labors in prayer Godward and in persuasion manward. And the poise of his spirit is the more impressive when we recall that of all the great Puritan sufferers—and the Puritans as a body were great sufferers—none had a heavier load of pain and provocation to endure than he did. He suffered throughout his adult life from a multitude of bodily ailments (a tubercular cough, frequent nosebleeds and bleeding from his finger-ends, migraine headaches, inflamed eyes, all kinds of digestive disorders, kidney stones and gallstones, and more), so that from the age of twenty-one he was, as he says, “seldom an hour free from pain,” and expected death constantly through the next fifty-five years of partial disablement before his release finally came. Then, after 1662, he suffered a great deal of hatred and harassment because he was a prominent nonconformist leader. This led to several arrests for preaching, some spells in prison, the distraining (confiscation) of his goods to pay fines, including on one occasion the very bed on which he was lying sick, and finally a trial, if it can be called that, before the appalling Judge Jeffreys, Lord Chief Justice of England (answerable therefore to no one) and James II’s human whip for flaying rebels. This was the lowest point of public degradation to which Baxter was ever reduced, and it is worth pausing to get a glimpse of it.³

The charge was sedition, a ridiculous, trumped-up accu-

sation based on expository words in his *Paraphrase of the New Testament* about the Pharisees and Jewish authorities, into which was read an attack on England's rulers in church and state. (Baxter later commented that by the same logic he could have been indicted for uttering the words, "Deliver us from evil," in the Lord's Prayer.) Jeffreys would not let Baxter and his six legal representatives say anything coherent at any stage, and the disputed passages in the *Paraphrase* were never discussed. Jeffreys simply ranted on against the seventy-year-old Puritan veteran as (these are the words of an eye-witness) "a conceited, stubborn, fanatical dog, that did not conform when he might have been preferred (that is, been a bishop. Baxter was offered the see of Hereford at the Restoration.); hang him! This one old fellow hath cast more reproach upon the constitution and excellent discipline of our Church than will be wiped out this hundred years...by God! He deserves to be whipped through the city." When he had finished haranguing the jury, Baxter said, "Does your lordship think any jury will pretend to pass a verdict on me upon such a trial?" "I'll warrant you, Mr. Baxter," replied Jeffreys, "don't you trouble yourself about that." And the jury promptly found him guilty without retiring. The result for Baxter was eighteen months in jail.

It should be added, however, that after Baxter was dead at seventy-six, and Jeffreys had drunk himself into the grave at the age of forty, and it was known that Matthew Sylvester was to be Baxter's biographer, Tillotson, the Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote Sylvester a letter of encouragement containing the following sentences about the trial: "Nothing more honorable than when the Rev. Baxter stood at bay, berogued (slandered), abused, despised, and never more great than then. Draw this well...This is the noblest part of his life, and not that he might have been a bishop. The Apostle (2 Corinthians xi) when he would glory mentions his labours and strifes and

bonds and imprisonments, his troubles, weariness, dangers, reproaches; not his riches and coaches and advantages. God lead us into this spirit and free us from the worldly one which we are apt to run into."⁴

One can only say "Amen."

IV

We have seen something of Baxter the man; let us now look at some of the ministering roles he fulfilled. First, I focus on Baxter as an evangelistic and pastoral communicator—preacher, teacher and writer.

The best curtain-raiser for this section is Baxter's own account of the fruitfulness of his Kidderminster ministry. He found the town's 2,000 adults "an ignorant, rude, and revelling people, for the most part...they had hardly ever had any lively serious preaching among them." Soon, however, things began to happen. Wrote Baxter:

"When I first entered upon my Labours in the Ministry I took special notice of everyone that was humbled, reformed or converted; but when I had laboured long, it pleased God that the Converts were so many, that I could not afford time for such particular Observations...Families and considerable Numbers at once...came in and grew up I scarce knew how..."

