

Richard Baxter—The Director of Souls

THE MAN AND HIS PASTORAL METHOD.

IT is Richard Baxter—the Director of Souls—who makes us realize that the prime work of the Christian Minister is to be the Ambassador of God and the instrument of men's conversion. Our greatest glory among men is to "save a soul from death, and to cover a multitude of sins." Not a person that you see but may find you work. "In the saints themselves, how soon do the Christian graces languish if you neglect them; how easily they are drawn into sinful ways, to the dishonour of the Gospel, and to their own loss and sorrow." It is ours to be wise in the winning of souls and to feed the flock of Christ. How to do this let the Holy Spirit teach us as we meditate upon the work of R. Baxter—the Reformed Pastor, in a day when many of the flocks were without shepherds.

One of the salient facts about him is that he stood for individualism in religion, and for spiritual freedom, while his life is almost coeval with the Stuart monarchy.

If I were asked what, in the year 1640, was one of the most unpromising towns in England to which a young man could be sent, who was starting his career as preacher and pastor, I should feel inclined to point to the town of Kidderminster. With a population between three and four thousand, mostly carpet weavers, it had been, morally and spiritually, so grossly neglected as to have sunk into practical heathenism. The majority of the people were ignorant beyond the ignorance of the time, debased beyond its defilement, disorderly beyond rudeness. The town's besetting sin was drunkenness, while swearing and Sabbath desecration abounded. Yet there was hope. The town petitioned against the vicar, an ignorant and drunken fellow named Dance, and he, to compromise the matter, offered to allow £60 a year for a preacher, on whom the main part of the duty of the parish would fall. The people concurring with the offer gave an invitation to Baxter, who willingly accepted it. Other parishes were no better. Thus the field had been overrun with briars and thorns, and abandoned to thistles and weeds.

Again, if I were asked, who of all men—taking merely physical reasons into account—would seem to be the most unlikely man to be sent as pastor to this unlikely, unpromising place, I should have said that man was Richard Baxter.

Scarcely ever has a man, who has done work at all, done it under circumstances of such difficulty and pain as this man did. For fourteen years he had scarcely a working hour free from pain. He was engaged in one long conflict with diseases like pleurisy, nephritic and choleric. "I had several times," he says, "the advice of no less than six and thirty physicians, by whose order I used drugs without number, almost all of which God thought not fit to make successful for a cure." Over twenty times he was near to death; again and again he was brought to the very gates of the grave, and again and again he returned to life through the long and wearisome ascent of slow and difficult recovery. If Baxter had done nothing but take care of himself as an invalid, no one would have had the heart to blame a man to whom life was thus one long and weary battle with disease and pain.

And yet once more, if I were asked to single out one English town of the seventeenth century which, more almost than any other, came under the influence of the Spirit of God, and one preacher, who, more than most, was successful in winning men for Christ, and in organizing a vigorous church life under his pastorate, I should say that town was Kidderminster, and that preacher, Richard Baxter. Half a century ago that town did honour to itself by erecting a statue to the preacher; and on the occasion of unveiling, Dean Stanley said: "There have been three or four parishes in England which have been raised by their pastors to a national, almost a worldwide fame. Of these, the most conspicuous is Kidderminster; for Baxter without Kidderminster would have been but half of himself; and Kidderminster without Baxter would have had nothing but carpets.

THINK THEN OF THE MAN. He was born of poor, but genteel, parents at Rowton in Shropshire, Nov. 12th, 1615, and although he became eminent for his learning, he was not educated at any university. He first was sent to school under Mr. John Owen, of Wroxeter. Then, for a time, he was a pupil to Mr. Richard Wicksted, a scholarly man, the chaplain to the Council, at Ludlow Castle. Neglected by his tutor, all the benefit he derived was from the enjoyment of abundance of time, and plenty of books. Ludlow Castle is the romantic centre of one of the sweetest landscapes in England, and the august seat of many historical recollections, e.g., here, some three or four years afterwards, Milton presented his immortal "Comus" for the first time, and here, some thirty years afterwards, Butler wrote the first part of his Hudibras. Baxter returned to Wroxeter, after only eighteen months absence, and taught in the school where he had been a scholar while he continued his own private preparation.

