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RICHARD BAXTER AND THE OECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

RICHARD BAXTER'S gifts and interests were so varied that no matter from what angle he be approached his life will reveal some constructive and inspiring food for thought. In order to understand the bearing of his attitude to Christian Unity on the present-day Oecumenical movement, however, it is particularly necessary to review, briefly, his life and work. So we will consider, first, Richard Baxter, the man himself; then his efforts for Christian Unity in 1660; thirdly, his plan for Unity; and, finally, the relevance of his ideas to the modern movement for Christian Unity.

I

The office of "Lecturer", which Baxter held at St. Mary's Church, Kidderminster, the scene of his remarkable ministry from 1647 to 1660, takes us straightway into the historic background which we must first consider. The process of break-up in the Church of England, in which Baxter intervened at the most critical moment, had its beginnings in the days of Queen Elizabeth. Under her shrewd and calculating rule the "Puritan" party, as it was called, found itself seriously restricted insofar as it strove to achieve its aim of a "reformed" Reformed Church. Only a minority of the Puritans took the path of complete separation from the national Church; the remainder strove by indirect methods to spread their point of view, no doubt hoping for a day when a different ruler would make direct action more possible. One of their methods was the appointment of "Lecturers"; these men did not perform the duties of the ordinary parish incumbent, but had the duty of preaching or lecturing upon the Bible at times other than those of the usual services. Their upkeep was provided by the offerings of the congregation, or by a rich patron. This arrangement served a double purpose, in that it provided pulpits for preachers who would otherwise have been unlikely to secure a living; and it enabled such preachers to skirt round some of the problems of Church order about which incumbents were allowed no liberty of action.

Through such arrangements, and through a stream of literature, the Puritans, still a party within the Church of England, made their views widely known. The House of Commons was their political stronghold, whilst the High Church party, quite naturally, became more and more closely allied with the king and his cause. Thus the gulf between the two parties widened, with the various Independent sects skirmishing on the fringes of the main battle, and adding confusion to the general scene.

Under Cromwell, the Church of England passed through a peculiar phase. His ecclesiastical policy was, in practice if not in theory, one of toleration, except towards the extreme High Churchmen. (Richard Baxter accused him of trying deliberately to persuade each of the several parties that he was for them!) Baxter tells us that Cromwell had the good sense not to seek out and persecute the ministers and others who did not consent to his government; speaking generally, it is true to say that he let men live quietly, without forcing them to take oaths of fidelity, except when they wished to enter Parliament. But he left his mark in one special connection. He appointed a committee of ministers, called "Triers", which sat at Whitehall, and examined and approved all candidates for the ministry of the Church. If the committee could not deal with a specific case itself, it referred it to a local committee of ministers in the county concerned. The net result of all this was, in Baxter's words:

They did abundance of good to the Church . . . though they were somewhat partial to the Independents, Separatists, Fifth Monarchy men, and Anabaptists, and against the Prelatists and Arminians, yet so great was the benefit above the hurt which they brought to the Church, that many thousands of souls blessed God for the faithful ministers whom they let in, and grieved when the Prelatists afterward cast them out again . . .

Baxter himself did not regard the authority of the "Triers" as lawful, and had as little to do with them as possible. But he was none the less engaged in his own private campaign for the unifying and purifying of the Church. He had taken the lead in the forming of the "Worcestershire Association"; in this about half the ministers in that county were joined together. Its articles included a profession of faith subscribed to by the ministers and the Church members. The purpose of these articles was to establish an agreed system of Church discipline, and to provide for consultation between the ministers. The terms of the agreement were made wide enough to allow the High Church party,

the Presbyterians, and the Independents to join in. Similar associations were formed in eight or nine other counties, and Baxter was in touch with them by correspondence.

Thus he was a nationally known personality, and had also the advantage of not being definitely linked with any one party. He was called a Presbyterian by many, but himself denied that he wholly agreed with the presbyterian system. His own estimate of the situation in those critical years is worth repeating:

God did so wonderfully bless the labours of His unanimous faithful ministers that, had it not been for the faction of the Prelatists on one side that drew men off, and the factions of giddy and turbulent sectaries on the other side . . . England had been like, in a quarter of an age, to have become a land of saints and a pattern of holiness to all the world, and the unmatched paradise of the earth. Never were such fair opportunities to sanctify a nation lost and trodden underfoot as have been in this land of late. Woe be to them that were causes of it!

If it be thought that the vision thus described is over-optimistic, it should be remembered that it was based upon his own remarkable experiences at Kidderminster. There, Baxter preached in the Parish Church every Sunday morning, and held something in the nature of a discussion group on Thursday evenings. Two days a week were spent by him and his assistant in visiting and catechising in the homes of members of the church. Fourteen families were dealt with in this way each week. In addition to this, Baxter spent the greater part of each day in writing, and complained that this, together with family duties, other visitation, correspondence and prayer left him very little time for study—"the greatest personal affliction" of all his life!

