

RICHARD BAXTER OF KIDDERMINSTER

(Lecture given by Pastor G. R. Burrows at Ebenezer Chapel Old Hill 1999)

1. It is appropriate that we speak this afternoon on the life of Richard Baxter, first of all and quite naturally because of his local interest. We know that he was a Shropshire man, born in Rowton, High Ercal, Shropshire in 1615. He was educated at various places - Ludlow Castle, Eton Constantine, Donnington and Great Wroxeter.

In 1638 he was appointed Headmaster of the newly opened Richard Foley School, better known locally as Dudley Grammar School. In that same year 1638, he was ordained at Worcester by Bishop Thornborough, and preached his first sermon at Dudley Upper Church, better known to us as 'Top Church', Dudley. He remained there for about a year from which he then removed to take up the position of curate at St Leonard's Church in Bridgnorth. In 1640 he began his ministry at Kidderminster for which he is so well known and to which we shall look shortly. After about 15 months at Kidderminster he was interrupted by the outbreak of the Civil War. He spent some time in Cromwell's Model Army as a chaplain and then returned to Kidderminster to spend 14 years memorable ministry in that place.

2. Secondly, we may consider him this afternoon because he was a man who was much given to self examination and reflection. Towards the end of his life he wrote in his autobiography a criticism of his own life - his strong points, his weak points, his strengths, his failures. The things that he wished he had done and the things he wished he had not done and so on; he was much given to reflection. We that stand here on the borders of the new millennium, might learn from this that it is good for us to reflect and consider our ways and to ask what we should be doing and what we should not be doing.

3. Thirdly we turn to him this afternoon, because he is a man who in a remarkable way focuses our attention on the chief issues. You could say that Richard Baxter was born in that period which gave birth to what we call the modern world and many of the issues with which he wrestled in his own life are still very relevant issues today.

Richard Baxter was ever concerned with the chief doctrines, the fundamentals of the faith, the chief business and work of the minister or a church. You know that he was much given to evangelism, a great pastor and in a very remarkable way this man focuses our attention on the main points, the main issues.

So with these thoughts in mind I want us to begin to think about this outstanding

individual Richard Baxter.

Richard Baxter was a very complex man, one has said of him that *'he was a big man, big enough to have big faults and make big errors,'* and yet of course of tremendous warm heart and tremendous strengths. He has been described as the *'Saint of the Puritans'*.

I want us to begin by giving a brief outline of his life in general, then to think of his great pastoral work at Kidderminster, to think briefly about his doctrines (and some of his doctrines we won't agree with) and then to sum up with some of his strengths and weaknesses, and lessons that we can learn from him.

Now I have already told you something about his beginnings. He was born actually on 12th November, on a Sunday in 1615 in Rowton, Shropshire. Richard Baxter's father was a member of the Shropshire gentry and much given to gambling in his early life gambling away his inheritance, but just before Richard's birth was wonderfully converted. Those who describe Richard Baxter in early life often describe him as *'a pious child'*, though one adds *'during his boyhood he became addicted to the sins of disobedience to parents, lying, stealing fruit etc., sins which afterwards greatly troubled his conscience and which he found great difficulty in mastering.'*

Whilst at school at Ludlow he himself was tempted to follow his father's gambling addiction. A remarkable thing happened to him during his first game of dice. During the first game he ever played in his life he played with the best gambler in the castle. It was soon perceived that he must lose the game unless he obtained one particular cast of the dice each time in succession. The dice gave that particular cast each time and he won the game. His astonishing success induced him to believe that the devil had managed the dice with the purpose of making a gamester of him and he thereby renounced gambling and never came back to it ever again in his whole life.

It was also at that same time that a very close friend of his fell backwards in the faith, in fact became apostate. This greatly troubled the young Richard Baxter. I may say then at the beginning, that his early life was full of discouragements in the things of God. He was born in a part of Shropshire where there were very few true believers, and in a part of Shropshire where the general Anglican parish clergy were extremely negligent in their duties and responsibilities. It was a place where James I's famous *Book of Sports* was well regarded. The Book of Sports taught that as long as a man went to church once on the Sabbath Day it was quite in order for him to play sports/pastimes for the rest of the day, because it kept men out of trouble, and fit for military service and that it was therefore the best way of spending the Sabbath. Such

was generally the attitude of the clergy who were often also ignorant in spiritual matters, and seldom preached. In fact it was said of Richard Baxter's own tutor at this time that he was a notorious drunkard who had been a lawyer's clerk and who held his curacy under forged orders. This was the sort of climate in which Richard Baxter spent his earliest years.