In his fifteenth year he tells us, "it pleased God that a poor

pedlar came to the door that had ballads and some good books, and my father bought of him, Dr. Sibbes's *Bruised Reed*." This also I read, and found it suited my taste and seasonably sent me, which opened more the love of God to me, and gave me a livelier apprehension of the mystery of redemption, and how much it was beholden to Jesus Christ." "Thus without any means but books was God pleased to resolve me for Himself."

Circumstances led to his turning his attention to a career at Court, under the patronage of the Master of Revels, but a short experience of this sufficed. The next four years were spent in quiet preparation for his life's task.

In 1638, Philip Foley, the Stourbridge ironmaster and brother to the speaker of the House of Commons, refounded and endowed the Grammar School at Dudley, making Baxter the Master. Therefore he was ordained by the Bishop of Worcester. His latest biographer tells us "by the terms of his licence, he had permission to teach in the school at Dudley, and to preach in the parish church, and in the villages round about. Dudley, however was a centre of Nonconformity, and with that scrupulosity in matters of belief that always characterised him, Baxter felt that he must plunge into the controversy, and master the principles of those that sought to free themselves from the jurisdiction of the bishops. It was the turning-point of his career, for Baxter, in spite of the obvious reluctance to reveal his own position, from this time onwards, betrays an increasing dissatisfaction with that of the majority of the clergy of the Established Church."

He preached his first sermon at the Upper Church, Dudley and evangelised the villages around. After a year he went to be curate to a clergyman at Bridgnorth, where he laboured two years. In 1640 he went to be lecturer for the Vicar of Kidderminster, where he remained for nearly two years. Originally, like his family and his friends, an unhesitating conformist, he about this time found himself led to adopt some of the nonconformist views. His learning and capacity for business made him the leader of the Presbyterian party. He was one of the greatest preachers of his own day, and consistently endeavoured to exert a moderating influence, with the result that he became the subject of attack by extremists of both views. Though siding with Parliament in the Civil War, he opposed the execution of the King and the assumption of supreme power by Cromwell. During the War he served with the army as chaplain.

It was during this period that he had at least three public disputations with the Baptists. One at Amersham in Bucks. Another in 1643, at Coventry, with Benjamin Coxe, M.A., on "Infant Baptism." Baxter issued the challenge for this, but as the outcome, Coxe was imprisoned. The most famous was on

Jan. 1st, 1650, at Bewdley, with John Tombes in an Anglican church he disputed from the infant's right to church membership to their right to infant baptism. There was a crowded audience and the debate lasted from nine in the morning until five at night.

For reasons of health he retired from the army to the house of his friend, Sir Thomas Rouse, of Rouse-Lench, Worcestershire, and there, in continual expectation of death, with one foot in the grave, he wrote the first part of the best of all his works, *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*, published in 1650. Excepting a Bible and a Concordance, Baxter had not a single book with him at the time to help him as he wrote.

On the invitation of his former parishioners he returned to Kidderminster in 1647, and, in spite of continual ill-health, he laboured there for fourteen years with eminent success. "When I came," he says, "there was about one family in a street that worshipped God and when I came away there were some streets where there was not one poor family that did not do so."—And on the Lord's days, instead of the open profanation to which they had been accustomed, a person, in passing through the town, in the intervals of public worship, might overhear hundreds of families engaged in singing psalms, reading the Scriptures, and other good books, or such sermons as they had wrote down while they heard them from the pulpit. His care of the souls committed to his charge, and the success of his labours among them, were truly remarkable; for the number of his stated communicants rose to 600, of whom he himself declared, there were not twelve concerning whose sincere piety he had not reason to entertain good hopes.