He was himself in a permanent state of ill-health, "being seldom an hour free from pain"; more than once he declares his life to have been spared as a result of the fasting and prayers of his neighbours. He lived in a few poorly-furnished rooms at the top of a tumble-down building, and was once nearly brained, he tells us, when some shelving collapsed, and part of his library, including all Augustine's works, fell on him! His amazing output of work suggests that the best way of guaranteeing that one's life is occupied to the full is to believe that death awaits you on every morrow. The result of his labours in Kidderminster was spectacular; the life of the town was transformed until Kidderminster became a by-word for godliness and sobriety. When he left, there were some streets in which you would find that every house on one side, and most on the other, was occupied

by a family which not only professed godliness, but, being subject to Mr. Baxter's searching discipline, must have given clear evidence of a truly Christian experience. Yet when he first went there, there was only about one family in a street which worshipped God and called on His name. Kidderminster in Baxter's time represents the nearest thing to an "organised" revival that I have read of. And it is profitable to reflect on the fact that it followed faithful preaching, diligent pastoral work, and the strict enforcement of church discipline on those who joined themselves to the Church.

Furthermore, Richard Baxter demonstrated at Kidderminster that a practical unity of all Christians within the national church was possible. Allowance must be made for his persuasive eloquence, but we know that the disturbing and disrupting ideas which were surging through the nation as a whole did not bypass Kidderminster. The Quakers, for instance, shouted against Baxter in the streets, and interrupted his services. Yet he could write:

Our unity and concord was a great advantage to us, and our freedom from those sects and heresies which many other places were infected with . . . we were all of one mind, of one mouth and way. Not a Separatist, Anabaptist, Antinomian etc. in the town. . . !

Significantly enough, he adds:

And the exercise of church discipline was no small furtherance of the people's good; for I found plainly that without it I could not have kept the religious sort from separations and divisions.

II

The foregoing gives some idea of the background out of which Richard Baxter emerged in 1660 to take a leading part in the discussions on church polity which followed the restoration of Charles II. Baxter arrived in London on April 13th, 1660, and immediately made contact with two members of the exiled Charles's circle of supporters—the Earl of Lauderdale, and Sir William Morrice, later Secretary of State. The Earl of Lauderdale had been corresponding for some time with Baxter, privately endeavouring to reassure him concerning the character and spirituality of Charles.

Soon after Baxter's arrival in London, the newly elected Parliament appointed a day of fasting and prayer, at which Mr. Calamy, Dr. Gauden, and Baxter himself were invited to preach.

The burden of Baxter's message was that "it was easy for moderate men to come to a fair agreement [i.e. on Christian unity], and that the late revered Primate of Ireland [Archbishop Usher] and myself had agreed within half an hour."

This last sentence refers to a meeting which Baxter had with the Archbishop, and to which he refers on a number of occasions. It occurred during one of Baxter's earlier visits to London; the two men had apparently quickly agreed on principles, including the critical question of the true nature of Episcopacy. It was soon to be revealed, however, that Archbishop Usher's viewpoint was not that of other leaders of the national church.

The day following the services at St. Margaret's, Parliament voted home the king, Charles II. Some Presbyterian ministers, friends of Baxter, went to meet him in Holland as he prepared to return home. Baxter, in the meantime, found that his reference to an agreement with Archbishop Usher had aroused a great deal of interest. Many moderate episcopal ministers went to him to enquire what the terms of agreement were, and Baxter tells how they agreed easily among themselves in private, as if almost all their differences were at an end. Concord in the church was being everywhere discussed.

The current optimism was further increased by the appointment of some ten of the Presbyterians, including Baxter, as chaplains to the king.

The next move came through two of the Presbyterian Lords who held office at Court, and who arranged a meeting between the king and some leading Presbyterian ministers, once more including Richard Baxter. It was typical of Baxter's courage and forthrightness that he should point out to Charles how well Cromwell had arranged the matter of supplying ministers for the national Church, and how foolish Charles would be if he undid the good which Cromwell had begun. Baxter also reminded the king that he and his friends were speaking, not for the Presbyterian party alone, but for all the king's religious subjects. All the ministers spoke of their desire to see unity in the Church of England. The king, in reply, said that he was resolved to bring both parties together, and that he would expect both sides to make concessions.

Shortly after, the king asked Baxter and his friends to draw up their proposals for church government. They explained that they had no authority to speak for any but themselves, but he

bade them carry on. They then met daily for about three weeks at Zion College, and finally drew up agreed proposals, largely echoing the ideas expressed by Archbishop Usher in his pamphlet, *A Resolution of Episcopacy to the form of Synodical Government*, in which he contended that there was no difference between the New Testament presbyters and bishops. He viewed bishops as permanent "moderators" in the synods of their brethren, "first among equals". The Presbyterians also pointed out their objections to certain parts of the Prayer Book, to some ceremonies used in Divine service, and to the enforcement of a liturgy (though they were not opposed to the voluntary use of such).