In spite of this, at the age of 15, he came under deep conviction of sin and the Lord graciously granted him the gift of faith and he became a true believer. Instrumental in his conversion and which would seem almost to be the only instruments the Lord used in his conversion were two books. One (never heard of these days) was called '*Bunny's Resolution*', the other was Sibbes' '*Bruised Reed*'. I think the latter is still in print. It was a book that his father had bought 25 years earlier from a door-to-door peddler and it had lain in the house all that time and then was used of God in the conversion of Richard Baxter, so we never know the lasting usefulness of books.

In his teenage years he began to see himself as a dying man. You know his famous saying that '*he preached as dying man to dying men*'. When he was only 18 years of age one of his tutors died and he himself was faced with this sudden death and at the same time the responsibility of the school suddenly and unexpectedly fell upon his shoulders. Shortly after that he discovered that he was ill and was showing all the signs and symptoms of consumption. He didn't have it, but he was extremely ill for a period of about two years.

During that time he was given to great seriousness and reflection upon the after life. He read a book by Ezekiel Culverwell called the '*Treatise of Faith*' which was about the subject of heaven and it is recorded that in the twilight of each day during this period of illness when it was impossible for him to read, he would reflect upon the glories of heaven. Later on he was to write that great book '*The Saints' Everlasting Rest*'. But it was through this period of illness that it would seem that God prepared him for this work. He recovered and began to study theology, believing that God was calling him into the ministry. He plunged into what we call the '*mediaeval scholastics*' - Anselm, Aquinas and Duns Scotus. On one occasion these great tomes that were balanced on a shelf or several shelves, collapsed and fell on Richard Baxter. He was later to remark, '*it was a wonder they didn't beat my brains out!*'

Later on in his teens he set out on a brief but ill rewarded venture to try his fortunes at the court of King Charles I. He was sickened by the atmosphere of the court and soon returned to Shropshire on hearing of the illness of his mother. He later wrote of how glad he was to be back. His mother died some months afterwards, in 1634, and it was at this time that he records, he first began to make acquaintance with some of the zealous, godly non-conformists in Shrewsbury and the adjoining parts. He met

some of the great Puritans, in other words. He mentions some of their names... Richard Simmonds, Walter Craddock and others and he says that he was favourably impressed and found that the popular prejudice against these men was greatly unfounded. Remember, Baxter was a member of the established church at this point. However at this time also he was being pressed to submit himself for ordination in the established church. He says, *'with considerable ignorance and some suppressed scruples about certain beliefs and practices to which he was now being called to declare his unfeigned assent'*. He nevertheless presented himself to the Bishop of Worcester as a candidate for Deacons Orders in the Church of England and was ordained on 23rd December 1638, receiving the Bishops Licence to teach, school and preach.

It is at this point he came to Dudley and became the Headmaster of Dudley Grammar School and preached his first sermon in Dudley Top Church. Later on he was to leave Dudley and move to St Leonards in Bridgnorth. He made these interesting remarks about the people of Dudley and of Bridgnorth at the time; He said of the people of Dudley; *'a poor tractable people lately famous for drunkenness but commonly more ready to hear the Word of God with submission and reformation than most places.'* So we may gather that he warmed towards the people of Dudley and they towards him. To the people of Bridgnorth he had these words to say, or this description to give, *'A very ignorant dead-hearted people; the town consisting too much of inns and alehouses and having no general trade to employ the inhabitants in which is the undoing of our great towns'*. Well perhaps he wished he had not moved from Dudley to Bridgnorth but that was the situation!

