

## <sup>1</sup> Baxter as Preacher and Pastor.

DR. POWICKE, in his *Life of Richard Baxter*, seems to have achieved the very difficult task of appealing both to a popular and to an antiquarian audience. Members of both sections of the reading public will take up the book, some with a desire for further information on Baxter the man and the preacher, some to take full advantage of Dr. Powicke's researches in the valuable Baxter MSS. in the Dr. Williams' Library. In the present article we propose to limit our interest to what Dr. Powicke has to say about the famous pastor and preacher in his Kidderminster days, reserving for subsequent notice that which will be of special interest to Baptist readers, the controversy with John Tombes of Bewdley on Baptism.

In one sense it is an advantage that Dr. Powicke has practically limited his survey to Baxter's Kidderminster days, for he has been able to deal with the ministry of that period in a very full and entertaining manner. Preachers of the present time will read with great interest about the methods of Baxter both in the pulpit and out of it. "True Pastors and Bishops of the Church," wrote Baxter, "do thirst after the conversion and happiness of sinners and spend their lives in diligent labours to these ends, not thinking it too much to stoop to the poorest for their good, nor regarding worldly wealth and glory in comparison with the winning of one soul, nor counting their lives dear if they might finish their course and ministry with joy." Baxter always preached with vehement intensity: the sermon was never less than an hour long, and generally read from a closely written manuscript. It is interesting to notice that then, as now, there were those who objected to the reading of sermons—the Quakers alleging that to read a sermon was evidence of the lack of the Spirit. Baxter rejoined that not want of ability made a preacher read his sermons, but rather a regard to the work and the good of the hearers. He believed that the preacher's aim should be to convince the understanding and then to engage the heart—first light, then heat. It is refreshing to find that while his converts were of all ages he had considerable success among the young. He claims that the young formed the greater number of his converts and tells how frequently the children were able to induce their parents into a liking and love of Piety. Clearly the young people of those days, or at any rate the young people

<sup>1</sup> *A Life of the Reverend Richard Baxter, 1615—1691.* F. J. Powicke. Jonathan Cape, 15s. net.

of Kidderminster, were a good deal more tolerable of long sermons than are their modern successors.

Baxter has given us an account of his own success, and what he considered to be the main reasons for it. When he went to Kidderminster, about one family per street worshipped God, he says, but when he left there were some streets where every household was of godly profession. His services were fully attended,—“On the Lord’s Day there was no disorder to be seen in the Streets, but you might hear a Hundred Families singing Psalms and repeating Sermons, as you passed through the Streets.” Among the causes of his success Baxter gives the following: the open field for work provided by the Cromwellian settlement: he came to a people not “Gospel-hardened,” a people who had not been used to good Gospel preaching: the influence of the numbers of the converted, together with their holy living: his own personal situation. He mentions “the acceptance of his Person,” though in no boasting way, and we can well understand his popularity when we note his whole-hearted interest in the practical expression of the Gospel he preached. A large part of his salary, together with what came to him through his literary work, he gave away. He maintained some of the needy children at the universities. “And I found that Three pence or a Groat to every poor body that askt me was no great matter in a year.” He considered his single state to be a blessing (he did not marry till 1662). “I could the easilier take the People for my children, and think all that I had too little for them, in that I had no children of my own to tempt me to another way of using it.” He refused, as he put it, “to meddle with Tythes or Worldly Business.” He found that “Nature itself, being conscious of the Baseness of its Earthly disposition, doth think basely of those whom it discerneth to be earthly, and is forced to reverence those whose converse is supposed to be most with God and Heaven.” We feel that here Baxter is putting his finger on a weakness of much pastoral life of to-day. It is the unfortunate case in many of our ministries that the pastor is compelled, by lack of suitable lay service, to spend too much of his time in the business management of the Church. This side of Baxter’s ministry may be commended to our laity to-day. One more point on this head—he thought it an advantage to him that he had a long pastorate, “for he that removeth oft from place to place may sow good seed in many places, but is not like to see much Fruit in any, unless some other skilful hand shall follow him to water it.”

The recounting of these points in his method will indicate how very “modern” Baxter was. There is nothing here of antiquated method: he is alive to the real needs of men and women, quick to discern the best point of approach, wise to apportion his time

to the best spiritual advantage. Like many another great man, his best work was often accomplished in spite of physical disability. Whatever advantage he enjoyed from his earlier single state, he seems to have suffered many distresses, and even when we read of them we cannot repress a smile, so quaint is his description of his malady and his search for ease. As a boy, he tells us, he ate Apples and Plums in great quantities, and this resulted in certain disorders. Doctors he tried—more than six and thirty in all, but they made matters worse. Permanent relief came to him through the use of simple remedies, and he gives us a delightful description of his successful recipe—Temperance as to quantity and quality of Food, exercise until he perspired freely, “for if I walk not hard, with almost all my strength, an hour before Dinner and an hour after supper, till I sweat well, I am not able to digest two meals.” “Beer as hot as my Throat will endure, drunk all at once, to make me Sweat.” This is a very humorous side to the picture of the great man, but underlying it all there is a very fine spirit. Baxter grew to regard pain as an “Unvaluable mercy.” It “greatly weakened Temptations; it kept me in a great contempt of the world; it taught me highly to esteem of Time; it made me study and preach things necessary and a little stirred up my sluggish heart, to speak to Sinners with some compassion, as a dying Man to dying Men.” There is a fine moral strength in all this which helps us to understand in some measure his great success in what we may call the personal ministry.

This personal ministry he considered to be of paramount importance. He was a great believer in following up the instruction from the Pulpit by pastoral care. He became enthusiastic for catechising. Week after week, together with his helpers, he assiduously visited the homes of his people. “Every soul in the Parish was approached with a view to its conversion, or edification. Copies of the Catechism were delivered to every family, rich and poor alike. They were delivered by one of the Ministers personally—this was the first step. Then it was understood that a month or six weeks later, the Minister would call again and begin the questioning.” Baxter knew what it was to have people in his congregation for years who “know not whether Christ be God or Man, and wonder when I tell them the story of His birth, life, and death, as if they had never heard it before.” When it is remembered that in addition to his preaching, his controversies (which he regarded as an aid to his work, helping to unify his people), his pastoral work, he found time to enrich our literature with so many books—he wrote over one hundred—it will be agreed that he spent his time wisely and well.

The picture which Dr. Powicke has drawn is well worth our study. We have designedly omitted references to Baxter’s con-

troversies, his apostleship of Church Unity in a very dangerous time, and have restricted ourselves to the picture of his work as preacher and pastor. A recent writer in the *Times* remarks, "So long as men respect conscientiousness, undaunted courage, sound learning, saintly character, and persistent endeavour to unite all but extremists, Baxter must be remembered." We notice that *The Reformed Pastor* is among the books which probationer Ministers of the Wesleyan Church are required to read. Ministers of any denomination might do far worse than turn over the pages of Baxter, for this commanding figure in the ecclesiastical affairs of his time speaks with a vigour and a truth which are needed just as much to-day. Dr. Powicke promises to return to the later period of Baxter's life in another volume, and we hope that it may not be long delayed.