The response to this was disappointing; the king expressed his pleasure, but the Episcopalian party made no counter-proposals, submitting only a paper of bitter arguments against the Presbyterian suggestions.

The king then submitted a Declaration which he proposed to make public. Baxter was asked to reply to this for the nonconformist party, but prepared a draft in such forthright language that his colleagues persuaded him to soften its tone somewhat.

Then followed the meeting of both parties, at which the Lord Chancellor read the proposed royal "Declaration". At the very close an additional paragraph was proposed, said to result from a petition by the Anabaptists and Independents, which said, "Others also shall be permitted to meet for religious worship, so be it they do it not to the disturbance of the peace; and that no justice of the peace or officer disturb them."

It was at once realised by all present that this would give liberty to Roman Catholics and to the "Socinians". But no one wanted to be the first to speak against this additional clause—and one of Baxter's friends, knowing him, whispered to him to say nothing. A long silence followed, until Richard Baxter, afraid that their silence would be taken as consent, spoke up against the suggestion; whilst he and his friends desired severity against none, he said, they distinguished the tolerable from the intolerable. They could not subscribe to the proposal. The bishops, who silently agreed with Baxter on this point, had thus succeeded in putting the blame for the rejection of liberty for all on the shoulders of the Presbyterian party. The king thereupon broke up the conference, and a dejected Richard Baxter walked out of the meeting, convinced that the proposed Declaration was doomed to failure.

When the Declaration was published, however, it was found that the Presbyterian point of view, especially in regard to the status of pastors, had been accommodated. Baxter immediately persuaded his friends to accept the new arrangement, and was once again in the royal favour. He was pressed to accept a bishopric, but eventually refused.

Then, in 1661, followed the Savoy Conference, at which the details of an agreement, based on the king's declaration, were to have been worked out by the two opposing parties. The bishop of London began by asking the Presbyterians to state their proposals for revising the liturgy. Baxter was commissioned to draw up the desirable additions, whilst the others together would deal with those parts of the Prayer Book to which they took exception. Single-handed, without his library or his papers, and within a fortnight, Baxter compiled a new liturgy—a prodigious piece of work; his companions had not finished their part by the same time, so he turned to and helped them also!

But this was all wasted labour; the conference dragged on, becoming more and more a sounding-board for the expression of differing viewpoints rather than a melting-pot for their fusion. In the end the conference broke up, without having made any progress. And since the prelatical party had the ear of the king, the future looked dark for Baxter and his friends.

Their worst fears were realised with the passing of the Act of Uniformity. On St. Bartholomew's day, 1662, some two thousand ministers of the national Church, with their families, were ejected and silenced. Many suffered severally, and Baxter himself did not escape. In one case he and Dr. Bates had been asked to go to pray for the sick wife of a Hatton Garden merchant. For some reason they could not keep the appointment, but it turned out that two justices of the peace were there, together with the sergent-at-arms, waiting to arrest the two distinguished nonconformists for "attending a conventicle"! For the remainder of his life, Baxter remained a Dissenter, suffering in varying degrees under the Clarendon code and after; brought, near the close of his life, before the infamous Judge Jeffreys, who said of him, "This is an old rogue, and hath poisoned the world with his Kidderminster doctrines . . . an old schismatical knave, a hypocritical villain."

III

This survey of events in Baxter's life is a necessary background to a consideration of the principles by which his actions were governed. Here the prolific pen of Richard Baxter becomes in one sense his worst enemy. He wrote so much that it would take several years of concentrated study to master the full scope of his doctrine. I do not pretend to have given the subject anything like that degree of study; but have read quite widely in his works, and have also sought to take advantage of the several sources of distilled "essence of Baxter", including Orme, and, in recent years, Irvonwy Morgan, whose book on *The Nonconformity of Richard Baxter* is a very valuable summary of his life and teaching.

First of all, Baxter took care to define and emphasise the fact of the already-existing spiritual unity of the Church. At the beginning of his book, *The Catholic Church Described*, he defines a true member of the Church Universal in these words; they are worth noting carefully, for the context shows them to be Baxter's considered thoughts on this vital point.