"The Congregation was usually full, so that we were fain to build five Galleries after my coming thither...The Church would have held about a thousand without the galleries. Our private Meetings (small groups, as we would nowadays call them) were also full. On the Lord's Days (which had been sports days before Baxter arrived) there was no disorder to be seen in the streets, but you might hear an hundred Families singing Psalms and repeating Sermons, as you passed through the Streets. In a word, when I came thither first, there was about one Family in a Street that worshipped God and called on His Name, and when I came

away there were some streets where there was not past one Family in the side of a Street that did not so; and that did not by professing serious Godliness, give us hopes of their sincerity...When I set upon Personal Conference and Catechising them, there were very few families in all the Town that refused to come...(Baxter asked them to call on him at home, since his bad health constantly disabled him from visiting their homes). And few families went from me without some tears, or seemingly serious promises of a Godly Life."⁵

What was the secret of Baxter's success (so far, at least, as this can be analyzed in terms of the means to ends)? He notes, as significant factors in the situation, that his people had not been gospel-hardened, that he had good helpers, both assistant clergy and members of the flock, that his converts' holy living was winsome while the town's black sheep made sin appear most repulsive, that Kidderminster was free of rival congregations and sectarian bickerings, that most of the families were at home most of the time, working as weavers, so that they had "time enough to read or talk of holy Things...as they stand in their Loom they can set a Book before them or edify one another."⁶ Also, it was helpful (Baxter continues) that he fulfilled a long ministry, that he practiced church discipline, that being unmarried he could concentrate on serving his people, that he gave out Bibles and books (he received every fifteenth copy of each of his own books in lieu of royalties for free distribution), that he gave money to the needy, and that he fulfilled for a time the role of amateur physician—effectively, it seems, and without charge—until he could persuade a qualified doctor to move to the town. He held that all these factors helped the gospel forward, and no doubt he was right. But the key element in his success, humanly speaking, was undoubtedly the clarity, force, and skill with which he communicated the gospel itself.

The content of Baxter's gospel was not in any way distinctive. It was the historic Puritan, evangelical, New Testament message of ruin, redemption, and regeneration. Baxter called for conversion from the life of thoughtless self-centeredness and sin to Jesus Christ, the crucified Savior and risen Lord, and he spelled out in great detail what this must mean in terms of repentance, faith, and new obedience. He saw the unconverted as on the road to hell, and as spiritually asleep in the sense of not recognizing their danger, so he set himself both in the pulpit and in his annual personal conversation ("catechising", as he called it) with each family of the parish, to wake them up and persuade them to thoroughgoing Christian commitment before it was too late. What he said, and the way he said it may be learned from his classic writings on conversion, among them *A Treatise of Conversion, Directions and Persuasions to a Sound Conversion*, and *A Call to the Unconverted* (full title: *A Call to the Unconverted to Turn and Live, and Accept of Mercy while Mercy may be Had, as ever they would find Mercy in the Day of their Extremity: from the Living God*); all of these were originally sermons preached in series to Baxter's Kidderminster congregation.

We should not suppose that conversion was Baxter's only theme in his Kidderminster ministry. He himself tells us that he ranged much wider:

"The thing which I daily opened to them, and with the greatest importunity laboured to imprint upon their minds, was the great Fundamental Principles of Christianity contained in their Baptismal Covenant, even a right knowledge, and belief of, and subjection and love to, God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and Love to all Men, and Concord with the Church and one another: I did so daily inculcate the Knowledge of God our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, and Love and Obedience to God, and Unity with the Church

Catholick, and Love to Men, and Hope of Life Eternal, that these were the matter of their daily Cogitations and Discourses, and indeed their Religion.”⁷

But Baxter was an evangelist, and he constantly led his hearers back to the life-and-death question: Will you, or will you not, turn and live? Will you now take seriously the things you say you believe about sin and Christ and heaven and hell?

Here is a sample of Baxter’s evangelistic rhetoric as he applies a message on Hebrews 11:1, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” He has made the point that faith treats as real the realities of which Scripture speaks: God, Christ, Satan, the final judgment, heaven, and hell. He has pressed the question: “Are you in good earnest when you say you believe in a heaven and a hell?” And do you think and speak and pray and live as those who do indeed believe it?...Deal truly...if you would know where you must live for ever, know how, and for what, and upon what it is that you live here.” He has invited his hearers to think what difference it would make to them if they could actually see with their physical eyes Christ, their own forthcoming death, judgment day with Satan accusing, and the condition of those already experiencing heaven and hell. Now he pins the congregation to the wall.⁸

“...Answer these following questions, upon the foregoing suppositions.

