

Richard Baxter -- the Man.

RICHARD BAXTER was a man of unusual moral stature, a man of spiritual splendour and of surpassing mental gifts. He rises out of a welter of words, many of them his own, as a lighthouse rises out of the sea. Richard Baxter, the man, will always shine.

Notice his incorruptible soul. When he could not be beaten in argument, or persuaded to yield, might he be bought? A little flattery goes a long way with some who are great. The offer of some place of influence and power is commonly used to take away the lion's roar. But Baxter did not know that he was roaring, and was entirely untouched by the offer of a Bishopric to keep him quiet.

You cannot discover any place in Baxter's life when Baxter was thinking of Richard's career. He says :

"I was more and more pleased with a solitary life : though in the way of self-denial I could submit to a most public life for the service of God when He requireth it, and would not be unprofitable that I may be private ; yet I must confess that it is much more pleasing to myself to be retired from the world and to have very little to do with men ; to commune with God, and conscience, and good works."

Richard Baxter was always a gentleman ; faithful in speech and conduct, and always firmly respectful.

Baxter had so many difficult things to say—things which high-placed men do not want to hear—that it is greatly refreshing to hear him say them. The vulgar Judge Jeffreys said :

"Richard, Richard, dost thou think we'll hear thee poison the court? Richard, thou art an old fellow, an old knave; thou hast written books enough to load a cart, every one as full of sedition as an egg is full of meat . . . but, by the grace of Almighty God, I'll crush you all. Come, what do you say for yourself, you old knave? Come, speak up. What doth he say? I'm not afraid of you, for all the snivelling calves you have got about you."

Richard spoke up :

"Your lordship need not fear, for I'll not hurt you. But

these things will surely be understood one day; what fools one sort of Protestants are made to persecute the other. I am not concerned to answer such stuff, but I am ready to produce my writings for the confutation of all this, and my life and conversation are known to many in this nation."

Baxter's moral courage was always on the finest edge. He writes :

"When Cromwell's faction were making him Protector, they drew up a thing which they called 'The Government of England.'

"Therein they determined that all should have liberty or free exercise of their religion 'who profess faith in God by Jesus Christ.' Hereupon the Committee appointed to that business were required to nominate certain divines to draw up the fundamentals of religion, to be as a test in this toleration.

"I knew how ticklish a business the enumeration of fundamentals was, and of what ill consequence it would be if it were ill done, and how unsatisfactorily that question, 'What are your fundamentals?' is usually answered by the Papists. . . . When I saw that they would not change their methods, I saw also that there was nothing for me and others of my mind to do but to hinder them from doing harm."

Again he writes :

"At this time the Lord Broghill and the Earl of Warwick brought me to preach before Cromwell the Protector. I knew not which way to provoke him better to his duty than by preaching on 1 Cor. i. 10. . . . But the plainness and the nearness, I heard, was displeasing to him and his courtiers; but they put up with it."

I have taken the phrase "spiritual splendour" applied to Baxter, from Henry Clark's *History of Nonconformity*. Baxter has earned that fine word of praise.

Some of you will have read Laurence Housman's *Trimblerigg*, where the Reverend Jonathan Trimblerigg, entirely satisfied with himself, unconsciously grows a halo around his head. Mr. Housman's clever but biting satire implies the splendour and power of real goodness. This "splendour and power" Richard Baxter had in a marked degree. His disease-filled body was a temple of the Holy Ghost—men felt his power. It gave him ascendancy over friends and over opponents. It made him as guileless as a child at times when men were expecting him to be clever. This spiritual power was manifest all through his Kidderminster ministry. It was equally as marked in his wide range of fellowship

with his fellow ministers. It was this that made him tolerable when he was trying to argue rough soldiers, and shrewd politicians, and narrow ecclesiastics to his will.