Every man that doth heartily believe in God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, by a faith that worketh by love, is a true Christian. Or, every one that taketh God for his only God, that is, his Creator, Lord, Ruler and felicity, or end, and Jesus Christ for his only Redeemer, that is, God and man; who hath fulfilled all righteousness, and given Himself up to death on the cross in sacrifice for sins, and hath purchased and promised us pardon and grace, and everlasting life; and hath risen from the dead, ascended into Heaven, where He is Lord of the Church, and Intercessor with the Father, Whose laws we must obey, and Who will come again at the last to raise and judge the world, the righteous to everlasting life, the rest to everlasting punishment. And that taketh the Holy Ghost to his sanctifier, and believeth the Scriptures, given by His inspiration, and sealed by His work, to be the certain word of God. This man is a true Christian, and a member of the Catholic Church; which will be manifested when he adjoineth a holy, sober, and righteous life, using all known means and duties, especially baptism at the first, the Lord's Supper afterward, prayer, confession, praise, meditation, and hearing the word of God, with a desire to know more, that his obedience may be full; living under Christ's ministers, and in communion of saints, denying himself, mortifying the flesh and the world, living in charity and justice to man; he that doth this is a true Christian, and shall be saved, and therefore a member of the catholic Church as invisible . . .

In a particularly significant passage a few lines further on, he says:

He that hath all that is contained but in the ancient creed, the Lord's prayer, the Ten Commandments, with baptism and the Lord's Supper, in his head, and heart, and life, is certainly a member of the catholic church.

Concerning the scope of the church he is quite clear; he says:

My next address is to them that are solicitous to know which is the true church among all the parties in the world that pretend to it. Silly souls! They are hearkening to that party and to that party . . . to find the true universal church . . . You run up and down from room to room to find the house, and ask, Is the parlour it? or Is the hall it? or Is the kitchen? or the cookhouse? . . . Is it the protestants, the Calvinists, or the Lutherans, the Papists, the Greeks, the Aethiopians, or which is it? Why, it is never any one of these, but altogether that are truly Christians . . . why, you doating wretches, it is all Christians in the world, of what sort soever, that are truly so, that constitute the catholic church.

It is hardly necessary to add that Baxter further comments that just as some rooms in a house are more desirable than others, so between the differing sects there are degrees of superiority, some being nearer the ideal than others. But none are to arrogate to themselves the exclusive claim to be the church; the pretensions of Rome in this connection met with short shrift from Richard Baxter.

But Baxter does not attempt to solve this problem by merely elevating it to the realm of the "spiritual", and refusing to face concrete difficulties. He is careful to emphasise through all his writings that the master-key which will open all doors is *holiness*. In his address to the people, in the book entitled *Catholic Unity*, he puts it thus:

Still I say, unholiness is the great point of difference, and the dungeon of conversion, and puddle, where all the heresies of the world are blended and made into a body that is something worse than heresy. When you cry up unity, and cry down holiness, you are distracted, and know not what you say. You talk of joining us together, and you cast away the glue and solder. You talk of building the Church in unity, and you cast away the lime and mortar, the pins and nails, and all that should fasten them . . . Do you not yet know the Church's unity is a unity of the Spirit, and of Holiness?

By "holiness", it should be explained, Baxter does not mean some involved or complicated "new teaching"—which, tragically enough, we in our day have seen at work as a *divisive* factor in Christian fellowships; he means what we should rather call "godliness"—a comprehensive devotion to God and His truth based fairly and squarely on the main lines of New Testament teaching. Here is his own definition:

A godly man is one that . . . is converted to unfeigned faith and repentance, broken-hearted for his former sin and misery . . . having his heart set upon God and everlasting life, and contemning all the pleasures of the flesh and the things of this world . . . hating all known sin, and not wilfully living in any; and loving the highest degree of holiness, and willing to use the means that God hath appointed to destroy the remnants of sin, and bring him nearer to perfection; this is a truly godly man . . .

Keeping the need for true sanctification in mind, he states quite plainly the desirability of an outward expression of Christian unity. Thus, in expounding Romans xiv. 1, he sets down his first "doctrine" thus:

It is the will of God that the unity of the Church should not be laid upon indifferent, small, and doubtful points; but that true believers, who differ in such things, should notwithstanding have inward charity and outward communion with one another, not censuring, nor despising, nor dividing from each other on this account.

If we examine more closely his teaching on this unity, we shall find that he makes a careful distinction between the negative and the positive—the "things indifferent, small, and doubtful", as he calls them, and the things essential.

For Baxter, the "things indifferent" mean things not commanded as duties or forbidden as sins, but left as lawful by the Scriptures.

The "small" things are things "small in comparison of greater things"—so small that many are saved without them.

The "doubtful" things are such points as are certainly revealed but more darkly than the greater points, and therefore cannot be so clearly known.

As an example of his attitude on such matters, we may consider his comments on what was then the vexed question of the observance of Christmas. He says:

There are three opinions about these holy days.

(i) Some think the observance of them a necessary religious duty. (ii) Some think the very outward observance to be an intolerable sin. (iii) Some know that both these extremes are erroneous, and therefore they take the thing itself to be indifferent but as circumstances or accidents may make it good or evil; *and these are in the right.*

He points out that Scripture for tolerance (Rom. xiv. 14) is clear enough; that historical proof of the observance of these days is lacking. He goes on:

For my part, I dare not judge men for keeping or not keeping such days as these . . .