At the Restoration, Baxter was appointed one of the King's Chaplains and took a leading part at the Savoy Conference. It is a great mistake to blame him because this Conference failed to secure agreement. Presbyterian though he was, he did not object to a modified form of Episcopacy; yet he declined the proffered Bishopric of Hereford, preferring to return as curate to Kidderminster. The Act of Uniformity having driven him out of the Established Church, he was compelled to leave Kidderminster and was subjected to much hardship. During the Plague and after the Great fire, when Parliament was meeting at Oxford, and passing measures against them, many of the Nonconformist ministers, including Baxter, returned to London and took the place of the clergy, who had fled from the post of duty, in succouring the sick and homeless people. It was at this time that Baxter was for the first time imprisoned and only got release at the end of the six months under the Habeas Corpus Act. Bunyan too, was imprisoned and that for twelve years in Bedford Jail.

Retiring to Acton, Middlesex, he spent the greater part of

nine years in the composition of some of the most important of his works. The Act of Indulgence, in 1672, permitted him to return to London, where he divided his time between preaching and writing. But in 1685, after the accession of King James II, he was brought, for alleged sedition in his *Paraphrases of the New Testament*, before the notorious Judge Jefferies, who treated him in a most brutal manner, calling him a dog, and swearing it would be no more than justice to whip such a villain through the city. Condemned to pay 500 marks, and to be imprisoned until the fine was paid, he lay in the King's Bench Prison for nearly eighteen months—during this his second imprisonment—and was only released on the mediation of Lord Powis.

It was Baxter who, when greeted by Judge Jefferies with the remark, "Richard, I see the rogue in thy face," replied, "I had not known before that my face was a mirror."

Mark you this was not the speech of a self-conceited fellow, for on one occasion on seeing a man being taken to the scaffold he said, "There goes Richard Baxter, but for the grace of God." The later years of his life were spent in tranquillity. One of his last efforts was to join in a serious attempt to unite the Presbyterians and Independents. He died on December 8th, 1691, in his seventy-fifth year, and it is said that never was there such a funeral as his.

His literary activity was marvellous in spite of ill-health and outward disturbances. He is said to have written 168 works, including two books of poetry. The best known are *The Saints Everlasting Rest*; *A Call to the Unconverted*; and *The Reformed Pastor*. A copy of his *Holy Commonwealth* had the distinction of being burned at Oxford along with books written by John Milton and John Goodwin. The most diverse minds have their favourites among his books. He was a favourite with Addison and Coleridge and Dr. Johnson's too indulgent reply to Boswell's question, what works of Baxter should he read, "Read any of them, for they are all good" is well known. They have been translated into many tongues. *A Call to the Unconverted* was translated by John Eliot—the Apostle of the Red Indians—into the Indian language, and a copy of this recently sold for £6,800. Dr. Isaac Barrow says that "his practical writings were never mended, and his controversial ones seldom confuted," and Dean Stanley called him "The first English Protestant Schoolman."

He preached before the House of Commons at St. Margaret's, Westminster, 30th April, 1660. The very next day the Parliament voted for the Restoration. He preached before the Lord Mayor and Alderman and all London at St. Paul's on the day of Thanksgiving, 10th May, 1660, for General Monk's success in bringing the king back.

The claim of Baxter to stand high on the roll of English worthies must be found in his eminent example of self-sacrifice. Two simple facts may be stated as illustrative of the breadth of this illustrious man, viz:—

1. The Church of England is indebted to Baxter for procuring the charter of the Company for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England. He had then been ejected by his mother church, in which he had refused a mitre; but none the less earnestly did he seek to obtain a charter for that Church. His "field" was the world, and his correspondence with John Eliot shows that, far ahead of his times, he saw the possibility and urgent need of modern missions.

2. Baxter was among the first, if not the very first, Englishman to speak fearlessly out on the slave trade. Writing in 1673 he said, "They who go as pirates and take away poor Africans to make them slaves and sell them, are the worst of robbers; and ought to be considered as the common enemies of mankind; and they who buy them, and make use of them as mere beasts of burden are fitter to be called demons than Christians."

It is a remark of Dr. Wilkins, Bishop of Chester, that "it was enough for one age to produce such a man as Richard Baxter." The age that had the honour of producing this holy and great man, was the age of the Commonwealth, the age of Non-conformity. Of it W. Savage Landor truly says, "There were giants in those days; but giants who feared God, and not who fought against Him." Baxter was one of the greatest of the giants. He was to its theology what Cromwell was to its politics and Milton to its liberties.