Now at this time we see him becoming increasingly moved towards the non-conformist position. He felt that he could not conscientiously agree to making the sign of the cross in baptism, could not wear the surplice and he could not agree to everything in the Book of Common Prayer, and was slowly aligning himself to the Puritan position. As is well known, after Bridgnorth he moved to Kidderminster and by this time there had come about a great change in the country. These were now the days of Cromwell and the days of the Long Parliament. In 1640 the Long Parliament set out to remove many of the disorders which were in parish churches at that time. Perhaps rather rashly they wrote to the various parishes of the land inviting the parishioners to put forward their grievances and complaints in respect to the ministry at the time. A very bold and brave, perhaps not particularly wise thing to do but they did it, and many replies of course came back. Complaints came in about the Vicar of Kidderminster, the Reverend George Dance. He had been there for almost 20 years. Baxter, who was always a very kind man in his descriptions of others, nevertheless described Rev. Dance like this, *'He is utterly insufficient for the ministry, he was presented by a papist, is unlearned, preached but once a quarter which was*

so weakly that it exposed him to laughter'. He frequented alehouses and had sometimes been known to be drunk. Rather amusingly another note has been added regarding the Rev Dance to the effect his wife was so embarrassed by his preaching, that when he did preach she refused to attend the church. It was into this position that Richard Baxter went in 1640.

After 15 months in Kidderminster his ministry was interrupted by the outbreak of the Civil War and he was advised to leave Kidderminster when a mob beset him and accused him of being a traitor. He was far from being a traitor as we shall see, but for his own safety and well being he left the town.

He attached himself to Cromwell's Model Army and was in Coventry when Cromwell fought the Battle of Naseby. Two days after the battle he visited the scene and spent his first night in the Parliamentary camp amongst the soldiers. He was with that same army in Bristol, Worcester, Leicestershire, Staffordshire, Derbyshire and Cheshire and maybe other places as well. He travelled quite extensively with the army but during his time in Derbyshire near Ashby-de-la-Zouch, amidst the cold and snow of winter, he fell again seriously ill and he describes this illness as being so serious that the *'Physician has sentenced me to death'*. He was very seriously ill indeed. This was about 1650, but during this illness he was to write the great work *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*. He wrote it with no aids about him, save his Bible and his concordance (one of the great classics of our Christian heritage and library).

We may further remark, we have already said that he was a complex character; here we may note another aspect of that complexity. Though he was a chaplain in Cromwell's Model Army, he was at heart a Royalist. That seems a strange contradiction. Whilst he was at Coventry he declared his allegiance to the Parliamentary cause but at sometime after that he said he was sorry that he had done so and wrote an apology with 32 points, giving reasons why he felt he had done the wrong thing. He gave as his reason for putting himself forward as a chaplain in that army, his fear of the rise of religious sects (Baptists and Independents and such like!). So we may note that he was concerned about these things. He was concerned for unity within the church.

Eventually after the Civil War he returned to Kidderminster and began really at that point, his great life's work. I should also perhaps say, and this is another strange contradiction, his heart never warmed towards Oliver Cromwell. Personally, I think Cromwell was one of our greatest men, our *Chief of Men*, but Baxter never got on with him. However, Baxter gave Cromwell this tribute; He said this, *'I perceived that it was his design to do good in the main and promote the Gospel and the interests of godliness*

more than any had done in this land before him'. Now that is a great tribute for one who at heart did not get on with him. Later he was to confess that *'under Cromwell I have liberty, but under Charles II, I only have liberty to write'*. So that was the situation.

Now in 1648 Oliver Cromwell died and was succeeded by his son Richard Cromwell, but to the shame of many who should have supported Richard Cromwell at that time, they did not, and it was soon seen that he could not govern the land. There were moves afoot to re-establish the monarchy and to call Charles II back from exile in France. Incidentally, the French Protestants assured the English Protestants that Charles II was favourable to their cause and there would be no danger in recalling him back to these shores. History was to show how wrong they were.

On 12th April 1660 Baxter left Kidderminster to engage in talks with the purpose of bringing Charles II back to England. Time is really against me, but I ought really to read this comment. *'Baxter was torn between loyalty to the throne and misgivings for the future. He was in favour of the King's return but not without anxiety as to the King himself. He was clear-eyed, and quite deliberate in his support for the restoration of the monarchy, though he plainly foresaw what it would mean. We all look to be silenced and some or many of us imprisoned or banished but yet will do our part to restore the King because no foreseen consequence must hinder us from our duty'*. So whilst he favoured the King's return he could see what was going to happen.

Shortly after that of course, came 1662 and the great ejection when 2000 non-conformist ministers were put out from their pulpits on St Bartholomew's Day, 'Black Bartholomew's Day', as it came to be called. Baxter himself suffered two periods of imprisonment after that time, in 1669 and later on. He himself suffered under the notorious Judge Jefferies. Well, that is a very brief outline of his life but I want to spend just some time talking about his pastoral work in Kidderminster which was outstanding.