What of the positive? Here is a summary of the points on which he claimed true "Catholic Unity" could be based (characteristically, he added a practical application of each of these, which I omit).

(i) One God, Maker, Preserver, Redeemer.

(ii) God is man's only happiness; infinitely wise, good, and powerful.

(iii) Sin has involved man in the wrath of God, and Christ has redeemed us by His blood.

(iv) The Holy Ghost is the Sanctifier of God's elect. The new birth essential; holiness imperative.

(v) Holy Scripture is the Word of God, and of infallible truth; the rule of faith and life.

(vi) Reality of heaven's eternal bliss.

(vii) Reality of hell's endless torments.

(viii) The flesh is our enemy and must be mortified.

(ix) Sin is a most hateful thing, to be hated and forsaken.

(x) God's kingdom is to be sought above all else.

(xi) It is our duty to hear the word of God, to read and study it; and parents should teach it daily in their homes, praying with their families regularly.

If it is asked, "But what was the underlying authority for Baxter's statements?" there can be but one reply. It is already referred to in point (v) above, but we should do well to examine it more closely. References to this occur in several places in his writings, as he is naturally often compelled to refer to the foundation upon which his system was built.

We have referred above to Baxter's attitude to the question of observing Christmas Day. Towards the end of his comments he says, writing against those who would make its observance compulsory:

For this I have an argument that sustaineth my religion itself—even the sufficiency of Holy Scripture. If this be not the law of God, then farewell Christianity! If it be His law, it is sufficient in its kind and to its ends . . . [one of which is] to determine of all that the universal church in all times after must be bound to . . . If Scripture be not a sufficient rule for the universal duties of religion, then we are utterly at a loss; and as papacy will first come in, infidelity is likely to come next.

(This was a fair forecast of the consequences of the critical undermining of the authority of Scripture—the growth of ritualism and rationalism.)

Baxter deals more particularly with this matter in his *Christian Ecclesiastics*, where he answers the question, "How far are the Holy Scriptures a law and perfect rule unto us?" After making some general points, he goes on:

It perfectly containeth all the essential and integral parts of the Christian religion; so that nothing is . . . directly any part of the Christian religion which is not there.

And:

It instituteth the form of His Church universal, which is called His body; and also of particular societies for His worship [note this important distinction]; and prescribeth them certain duties as the common worship there to be performed.

Again:

it is the only law that is made by infallible wisdom, and the only law which is faultless.

Answering the question, "How much of Scripture is necessary to salvation, to be believed and understood?" Baxter comments:

He that believeth God to be true, and the Scripture to be His word, must needs believe all to be true which he believeth to be His word . . . It is not of necessity to salvation to believe every book or verse in Scripture to be canonical or written by the Spirit of God.

He refers to questions arising from differences in the MSS.

Baxter argued, against Dr. Owen, that a man can be saved apart from the Bible, referring to the early Church before it possessed the New Testament; but adds, elsewhere, "They that are ignorant of the being of Scripture have a great disadvantage to their faith." Clearly he regarded such as exceptional. He uses the same expression—"disadvantage"—when referring to those who accepted the substance of Scripture without its detail accuracy.

Baxter takes the matter one important stage further in answering the question, "Is the Scripture to be tried by the [Holy] Spirit, or the Spirit by the Scripture; and which of them is to be preferred?" (A question arising out of the teachings of some extremist Independent sects.) He answers:

(i) The Spirit, being God, is infinitely more excellent than the Scriptures, the work of God.

(ii) The operation of the Spirit in the apostles was more excellent than the operation of the same Spirit now in us; as producing more excellent effects, and more infallible [ones].

(iii) Therefore the Holy Scriptures, which were the infallible dictates of the Spirit in the apostles, are more perfect than any of our apprehensions which come by the same Spirit (which we have not in so great a measure).

(iv) Wherefore . . . we must try our apprehensions by the Scriptures.

He adds that the apostles, and not we, are called the "foundation of the Church".

In all fairness, however, we must observe that he did not go to unprofitable and divisive extremes in his view of Scriptural authority. He says that among those who give too much to Scripture are they that "feign it to be instead of all grammars,

logic, philosophy, and all other arts and sciences . . .” And, “they that say that the Scriptures are so divine, not only in matter, but in method and style, as there is nothing of human (inculpable) imperfection or weakness in them”. And we must not omit “those that Jewishly feign a multitude of unproved mysteries to lie in the letters, order, numbers, and proper names in the Scripture . . .”

