

## Baxter's Work.

RICHARD BAXTER was a Puritan, a puritan in the sense that he believed in private judgment in matters of religion, in individual responsibility, and in the absolute necessity for individual righteousness. Baxter's Kidderminster ministry gave him scope for the work of his puritan soul; here he did what he believed was most worth doing—he cared for souls. At Kidderminster Richard Baxter laboured for the conversion and for the all-round uplift of all who came under his care. He had the soul of a Quaker, although to have told him so would have made his hair stand on end. Nevertheless the fire which burned in Baxter's heart was the same that burned in the heart of Fox. But whereas Fox was *all* fiery soul, Baxter was fiery soul controlled by a very cool head.

Richard Baxter loved the church; he was deeply impressed by the idea of *continuity* in the Church, and did not like to feel that he was cut off from the main stream of Church life. He was very impatient with his Independent and Anabaptist brethren, who could not see the need for the Church and Church government as he saw it. Yet he could not accept Presbyterianism; "odious name," he said. He saw the likelihood of Presbyterianism becoming another Infallible, and he hated Infallibilities; not seeing that he had one of his own to offer. Baxter tried to do what we have not yet succeeded in doing—he tried to pour the puritan spirit into one mould. He had cast off the Roman Church, but he could not cast off the English Church, he ardently believed in it; he believed in it as he believed in Monarchy. And yet he was to become a great non-conformist; and his life work was to stand with the Parliament against the King.

Richard Baxter wanted a Primitive Episcopacy, with a bishop in every parish, organised on Presbyterian lines. His chief reason against diocesan episcopacy was that no one should be responsible for the discipline of more than one parish and the serving of one congregation. Discipline was to be the beginning and the end of his system of Church government. He did not see that the laity might be more priest-ridden than ever with a bishop in every parish. Nor did he see how contrary it was to the English character.

Here tulips grow as they are told;  
Unkempt about those hedges blows  
An English unofficial rose.

Charles and Laud were forcing the situation for the divine right of kings, and the supremacy of the Church of England in

religion. Charles and Laud would have created another Infallible. England, however, had got rid of the Roman Church, and was not in a mind for any other Infallible: Laudian, Presbyterian, or Baxterian. The unthinking mass of the people still loved the old forms of the Roman worship, and while content that Rome should lose her power, was desirous that she should continue her performances. The attempts from the time of Edward VI to Elizabeth, by Acts of Conformity, to make all people obey one system of Church government and one form of Church worship, had failed. The "First-hand Experience" of God, which is the contribution to religious thought of both the Old Testament and the New, which comes through Church History always clearly to be traced, which kept an anti-sacerdotal witness in Europe through the Waldenses in the 12th century, the Brotherhood Groups in the 13th century, the Friends of God in the 14th century, and in England through Wycliff, and the Lollards, and the Anabaptists; culminated in the 17th century in almost a riot of private judgment and at the same time in an outburst of a great religious temper that fought for and won the rights of civil and religious freedom.

Baron Von Hügel begins one of his lectures by saying that "Protestantism, as such, has always been fissiparous—a spirit or principle or doctrine prolific, among other things, of divisions down almost to so many individual minds." It seems to me that it is not Protestantism only, but Christianity that is "fissiparous." The right appreciation of Christian truth will break up every attempt to impose one single system upon the life of the soul, and its final grandeur is that it makes the individual mind independent—it sets men free. The Roman Church achieved its world supremacy only to find itself incapable of satisfying the inner, spiritual life; and only saved its own life by becoming "fissiparous." The acute Machiavelli, in his discourse on Livy, says, "all religions must be again and again rejuvenated by a return to their original principle. Christianity would have become entirely extinct had not St. Francis and St. Dominic renewed its life and kindled it afresh in the hearts of men by their imitation of Jesus Christ. They saved religion, but they destroyed the Church."