The power of that shining spirit is the life of his two best known books. The *Reformed Pastor* is built upon one sentence in the book which rings true to Baxter's own practice:

"Be that first, yourselves, which you persuade your hearers to be; believe that, which you daily persuade them to believe; and heartily entertain that Christ and Spirit which you offer to them."

The *Saint's Everlasting Rest* burns with a tireless zeal for God:

"If thou wouldst have light and heat, why art thou no more in the sunshine? For want of this recourse to heaven, thy soul is as a lamp not lighted, and thy duty as a sacrifice without fire. Fetch one coal daily from this altar, and see if thy offering will not burn. Light thy lamp at this flame, and feed it daily with oil from hence, and see if it will not gloriously shine. Keep close to this reviving fire, and see if thy affections will not be warm. In thy want of love to God, lift up thy eye of faith to heaven, behold his beauty, contemplate his excellencies, and see whether his amiableness and perfect goodness will not ravish thy heart. As exercise gives appetite, strength, and vigour to the body, so these heavenly exercises will quickly cause the increase of grace and spiritual life. Besides, it is not false or strange fire which you fetch from heaven for your sacrifices. The zeal which is kindled by your meditations on heaven is most likely to be a heavenly zeal.

"Some men's fervency is drawn only from their books, some from the sharpness of affliction, some from the mouth of a moving minister, and some from the attention of an auditory; but he that knows this way to heaven, and derives it daily from the true fountain, shall have his soul revived with the water of life, and enjoy that quickening which is peculiar to the saints."

The mind of Richard Baxter was an extraordinarily ready mind. It had not the weight of the mind of Milton, nor the unearthly questioning of Sir Thomas Browne; nor had it any kinship whatever with the practical mind of Cromwell. Baxter's mind was ceaselessly furnishing itself with answers to his own questions, so that he was ready at all times to answer other men's questions. To ask Baxter for a reason for the faith that was in him was to invite an answer in three volumes. In the midst of a heated discussion with Cromwell, when evidently Cromwell had

lost his temper, Baxter quietly told Cromwell that he would "write down" what he had to say if Cromwell would read it. You will recall how imperturbably Baxter referred Judge Jeffreys to his books in defence of his teaching—"a cart-load" of them. At the Savoy Conference, when the Prayer Book was under discussion, Baxter was quite ready to present the Conference with a new Baptism, or a new Communion Service by the next morning; and if they gave him a little longer, he would do them a brand new Prayer Book.

Baxter was so full of reasons, that he could not help himself overflowing, often to the annoyance of his friends as well as to the confusion of his enemies. The intensity of Baxter hindered him from being impartial. Like all who think intensely and argue incessantly, Baxter could not understand how men could differ from him, and it was very difficult for him to widen the bounds of toleration where order and discipline were concerned. "My mind abhorreth confusion," says Baxter.

He went into the Army, though a Royalist, because he thought that he could put the Independents and the Baptists straight. A fine illustration of Baxter's mind at work is in the "Self-Analysis" chapter of *The Autobiography*:

"My certainty that I am a man is before my certainty that there is a God, for *Quod facit notum est magis notum*; my certainty that there is a God is greater than my certainty that he requireth love and holiness of his creature; my certainty of *this* is greater than my certainty of the life of reward and punishment hereafter; my certainty of that is greater than my certainty of the endless duration of it, and of the immortality of the individual souls; my certainty of the Deity is greater than my certainty of the Christian Faith; my certainty of the Christian Faith in its essentials is greater than my certainty of the perfection and infallibility of the Holy Scriptures; my certainty of that is greater than my certainty of the meaning of many particular texts, and so of the truth of many particular doctrines, or of the canonicalness of some certain books.

"So that you see by what gradations my understanding doth proceed, so also that my certainty differeth as the evidence differeth."

Mr. Ladell, in his book on *Richard Baxter*, makes a shrewd shot at the difference that always existed between Baxter and Cromwell, but I think that he misses the mark. Mr. Ladell thinks that it was due to Baxter's mind not being able to "grasp largely," that his world was made up of his immediate surroundings, and that "his ideas revolved with meticulous precision around the

problems and difficulties of the moment," while Cromwell's mind was just the reverse, being able to grasp largely with extraordinary understanding.