In order to see how this emphasis on a true interpretation of Scripture worked out in detail, we may observe some of the things which, Baxter held, were not expressly forbidden, and which might therefore be permissible (though not enforceable as of universal validity). “Whether to pray in the same words often, or various”; “whether to use words of our own composing or invention primarily, or of other men’s . . .”; “to use a written or printed form, or neither”; to read it from the book, or to speak it from memory; “to baptise in a river, pool, well, or font”; “whether there shall be any deaconesses in the church”; “who shall be ordained ministers to preach, baptise, and gather churches”; “whether there shall be any music by instruments in the church or house, for the praises of God, and what”; “at what hour the church shall assemble on the Lord’s days, and receive the sacrament”; “where the Lord’s table shall stand”. Altogether he lists some ninety points of this kind, and then bursts into a prayer:

But, O Lord, have compassion on Thy scattered flocks, who are afflicted and divided by the imperiousness of those pastors who think it not enough for the exercise of their domination to promote all Thine holy laws and canons in all these cases . . . but they must make more work than all this cometh to, for themselves and for their flocks, even unto those distractions and dissipations and fierce persecutions and contentions, which many hundred years have exercised the Greek and Latin churches, and many more throughout the world!

Perhaps the best way in which we can bring into focus the basic principles of Church Unity which he developed from his acceptance of Scripture’s supreme authority, is by referring to his own repeated statement that the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments provided a ready-made touchstone. It is interesting to see how he viewed the relationship between these three. He divided the baptismal covenant into three: (i) things true as such—i.e. things to be known and believed intellectually; (ii) things good as such—i.e. things to be loved, chosen, desired and resolved, by the action of the will; (iii) things to be done as such—i.e. matters of practical living,

the fruits of our dedication to God. The Creed, he maintained, summarised (i); the Lord's Prayer, (ii); and the Ten Commandments, (iii). In his very beautiful *Self-analysis*, he says:

The Creed, the Lord's prayer and the Ten Commandments do find me now the most acceptable and plentiful matter for all my meditations . . . And thus I observed it was with old Bishop Usher, and with many other men.

Again, in discussing the means by which the Churches might be healed and united, he says:

That those churches be accounted tolerable [i.e. granted toleration by the authorities] who profess all that is in the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and Decalogue in particular, and generally all that they shall find to be revealed in the Word of God; and hold communion in teaching, prayer, praises and the two sacraments. . . .

He proposed the same three elements to a conference called by Cromwell to offer him guidance on the question of which Churches to tolerate, and which to suppress.

All that we have said above serves to illustrate how he himself worked to the famous principle of which he was so fond: "In things necessary—unity; in things indifferent—liberty; in all things—charity." Some of the "things indifferent" I have quoted from his own list. The "necessary" things included all those about which Scripture gives definite teaching; and, in addition, Baxter would not allow that anything should be transferred from the category "indifferent" to that of "essential". It was this, more than anything else, which provoked his break with the prelatical party in the Established Church. He would not assert that Laudian prelacy was entirely unlawful; but he would not submit to a system which declared it to be universal and compulsory. He would not have the magistrate (whose function was necessary to the Church) forbid the assembly of any who conformed to the triple test of Creed, Lord's Prayer, and Decalogue; but it was he who spoke up at the Savoy Conference when the king wished to declare for liberty for all and sundry. "In all things—charity" did not mean, for Richard Baxter, "In all things—indifference to basic and vital principles."

IV

With this more general comment, we may now pass on to consider the particular relevance of Richard Baxter to the movement for Christian Unity which culminated in the 1948 Amsterdam Assembly and the formation of the World Council of

Churches. What lessons can we learn from Baxter's teaching and experience as we face this new manifestation of the desire for Christian Unity?

First of all, we may note that he would have queried some of the assertions of those who tell us that unless the churches unite, they cannot possibly hope to impress or win the unbelieving world. It is sometimes suggested that the presentation of a "united front" is an essential prelude to any widespread movement of revival. Baxter's reply to such suggestions would surely be as precise and pointed as it was when he wrote his book, *Catholic Unity, or: The Only Way to Bring Us All to be of One Religion (To be Read by All Who Are Offended at the Differences in Religion and are Willing to Do Their Part to Heal Them)*. This book, with its strangely up-to-date title, turns out to be in the main a polemic directed against the unconverted! Baxter's thesis is, "Before you begin worrying about the divisions in the Church, you must make certain that you have settled the matter of the great gulf caused by sin between you and your Maker". As an example of his approach, we may take the following quotation:

In this parish where I live, we have not several congregations, nor are we divided into such parties as in many other places; but we have the great division: some are for heaven, and some are for earth; some love a holy, diligent life, and others hate it; some pray in their families and teach them the word and fear of God, and some do not . . . ; some hate sin, and make it their daily work to root out the relics of it from their hearts and lives; and others love it and will not leave it, but hate those that reprove them and endeavour their salvation.

Then, later:

We must conclude then that it is the ungodly that are the wilful and obstinate dividers. They might be united to Christ, and reconciled to God, and they will not . . . It is themselves that are the refusers and continue the division, to the displeasing of God, and the grief of their friends, and the gratifying of Satan, and the perdition of their immortal souls.