His achievements in Kidderminster as a pastor are really incomparable. George Whitfield visited Kidderminster 83 years after the time Baxter was there, in 1743, and he wrote in his diary. *'I was greatly refreshed to find what a sweet savour of good Mr Baxter's doctrine, works and discipline remain to this day'*. Here was a lasting testimony to the great and enduring work done against the backcloth of continued ill health. Baxter was never a well man. It is very interesting and amusing to read the remedies that he took to try to alleviate himself of some of his troubles. It is a wonder that he didn't kill himself! One remedy that someone advised was this, that he swallow a gold bullet of 20 to 30 shillings weight ... which he did, and it nearly did kill him! He was also advised on one occasion to take a concoction or potion taken from mould

extracted from a human skull. That is the sort of thing he was taking, so it is a wonder he managed to survive at all. In spite of his illnesses and in spite of his potions and remedies he was able to toil incessantly, the Lord giving him strength for his labours.

It is recorded that it was his pattern to preach twice each Sunday before the Civil War but only once each Sunday in his Kidderminster ministry after the Civil War. I don't know why, maybe someone else, probably his curate, took the other sermon. He also preached every Thursday, preaching for about an hour each time. Two days, (and this is one of the things that is most notable about Baxter), two days every week were given to the visiting of his parishioners. He shared this work with his curate. He mapped out his parish and each week together they covered about 14 families. It seems to be, that the assistant went to the homes of the various people and took them through the points of the catechism and questioned them on the points of the Sunday and Thursday sermon. Those who had the privilege of being interviewed by Baxter, were interviewed in his own house.

I am going to tell you something about his weekly work schedule in a moment, but to note here something about his practice in preaching. I told you that he was a man who thought about the essentials. This is what he said about his preaching pattern.

'The thing which I daily open to them and with greatest importunity labour to imprint upon their minds was the great fundamental principle of Christianity. Even a right knowledge and belief of, and subjection to, and love to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost, and love to all men and concord with the church and one another. The opening of the true and profitable method of the creed, the Lord's Prayer, and Ten Commandments which afforded matter to add to the knowledge of most professors of religion. These things take a long time', he said, 'and when that is done they must be led on, but not so as to leave the weak behind and so as to be truly subservient to the great points of faith, hope and love, holiness and unity which must be still always consistently inculcated at the beginning and end of all.'

This was his pattern, to teach the people and lay before them the fundamentals of faith.

Next I would like to describe to you the typical weekly programme Richard Baxter tried to follow. I hardly have time to tell you much about this.

I have mentioned that Monday and Tuesday were given to visits and interviews with the families. He preached every Thursday morning. After that preaching time a company of several godly ministers would spend the afternoon with him in, as he said, the truest recreation, which is further study and prayer. Every Thursday

evening he had neighbours to meet him in his own house. On these occasions one of them repeated the leading thoughts of the sermon that had been preached in the morning. Others asked their questions, others brought cases of conscience. The meetings concluded by one or more closing in extemporary prayer. Once a week he had meetings for the young people, again spending hours in prayer with his young people. Other times in the week he met with other ministers. On the first Wednesday of every month he held a meeting for parish discipline.

Here is an amusing incident... One or two of the people in Kidderminster closed their doors to his visits and this is how he resolved it. In some streets he found some families so obdurate that they refused him admission and the door was continually closed as long as he was known to be in the neighbourhood. In such cases, his practice was on another day, not the day they expected him to visit, to enter some friendly house which commanded a view of the door that had been closed against him and then watch to see if the door would open or left ajar and whenever he saw a door partly open he would seize the opportunity to enter the house and have religious conversation with the inhabitants. So you see the determination of this man!

Now, of course this ministry met with great success, his congregation increased and became so numerous that five galleries were built in the Parish Church of Kidderminster and great congregations gathered. It was said that there was no disorder in the town during all the time of his ministry. Zeal and knowledge of the things of God increased. At that time he also managed to be the doctor of the town and often at certain hours of the day great companies of sick and ailing people would gather at his door. I don't suppose he prescribed them any of the remedies he took himself, but he was the town doctor!

He was extremely generous, giving away pounds upon pounds upon pounds. This is the briefest insight into Baxter's practical ministry at Kidderminster.

I have got about 5 minutes left and I had wanted to say something about Richard Baxter's theology.