I rather see Richard Baxter with an accurate and an exacting mind, concerned with ideas, and with the understanding of truth — with a scholar's mind; and Cromwell, a man of deeds, possessing a workman's or a soldier's mind. Baxter took principles for light and order; Cromwell took them for use, as he might take a hammer or a sword. Baxter certainly was cumbered about with the near-at-hand problems, but he had a mind of range. He says :

"I cannot be affected so much with the calamities of my own relations or the land of my nativity as with the case of the heathen, Mohametan, and ignorant nations of the earth. No part of my prayers are so deeply serious as that for the conversion of the infidel and ungodly world, that God's name may be sanctified and his kingdom come, and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Nor was I ever before so sensible what a plague the division of languages was which hindereth our speaking to them in their own conversation; nor what a great sin tyranny is, which keepeth the Gospel from most of the nations of the world. Could we but go among Tartarians, Turks, and heathens and speak their language, I should be but little troubled for the silencing of 1,800 ministers at once in England, nor for all the rest that were cast out here, and in Scotland and Ireland; there being no employment in the world so desirable in my eyes as to labour for the winning of such miserable souls; which maketh me greatly to honour Mr. John Eliot, the apostle of the Indians in New England, and whoever else have laboured in such work."

Baxter's bodily weakness was with him throughout the whole of his seventy-six years. The buoyancy that usually flows from vigorous health was not his. He seems to have had all the ailments that one body could have, "acrimonious blood, excoriated finger nails, rheumatic head, flatulent stomach, extreme chilliness, bleedings of the nose, latent stones in the reins," and yet more; but he found incessant activity a capital doctor.

Death, the "inexorable leveller," stood always by, so that he must get on with his work in order to get it done; and in the doing of his work, the body was mastered by the spirit, and he did the work of ten men.

"The second book which I wrote was that called *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*. When I was weakened with great bleeding, and left solitary in my chamber at Sir John Cook's

in Derbyshire, without any acquaintance but my servant about me, and was sentenced to death by the physicians, I began to contemplate more seriously on the everlasting rest which I apprehended myself to be just on the borders of. And that my thoughts might not too much scatter in my meditation I began to write something on that subject."

Speaking upon his first Kidderminster ministry, Baxter wrote :

"All this forementioned time of my ministry was passed under my foredescribed weaknesses, which were so great as made me live and preach in some continual expectation of death, supposing still that I had not long to live. And this I found through all my life to be an invaluable mercy to me, for . . . 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 men to dying men."

Mr. J. M. Lloyd Thomas, in his fine "Introductory Essay" to *The Autobiography*, abridged by Mr. Thomas from the *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, speaks of Baxter's "unduring undatedness, the timeless element which will survive all our fleeting modernity"; and further says :

"In him we seem to have all the contradictions joined. He is a catholic Puritan as Savonarola was a puritan Catholic; a parliamentarian Royalist who took Cromwell for an ambitious usurper and thought that Hooker and other defenders of monarchy conceded too much to democracy; a nonconformist Episcopalian who would fain, had conscience permitted, have conformed; an intellectualist, but one who, as Calamy says, 'talked in the pulpit with great freedom about another world, like one that had been there and was come as a sort of express from thence to make a report concerning it.'"

I should like to close my estimate of "Baxter, the Man," who in old age, like Mark Rutherford, married in sexless love a young girl, and lived very beautifully with her, although he contradicted his almost life-long plea for a celibate ministry; I should like to close with words of Mr. Henry Clark. He is speaking of Baxter's attitude toward Presbyterians, and by way of parenthesis he says, "Even before the gracious tolerance of his old age came upon him to make his always beautiful character more tenderly beautiful still."

WILLIAM H. HADEN.