To this "great gulf" Baxter returns again and again, so that his book on Church Unity is really another "Call to the Unconverted"! Men, he sees, will cling stubbornly to sin, no matter what manœuvres take place within the ranks of organised religion; an excuse will always be found—and the disunity of the churches is but one such excuse.

And yet it is only fair to point out that he felt the divisions in the Church to be a very serious stumbling-block and hindrance to the cause of truth. He says in one place:

Ask any compassionate Christian, ask any insulting enemy, whether our divisions be not our deformity and shame; the lamentations of friends and the scorn of enemies . . . Thus also our divisions lamentably hinder the progress of the Gospel, and the conversion and salvation of the ungodly world: they think they have small encouragement to be of your religion, while your divisions seem to tell them that you know not what religion to be of yourselves.

And again,

Where hath the Church been destroyed, or religion rooted out, in any nation of the earth, but divisions had a principal hand in it?

Altogether he sets out ten different ways in which disunity hinders and weakens the life and progress of the Church, and twelve aspects of the sinfulness of those who promote or excuse it.

Having said the above we might be tempted to add that there is no other point at which the record of Richard Baxter's work touches on the modern Oecumenical movement. The position is so very different to-day; strong denominations exist where in Baxter's day there were but ill-defined, embryonic, tentative groupings. Again, Baxter was concerned solely with this country, whereas the Oecumenical movement is world-wide. Or again, Baxter's intolerance—he would not agree to freedom of worship for Roman Catholics or Unitarians—obviously cuts him off from those latter-day Christian leaders who embrace one of these and cast wistful glances at the other. But such a judgment would be shallow—and, moreover, it would rob us of some fruitful ideas which derive directly from Baxter's work.

There is little doubt also that Baxter, looking at the modern scene, would be tempted to say, "I told them so!—and *now* see how the differences which we might have settled have become magnified and dispersed to the far corners of the earth; if only reason and charity had prevailed in 1660, how much simpler would have been the task of those seeking unity in 1950!" How he would grieve over the extension of denominational differences to every land! But such speculations as "If only so-and-so . . ." do not really help us to handle the concrete situations of the modern world, interesting as they may be.

Of course, it is impossible to declare with certainty, "This is what Richard Baxter would have said had he been alive to-day." Like us all, Baxter was a child of his own generation, moulded and influenced by the mental and spiritual climate of his day. Anything we suggest must therefore be put forth with some definite qualifications of this kind. However, the following are possible ways of learning from Baxter's experiences:

The underlying problem of Church Reunion is that of judging how far unity is the supreme thing. Always there is the question, How far can concessions be given? And what are the essential principles to which we must hold, even at the price of perpetuating division? In other words, Which is the greater wrong, yielding on a point of principle, or continuing a separation from those with whom you disagree? Is disunity *always a sin*?

To such a question, Baxter would surely have given as his answer an uncompromising "No!" The man who broke up the Savoy Conference by opposing liberty for Roman Catholics and Socinians, and who for some time contemplated voluntary exile in the American colonies, would hardly be found yielding up principles for the sake of compromise. Yet who, knowing his character and life, could accuse him of not caring for unity? And before anyone concludes that he can quote Richard Baxter in support of his own particular sectarianism or isolationism, he should study carefully all that Baxter had to say on this important subject.

On particular points I would, very diffidently, offer the following suggestions:

(i) He would hardly have been content with a movement for unity which had as its doctrinal basis: "We acknowledge Jesus Christ as God and Saviour." When we remember his absolute minimum of the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, we must confess that the modern equivalent sounds disappointingly thin. After all, we must remember that to the men of his own day, his "absolute minimum" was very unsatisfactory, and it was charged against him that Roman Catholics and Socinians would subscribe to his suggested basis. His reply to this brings us to the next point.

(ii) He would certainly have baulked at the declaration which the World Council of Churches adds to its basis of faith: "(a) The foundation is not a touchstone whereby the faith of the Churches can be judged. (b) The World Council does not concern itself with the manner in which the Churches will interpret the foundation. (c) That it is left to the responsibility of every Church to decide whether it will co-operate on this basis."

We can be quite dogmatic about Baxter's attitude on this matter; for we note what he said to those who objected that Papists and Socinians could subscribe to his threefold basis. Here are his own words:

I answered them, "So much the better, and so much the fitter it is to be the matter of our concord. But if you are afraid of communion with Papists and Socinians, it must not be avoided by making a new rule or test of faith that they will not subscribe to, or by forcing others to subscribe to more than they can do; but by *calling them to account* whenever in preaching or writing they contradict or abuse the truth to which they have subscribed. This is the work of government. . . ."

This is obviously at the opposite pole to its modern counterpart; and Baxter's view is worthy of careful attention. "Establish your absolute minimum," he seems to say, "with no other consideration than that of defining basic Christian truth correctly. Accept all who will subscribe to that minimum, and deal with offences by disciplinary action." But since Baxter always had in mind that the power of princes and of magistrates was the ultimate sanction, and should enforce order in things spiritual, it is difficult to see how this could be worked out to-day, especially in "missionary" areas.