1. If you saw but what you say you do believe, would you not be convinced that the most pleasant, gainful sin is worse than madness? And would you not spit at the very name of it?
2. What would you think of the most serious, holy life, if you had seen the things you say you do believe? Would you ever again reproach it as preciseness (a long-standing contemptuous label for the Puritan lifestyle), or count it

more ado than needs, and think your time were better spent in playing than in praying; in drinking, and sports, and filthy lusts, than in the holy services of the Lord?...

3. If you saw but what you say you do believe, would you ever again be offended with ministers of Christ for the plainest reproofs, and closest exhortations, and strictest precepts and discipline...? Then you would understand what moved ministers to be so importunate with you for conversion and whether trifling or serious preaching was best.
4. ...I durst then ask the worst that heareth me, Dare you now be drunk, or gluttonous, or worldly? Dare you be voluptuous, proud, or fornicators any more? Dare you go home and make a jest at piety and neglect your souls as you have done?...
5. And oh how such a sight would advance the Redeemer, and his grace, and promises, and word, and ordinance in your esteem! It would quicken your desires and make you fly to Christ for life, as a drowning man to that which may support him. How sweetly then you relish the name, the word, the ways of Christ, which now seem dry and common things!”

That is vintage Baxter, arousing the complacent. It remains only to add that he was preaching before King Charles II, England’s merry monarch, and his merry court, and that the sermon was in fact published by royal command, though not, it seems, heeded by the royal conscience. The quality that the 1875 inscription calls “pastoral fidelity” made Baxter willing to say, “boo” to any goose, even a royal one. That was the kind of preacher he was.

The second sphere of Baxter’s ministry at which we glance is the field of ecclesiastical statesmanship, where Baxter, the advocate of a comprehensive national church, as we saw, was in constant action after 1662 negotiating for

agreement with the Independents and a rapprochement with the Church of England, and writing documents and publishing books to that end. Not much need be said about this, because it was an area in which he did not shine at all. His provocative manner in discussion and debate totally thwarted his unitive purpose. His schoolmasterly strictures upon the cherished beliefs of others only made enemies. As the sermon just quoted would suggest, he was too blunt and oracular in style to be a bridge-builder. The position from which he reached out in all these discussions, however, was a non-sectarian, noble one, which, when applying for a license to preach under the royal Indulgence of 1672, he formulated as follows:⁹

“My religion is merely Christian, but as rejecting the Papal Monarchy and its attendant evils, I am a Protestant.”

“The rule of my faith and doctrine is the law of God in Nature and Scripture.”

“The Church which I am a member of is the Universality of Christians, in conjunction with all particular churches of Christians in England or elsewhere in the world, whose communion according to my capacity I desire.”

Sometimes he called this position “Catholicism against all sects.” In his day it was thought eccentric; in ours, it might appear prophetic, marking the path whereby the exclusiveness of denominationalism comes to be transcended. It was never correct to call Baxter a Presbyterian as was often done, nor after 1662 could one call him an Anglican. He was a “mere nonconformist” in relation to the Anglican settlement, and that, denominationally speaking, was all. In an ecumenical age it is worth reflecting on the significance of Baxter’s non-denominational stance.

A further sphere of ministry in which Baxter moved was the delineating of Christian social justice, and here he shows great skill in reforming medieval formulae and bringing them up to date for seventeenth-century Protestant use.

Part IV of the *Christian Directory*, comprising about 200,000 words, deals in detail with rulers and subjects, lawyers, physicians, schoolmasters, soldiers, murder and suicide, scandal, theft, contracts, borrowing, buying and selling, the charging of interest (i.e. usury), wages, landlords and tenants, and lawsuits, distilling out practical guidance for serving and pleasing God in all these relationships, by managing them as expressions of neighbor-love and cooperative service, and avoiding any form of callous or careless exploitation. One must not try, he says, “to get another’s goods or labour for less than it is worth, nor must one make profit out of the customer’s ignorance or necessity: it is a false rule of them that think a commodity is worth so much as any-one will give” for it. “To wish to buy cheap and sell dear is common (as St. Augustine observes), but it is a common vice.”¹⁰ And landlords must not squeeze rents so that tenants cannot live decently, or have leisure to care for their souls. This point Baxter made again later in a separate tract, “The Poor Husbandman’s Advocate to the Rich Rack-ing Landlords,” which he finished only six weeks before his death (it was his last writing), and which did not, in fact, see the light of day until this century.¹¹