Baxter, with the soul of a Quaker, had the mind of an ecclesiastic; and he badly wanted a system that would fit all. Baxter never found ecclesiastical rest, nor can anyone else with such livingness of soul as Baxter possessed. Ecclesiastical rest can only come to those who are absolutely certain that they have found the last word in Church government, or to those who either sleep or are at the beginning of sleep; and Richard Baxter was ever wide awake, and certainly could not rest his soul in the

assurance that ultimate perfection had been reached in the matter of Church government. Baxter kept his puritanism, and so manifested the power of the puritan soul that it abides with us to-day; but he entirely failed either to create a form of Church government, or a form of worship that was acceptable to all.

Baxter the disciplinarian, who fought side by side with his "fissiparous" brethren of the spirit, was a nonconformist because he would not consent to have imposed upon himself another's form of government and worship. Whether he would have refused to impose upon others the system in which he believed is not known. His Anabaptist brethren would have refused, his Independent brethren would have said "partly yes and partly no," while his Presbyterian brethren would have imposed their will with thoroughness.

Baxter was a mystic with a too fond use of the reason. He was deeply religious, and he sorely desired to conform to the Church all his days, but his intelligence would not let him. He was an intellectualist with his soul bathed in heaven. No one fought more valiantly for the puritan faith, or more faithfully followed the light that was in him; which was sometimes darkness. After the Savoy Conference, in which Baxter was the champion against the Bishops, there followed bitter humiliation and suffering, in which Baxter was always a great-souled Christian.

In 1662, the operation of the "Act of Uniformity" shut the doors of the Church of England against all who would not accept its doctrine, its liturgy, and its worship; and from that day Puritanism became Nonconformity. Baxter failed nobly, although he did not always see that the true Church is the invisible host whose faces are turned Godwards in the faith and love of Jesus Christ the Lord. With a vision wider than of any one party, he yet found it difficult to accept those who had no place in some settled scheme. Baxter was finely Catholic in his sympathies, and at times he saw in distant vision the Church as wide as Christianity. He failed, however, because no human hands can fashion the one complete wine-skin that would hold the exceeding rich and abundant wine that flows from the heavenly vineyard.

Richard Baxter was a great minister of the Gospel. His ministry at Kidderminster lifted up a standard of faithful pastoral labours that has never been excelled. Kidderminster was his parish, and within the bounds of his town every concern of his people was his own.

"Besides all this I was forced five or six years, by the people's necessity to practise physic. A common pleurisy

happened one year, and no physician being near, I was forced to advise them, and to save their lives; and I could not afterwards avoid the importunity of the town and country round about. And because I never once took a penny of anyone, I was crowded with patients, so that almost twenty would be at my door at once; and though God, by more success than I expected, so long encouraged me, yet at last I could endure it no longer, partly because it hindered my other studies, and partly because the very fear of miscarrying and doing anyone harm did make it an intolerable burden to me. So that after some years' practice I procured a godly, diligent physician to come and live in the town, and bound myself by promise to practise no more (unless in consultation with him in case of any seeming necessity). And so with that answer I turned them all off and never meddled with it more."

Baxter possessed a fine prudence and a steady patience in practical affairs, combined with a burning zeal that never died down. His own bodily weakness was no hindrance to what seemed to be super-human labours, and served to reflect more brightly the splendid sympathy and constant love of his labours. This was the work he most loved. He writes: "Thus was I brought by the gracious providence of God to that place which had the chiefest of my labours, and yielded me the greatest fruits of comfort." It was a source of satisfaction to Baxter that his people were not a sermon-proof people. The abandoned folk all around were much more likely to respond than "if they had been hardened under a powerful ministry."

Baxter's catalogue of advantages in his ministry makes interesting reading. We should expect "unity and concord" to be an advantage, and can enjoy the minister's relish in his united church. "We had not pastor against pastor, nor church against church, nor sect against sect, nor Christian against Christian. We were all of one mind and mouth, and way. Not a Separatist, Anabaptist, Antinomian in the town." He found it an advantage that his neighbours "were of such a trade as allowed them time enough to read or talk of holy things." Then he was pleased to say that his people were not rich. "Another help to my success was that my people were not rich." The very "quality of the sinners" turned out to his advantage, for they made the sin of drunkenness so "bestly and ridiculous" as to make the sin the more abhorred. He knew the advantages of a long ministry in one place. "And it furthered my success that I stayed still in this one place (near two years before the wars and above fourteen years after)."