(iii) A further point concerns the wistful Romeward glances which some leaders of the Oecumenical movement seem to be making. So far as Baxter was concerned, the Roman Catholic system was corrupt and full of error; individual Catholics, he said, might well be true Christians, but the institution as a whole was rotten. His view can be summed up in one neat sentence: "I abhor that religion that is less than sixteen hundred years of age, and therefore I cannot be a Papist."

(iv) But I cannot help feeling that Baxter's most important rôle in the present-day movements towards Church Unity would be that of a searching, probing critic, who would cut through verbiage and declare the real conditions. He would ruthlessly expose the false pretensions of some, and would check the over-eager enthusiasms of others who would go too far. I can imagine him agreeing heartily with this sentence from the official statement of the Amsterdam Conference: "Our Churches are too much dominated by ecclesiastic officialdom, clerical or lay, instead of giving vigorous expression to the full rights of the living congregation and the sharing of clergy and people in the common life in the body of Christ . . . there is no gain in unity unless it is unity in truth and holiness." But he would surely not have spoken of the "rights" of the living congregation without referring to their duties also!

And he would hardly have been content with a review of the "Universal Church in God's Design" which made no mention

at all of discipline in the Church. Nor would he have been surprised that the delegates to Amsterdam quickly discovered that the great division, underlying most of the other points of difference, was that between the traditions known as "Catholic" and "Protestant" respectively. He himself eventually had to confess defeat before that same wide gulf.

Probably the best way of bringing this article to a close is to summarise his "Directions for the Union and Communion of Saints, and the Avoidance of Schism", contained in chapters of his *Christian Ecclesiastics*. The directions are these:

(i) "Understand first wherein the unity of Christians and churches doth consist"—i.e. the covenant relationship between the believer and the Lord, with its subordinate relationships between individual believers in the local community.

(ii) "Understand also wherein the communion of churches and Christians doth consist; that you may know what it is that you must hold to." This is both "internal"—between the believer and Christ—and external—sembling together, and so on. Baxter stresses here that communion with other churches is not the same thing as subjection to them—a blow at Romish pretensions.

(iii) "Understand how far you are bound to communion with other Christians, and what division is sin . . ." Baxter lists thirteen necessary points of agreement, and ten permissible points of difference. He traces out the successive grades of sinful division, and at the head of them all he places the Romish attitude. He mentions that there is a "pardonable infirmity, consistent with integrity and the favour of God" when an individual mistakenly, but without bitterness, withdraws from a particular church for conscientious reasons. He also details certain cases where separation is a duty and not a sin—as where a church apostatizes and forsakes the faith, or makes no visible profession of faith and holiness. Altogether he lists twenty-one examples of such permissible separation. He would hardly accept the suggestion made in the new scheme for church union in Ceylon, that the fact of separation makes all ministries imperfect and limited in authority.

(iv) "Understand the reasons why Christ so frequently and earnestly pressed concord on the Church, and . . . how much the Scripture speaketh to this purpose." He comments, in one place, "If all Christians were reduced to a holy concord, it

would do more to win the heathen than all other means can do without it ”.

(v) “ Own not any which is an enemy to love; and pretend neither truth nor holiness, nor unity, nor anything against it.” “ The decays of love are the Church’s dissolution.” This argument he uses against both Roman Catholics and *Quakers*!

(vi) “ Make nothing necessary to the unity of the Church . . . which God hath not made necessary . . . ”

(vii) “ Pray against the usurpations or intrusions of impious, carnal, ambitious, covetous pastors into the churches of Christ.”

(viii) “ In a special manner, take heed of pride.”

(ix) Beware of narrowness of mind or outlook.

(x) Do not apply the command, “ Be separate ”, to the visible church as you do to the world. You read of many corruptions in the New Testament churches, but no command to separate from them.

(xi) Distinguishes between a minister’s personal faults and his ministerial faults.

(xvi) “ Judge not of doctrines and worship by persons, but rather of persons by their doctrine and worship.”

(xxi) “ Look more with an eye of charity on what is good in others and their worship of God, than with an eye of malice to carp at what appeareth evil.”

(xxii) Take trouble to talk with those from whom you differ; do not be content with second-hand opinions of them.

(xxiii) Keep the church out of “ civil ” (i.e. political) differences.

And Baxter adds a footnote: “ Beware lest your very zeal for unity provoke further divisions! ”

None of those concerned with the modern movement for Church Unity could fail to gain from a careful study of Baxter’s ideas and experiences. Here is unique mine of truth—theoretical and practical. Baxter stands for all that is best in Evangelical Christianity—and not least in his burning passion for the unity of all God’s true children by faith in Christ Jesus.

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