I wish that space allowed me to explore the idyll of Baxter’s marriage, a nineteen year partnership with a brilliant woman, twenty-one years younger than himself, whom he memorialized in an account of her life written “under the power of melting Grief” a few weeks after her death in 1681. The account was well and lovingly edited by J.T. Wilkinson in 1928 under the title *Richard Baxter and Margaret Charlton: A Puritan Love-Story*. It deserves to be reprinted. “When we were married,” writes Baxter, “her sadness and melancholy vanished: counsel did something to it, and contentment something; and being taken up with our household affairs did somewhat. And we lived in inviolated love and mutual complacency sensible of the benefit of

mutual help.” Baxter’s account of his wife’s ministry to him has in it many such hints of his ministry as a husband to her, and it is evident that in this he did well, although he writes of himself, with that devastating perfectionist honesty that we saw in him before: “My dear wife did look for more good in me than she found, especially lately in my weakness and decay. We are all like pictures that must not be looked on too near. They that come near us find more faults and badness in us than others at a distance know.”¹² Well, maybe so. Yet if one picks up all the hints in the narrative, Baxter’s marital ministry appears as something to be very much admired, and in days like ours to be viewed as something of a model. But that theme cannot be explored any further at this point.

V_____

It was usual to end Puritan funeral sermons with a reference to the dead person’s final hours, for it was an age in which people died at home, in company, without pain-killing drugs, and often in full consciousness to the very end, and it was taken for granted that their dying behavior and their last words, spoken from the edge of eternity, would have special significance for those whom they left behind. This is not a funeral sermon but a celebratory presentation. Nonetheless, I think it is fitting to end it in this Puritan way. So, let it be said that on the day before he died, as on every day of his life, it seems, for the previous forty and more years, Baxter was meditating on heaven, focusing on the description of the heavenly Jerusalem in Hebrews 12:22-24, a passage which, so he told his visitors, “deserves a thousand thoughts.” He told those same visitors, “I have peace; I have peace.” And he brushed aside praise for his books with words of almost arrogant humility, “I was a pen in God’s hand; what praise is due to a pen?” His last words, spoken through pain, to Matthew Sylvester, whose pastoral

assistant he had been for the previous four years, were, “Oh I thank him, I thank him. The Lord teach you to die.” And let it further be said that Sylvester himself, preaching Baxter’s memorial sermon on Elisha’s words, “Where is the Lord God of Elijah?”, was constrained to end by looking ahead to resurrection day, (which, for God’s people will be reunion day also), and to ask aloud,

“What must I do to meet with our Elijah and his God in peace? Must not my eye be inward, upward, forward, backward, round about? Must I not endeavour to know my errand, warrant, difficulties, duties and encouragements? Must I not...tell what I believe?...practice what I preach? and promote the Christian interest with all wisdom, diligence, and faithfulness; as my predecessor did before me?”¹³

Baxter’s brand of spiritual straightforwardness in the service of the triune God regularly affects Christians as it affected Sylvester. It makes one seek to be energetic and businesslike in one’s discipleship and service, just as he was, and gives one a conscience about aimlessness and casualness and spiritual drift. For this reason alone it is good for us to remember Baxter, and I have counted it a privilege to introduce him in this all-too-sketchy way. From my own acquaintance with him, which now goes back forty-five years, I say to you all—clergy, layfolk, young Christians, senior Christians—get to know Baxter, and stay with Baxter. He will always do you good.

- 1 Matthew Sylvester, ed., *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, section 2, p. 2.
- 2 J.M. Lloyd-Thomas, ed., *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter*, pp. 106, 107f., 112, 115, 117, 118f., 125, 130f.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 258-264.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 298.
- 5 *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, Part I, pp. 21, 84f.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 93f.
- 8 *Practical Works*, Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1991, III, p.585f.
- 9 Lloyd-Thomas, *Autobiography*, p. 293.
- 10 Hugh Martin, *Puritanism and Richard Baxter*, p. 173.
- 11 F. J. Powicke, ed., *The Reverend Richard Baxter's Last Treatise*, 1926.
- 12 J.T. Wilkinson, ed., *Richard Baxter and Margaret Chilton*, pp. 110, 152. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1928.
- 13 Matthew Sylvester, *Elisha's Cry After Elijah's God*, p. 18. Appended to *Reliquiae Baxterianae*.

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