Our study is more particularly concerned with HIS PASTORAL METHOD. Dr. Powicke rightly asserts: "Nor can I help setting down the conviction that in Baxter the Pastor—which includes Preacher—a modern Pastor may still find the richest possible incentive to all that is best and highest in his vocation, whatever may be the width of his difference from Baxter the Theologian."

The best way to understand him is to study *Gildas Salvianus: The Reformed Pastor*, which was written in connection with a Day of Humiliation kept at Worcester, December 4th, 1655, by the Ministers of the County. It is really the enforcement of the text "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood," Acts xx. 28. Listen to what Dr. Doddridge said of it: "*The Reformed Pastor* is a most extraordinary performance, and should be read by every young minister, before he takes a people under his stated care; and, I think, the practical part of it

reviewed every three or four years; for nothing would have a greater tendency to awaken the spirit of a minister to that zeal in his work, for want of which many good men are but shadows of what (by the blessing of God) they might be, if the maxims and measures laid down in that incomparable Treatise were strenuously pursued." No wonder that it is still among the books which probationer ministers of the Wesleyan Methodist Church are required to read, as it was thus placed by John Wesley.

Baxter regarded his ministry at Kidderminster as the principal work of his life. His work was to preach. He took it to be the chief instrument of salvation. "True Pastors and Bishops of the Church 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."

As a preacher his sermons were long—never less than an hour in length. Once a month he preached a sermon above the people's heads and further he says, "I did usually put in something in my sermon which was above their own discovery, and which they had not known before, and this I did that they might be kept humble, and still perceive their ignorance and be willing to keep on a learning still." Such words express what the writer himself felt and believed when he took up his work at Kidderminster. He was there as God's ambassador. Whether the verse on the pillar in front of which stood his pulpit was inscribed by his direction or not, it was true of him—"We preach not ourselves but Jesus Christ our Lorde. We are not as the most part are who choppe and change with the word of God." He tells us that the preacher's aim should be first to convince the understanding and then to engage the heart. Light first, then heat. He was a passionate but not an emotional preacher. He had the three great principles of effective preaching—simplicity of style, directness of purpose and earnestness of manner. He had not long been preaching in the town before the large and capacious church became so full that gallery after gallery had to be added to the interior. And as years went by his preaching in the church told powerfully upon the life of the town. At first his converts—mostly young men and girls—were few so that he "took special note of every one that was humbled, reformed or converted," but later they were so many that "I could not." His success was not uniform. "Once all the ignorant rout were raging mad against me for preaching the doctrine of Original Sin." His troubles, such as they were, did not all come from without. One of the worst was of a kind he could not speak of. This, to his own

surprise, was a lapse into scepticism concerning the very foundations of the faith. In this crisis it came home to him that the only safety lay in a policy of thorough. "I was fain to dig to the very foundations . . . and at last I found that . . . nothing is so firmly believed as that which hath been sometime doubted of." From first to last, he was more or less a sufferer. He grew to regard pain as an "invaluable mercy." "It made me study and preach things necessary and a little stirred up my sluggish heart, to speak to sinners with some compassion.

I preached, as never sure to preach again,
And as a dying man to dying men."

He found, however, that his preaching, to be rendered fruitful must be followed up by direct personal converse with every family and every member of the family. Accordingly he arranged that he should be at home all the afternoons of Monday and Tuesday of each week, to a certain specific number of families from the town; while his assistant should spend all the morning of the same two days in visiting an equal number of families in the outlying parishes.

His power and the secret of his success lay in the natural way he spoke to men and the divine earnestness which possessed his soul. He spoke directly from Christ to the people. Christianity was to him not a mere set of doctrines to be received or a code of ethics to be followed; it was the power of an endless life.