Richard Baxter was a great brother-minister in the Gospel.

He formed an association of ministers in his own neighbourhood, for the discussion of religious questions and for the promoting of mutual understanding and goodwill. His books are burdened with anxiety for the fulfilling of the ministry.

"Do not think that all your work is in your studies, and in the pulpit. I confess that it is great; but, alas! it is but a small part of your task. You are shepherds, and you must know every sheep, and what is their disease, and mark their straying, and help to cure them, and fetch them home."

"O be not asleep while the wolf is waking! Let your eye be quick in observing the dangers and strayings of your people. If jealousies, heart-burning, or contentions arise among them, quench them before they break out into raging, irresistible flames."

An oft-repeated exhortation needed in every generation is :

"Surely, brethren we have a great cause to take heed what we do, as well as what we say. A practical doctrine must be practically preached. We must study as hard how to live well as how to preach well."

I am one of those ministers who very much dislike to hear the altogether too-common condemnation of deacons at our ministers' meetings, and would gladly know that it was ended. It would be far more profitable to deal faithfully with our own faults; and *weakness* is a common ministerial fault.

"In order to preserve the Church, it is desirous that the minister be so far superior to the people as to be able to teach them, and to keep them in awe; and manifest their weakness to themselves and to others. The truth is, a truth which cannot be hid, it is much owing to the weakness of ministers that our poor people run into so many factions. When a proud seducer has a nimble tongue, and a minister is so dull or ignorant as to be confounded in his company, it brings him into contempt."

We need to heed such words as the following :

"If ministers would faithfully and humbly lay themselves for Christ and His Church without thinking of titles and reputation, they would have honour whether they would or not; whereas by gaping after it they lose it. Consider that you have many privileges belonging to your office. It is no small thing that you are maintained by other men's labours. This is for your work, that you may not be taken from it—either do the work, or take not the maintenance."

Baxter has always something good to say to the preacher :

“Noise without seriousness and pertinent matter, is like gunpowder without bullets, that causeth sound, and no execution. And the weightiest matter without clear explication and lively application, is like bullets without powder. If you will throw cannon bullets at the enemy with your hands, they will sooner fall on your feet than on them.”

“A sermon full of mere words, how neatly soever it is composed, while there is wanting the light of evidence, and the life of zeal, is but an image, or a well-dressed carcase. In preaching, there is intended a communion of souls, and a communication of something from ours unto theirs. As we and they have understandings, and wills, and affections, so must the best of our endeavours be to communicate the fullest light of evidence from our understandings unto theirs; and to warm their hearts by kindling them in holy affections, as by a communication to theirs. The great things which we have to commend to our hearers have reason enough on our side, and lie plain before them in the Word of God. We should therefore be so furnished with all store of evidence, as to come as with a torrent upon their understandings, and bear down all before us, and with our dilemmas and expostulations to bring them to a non-plus, and pour our shame upon all their vain objections, that they may be forced to yield to the power of Truth, and see that it is great, and will prevail.”

Lest those who are young in the ministry should think that all the advantage is with the “splendid young days,” it might correct to read a few of Baxter’s words on advantages in being no longer young. He says of himself when he was young :

“I was more vigorous—my style was extempore and lax ; but by a moving voice and utterance, my preaching had more effect. But I was raw, there were passages that would not bear trial of accurate judgment—there was less substance and less judgment. My understanding was then quicker; since it has become better furnished. Then I had the faculty of knowing, but I did not actually know. When I peruse the writing which I wrote in my younger years, I can find the footsteps of my unfurnished mind.”

Mr. Lloyd Thomas, in the Introduction to his book *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter*, provides me with words with which I may fittingly close. “The writer of this Introduction may be indulged the expression of his own judgment that he is the most vital and significant witness of his own age to ours, and that he has not yet, though there are many signs of awaking interest, come to his own.”

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