If we have any criticisms of Richard Baxter or any questions or doubts about him, it is in the realm of his theology. Now it is very hard to describe, especially in a couple of minutes the theology of Richard Baxter!

In the 1690s when people wanted to describe what Richard Baxter believed they had to come up with a completely new word and they called his beliefs 'Baxterianism' which was the only way they could describe it. Another word that was used was this, 'neo-nominism'. Now how can I describe this?

In a book that Baxter wrote called, *The Aphorisms of Justification*, he said, and here is the error,

'To affirm therefore that our evangelical or new covenant righteousness is in Christ and not in ourselves, or performed by Christ and not by ourselves is such a piece of antinomian doctrine that no man who knows the nature and difference of the covenant can possibly entertain, and which every Christian should abhor as insufferable'.

It is hard to take in in a second I know, but remember this... our Reformers describe justification by faith in these terms. They say that to be justified in the sight of God was to be declared or counted or considered righteous in the sight of God. It was a judicial or legal pronouncement, because of what Christ had wrought for us on the cross, we are seen in legal terms, as counted as righteous in the sight of God.

Now the Roman Catholic position on this is different. The Roman Catholics say that justification means not to *declare* righteous but to *make* righteous. In other words, the Roman Catholics put together justification and sanctification. Baxter's error in the first instance is to come dangerously close to the Roman Catholic position in this matter. Also we may remind ourselves that Baxter embraced the ideas of what we now call Amyraldianism and this position is in some ways similar to Arminianism. The Arminians believe that faith is the ground of our justification, and that our faith is that thing which God sees and accepts for our righteousness; Richard Baxter comes very close to accepting this idea. Baxter's view certainly was that faith is the ground of our acceptance with Christ. Now you may say that is right, but it is not. Faith is the channel by which we receive the justification of God. The ground of our justification is Christ's great work on Calvary. Faith is the channel or the hand that is stretched out to receive that great gift. Faith is not the ground but the channel.

By neo-nomianism Richard Baxter meant 'new law' and he meant that faith was the 'new law' and that if we obeyed by faith it was equivalent to obeying the Law of God and hence being able to receive God's mercy. So Richard Baxter's position at this point is to be criticised.

I intended to go into the reasons why he took this position but time has gone and so I am just going to close by taking up some of the points I think we ought to learn from Richard Baxter's life.

First of all, his emphasis on teaching. There are three rules for success in the ministry. Three things to be emphasised above all others. They are these: *'To teach the people, and to teach the people and to teach the people'*. He was most concerned that the people in the congregation knew what they believed, and that they were rooted and

grounded in the great fundamentals of their faith. Certainly this is a lesson for today when so many false teachings are put forward, that we know what we believe.

The second emphasis was holiness of life. He believed that we should be what we profess we are. There should be a profession of faith and it should be matched with holiness of life. We should be what we profess to be.

Thirdly, Baxter's emphasis was on evangelism. He preached, '*as a dying man to dying men.*' Read his sermons and you will see that they are really heart-melting. Great is his desire, his concern is for the lost. His book, *The Reformed Pastor* is a challenge to ministers and churches to make the Gospel known, and that is surely a great message for us today. He wanted to know the spiritual state of his people. He emphasised the Word of God as the supreme authority in all matters of faith and practice.

He had a high view of the ministerial office.

He knew what it was to suffer for the faith. At one time his treasured library had to be sold to make ends meet. His goods were confiscated; he was even turned out of the very bed he laid sick upon. He spent two periods in prison.

There were those things that we could criticise in his life. He had an argumentative spirit in some respects. He wanted unity but sometimes the way that he argued for it stirred up strife. But we admire his call to the essentials.

We are wary of some of his doctrinal deviations.

We long for his pastoral heart.

We want that concern for the lost that he had and we would seek to emulate his selfless life.

He died on 8th December 1691, passing into the 'saint's everlasting rest' he had longed for, for such a large portion of his difficult life.

I will close with the words of his well-known hymn:

Lord, it belongs not to my care,
Whether I die or live;
To love and serve Thee is my share,
And this thy grace must give.

If life be long, I will be glad
That I may long obey;
If short, yet why should I be sad
To soar to endless day?

Christ leads me through no darker rooms
Than He went through before;
He that into God's Kingdom comes
Must enter by this door.

Come, Lord, when grace has made me meet
Thy blessèd face to see;
For if Thy work on earth be sweet
What will thy glory be?