Among the causes of his success Baxter gave the following: the free and open field for his work provided by the Cromwellian settlement in religion; he came to a prepared people in the negative sense, that of not being Gospel hardened; and the holy living of the converted—this quickened a conscience of divine things in home and workshop; the trade of weaving offered conveniences for study and talk; the comparative poverty of the people helped. He found, as George Herbert says,

"Gold and the Gospel never did agree,
Religion always sides with poverty."

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 youths at the universities. "And I found that Threepence or a Groat to every poor body that askt me were no great matter in a year." He considered his single state to be a blessing, and thus he did not marry until 1662.

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 to-day. His exercise of Church Discipline was an important part of his pastoral oversight. This consisted, after private reproofs, in more public reproof, continued with the exhortation to repentance—in prayer for the offender—in restoring the penitent—in excluding and avoiding the impenitent. Again 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 fruit in any, unless some other skilful hand shall follow him to water it."

Baxter was dominated by an eternal purpose and subordinated everything to it. This is the great lesson of his life. In the light of this all his studies, his preaching, his controversies, his books, fall into place, and made a consistent whole. We must never forget that he preached as he preached, and achieved the work he did, from the English Bible. In all his works he impresses you as the Man of the Book. He taught that the making sure of heaven is the main purpose of life. For him heaven meant the perfect fellowship with God which comes from moral likeness to God and above all through the Spirit of love. He believed that preaching of the right sort was more effective than ceremonies. Christ and salvation must not be made light of. The preacher ought to cultivate a plain and even diffuse manner. There must be a repetition of essential truths. The doors must be opened to all who crowd in, and the ministry must not be carried on for personal profit. He believed in personal dealing as the most effective of all methods for winning souls for God. Thus 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 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 the story of His birth, life, and death, as if they had never heard it before."

He urges that if a minister himself cannot effectively do the pastoral work necessary to adequately feed the flock, he ought not to take a salary more than sufficient for his needs, or he ought, at his own expense, to provide the necessary assistance.

All personal profit should be entirely eliminated. To spend and be spent is the apostolic ideal. Let me, from Baxter's *Reformed Pastor*—which should be every pastor's companion—close with the words which he addressed to his brethren in the ministry, now 275 years ago. "O brethren! do you not shrink and tremble under the sense of all this work? Will a common measure of holy skill and ability, of prudence and other qualifications, serve for such a task as this? I know necessity may cause the church to tolerate the weak; but woe to us, if we tolerate and indulge our own weakness! Do not reason and conscience tell you, that if you dare venture on so high a work as this, you should spare no pains to be qualified for the performance of it? It is not now and then an idle snatch or taste of studies that will serve to make an able and sound divine. I know that laziness hath learned to allege the vanity of all our studies, and how entirely the spirit must qualify us for, and assist us in, our work—as if God commanded us the use of means, and then warranted us to neglect them—as if it were His way to cause us to thrive in a course of idleness, and to bring us to knowledge by dreams when we are asleep, or to take us up into heaven and show us His counsels, while we think of no such matter, but are idling away our time on earth! Oh, that men should dare, by their laziness, to 'quench the Spirit,' and then pretend the Spirit for the doing of it! *O inestimabile facinus et prodigiosum!* God hath required us, that we be 'not slothful in business,' but 'fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.' Such we must provoke our hearers to be, and such we must be ourselves. Oh, therefore, brethren, lose no time! Study, and pray, and confer, and practise; for in these four ways your abilities must be increased. Take heed to yourselves, lest you are weak through your own negligence, and lest you mar the work of God by your weakness."

ARTHUR S. LANGLEY.

JUNE, 1660. Some Anabaptists as Disborough, Markly, and Wingforth smartly secured in Ireland for endeavouring to disturb the peace of the nation.

MARCH 23, 1660/1. Memorandum. I and Mr. George Symonds as justices, released out of the Castle gaol at Worcester this day, 44 Quakers and 14 Anabaptists upon their promise to appear at the next gaol delivery, and in the mean to keep the peace towards the king and all people. They drew up two recognizances containing three heads:—1. To acknowledge Charles the 2nd king. 2. To live peaceably. 3. To appear at the next assize.

Diary of Henry Townsend.