

Richard Baxter; 1615-1691. *I preached, as never sure to preach again, And as a dying man to dying men.* Those words from Baxter sum up the essence of Puritan preaching. Baxter was born near Shrewsbury, Shropshire; an only son. His Father in debt and gambled, mother in poor health; he lived with maternal grandparents until 10 years old. His Father converted through privately reading Scriptures, so Richard came home. 'It pleased God,' writes Baxter, 'to instruct and change my father, by the bare reading of the Scriptures in private, without either preaching or godly company, or any other books but the Bible.'¹ He said that God used his father's serious talks about God and eternity as 'the instrument of my first convictions and Approbation of a Holy Life'. Baxter's school education consisted of four ignorant teachers in six years; two of them immoral. Fortunately he had an inquisitive mind with reading and study as his interests. Long periods of illness gave time for reading, particularly the works of **William Perkins** (1558-1602). He was also deeply moved by **Richard Sibbes'** (1577-1635) volume; *The Bruised Reed*; based on Isaiah 42: 3 and repeated in Matthew 12: 20: *a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.* Baxter recorded; 'Sibbes opened more the love of God to me and gave me a livelier apprehension of the mystery of redemption and how much I was beholden to Jesus Christ'. He could not put a date on his conversion. Baxter then had opportunity to attend Wroxeter grammar school and became not only a preacher and pastor but the author of some ten million words; 'the most voluminous English theologian of all time,' according to J I Packer. His best-known writings include; *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, plus the classic; *The Reformed Pastor*. Baxter's historical setting is in 17th century Puritanism.

1: 17th Century: Monarchs; Queen Elizabeth 1, died 1603, James VI Scotland & James 1 – 1625; **AV Bible 1611**; Charles 1, 1649 beheaded; Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell, 1653 - 58; Charles 11, 1660 – 1685; James 11 – 1685 - 88, deposed in the Glorious Revolution, last Roman Catholic Monarch of England, Scotland and Ireland. His 15-year-old Protestant daughter Mary 11 married William of Orange, [known in Northern Ireland & Scotland as 'King Billy']; invited to take English throne, installed 1689. Battle of Boyne 1690. James defeated, exiled to France protected by Louis XIV. **Composers:** Corelli, B, 1653; Pachelbel; 1653; Purcell, 1659; Vivaldi, 1678; Telemann, 1681; J S Bach, 1685; Scarlatti, 1685; **Plymouth Colony**, 1620; 1614-1648, Central Europe Thirty Years War [8 million deaths]; 1631, Mount Vesuvius. 1666, Great fire of

¹ John Legg, *The Footsteps of God*, Evangelical Press, 1986, 202

London. John Owen (1616-1683), Richard Sibbes; d. 1635, John Bunyan; 1628 - 1688, Matthew Henry, 1662 - 1714.

2: Great Ejection: After restoration of Charles 11; St. Bartholomew's Day, August 24, 1662, [Black Bartholomew] in co-sequence of the Act of Uniformity passed by Parliament in May that year, more than 2,000 ministers were 'ejected' or expelled from their churches, residences, and incomes because they would not conform to the use of *The Book of Common Prayer* as the uniform order for worship in the Church of England. Baxter voiced his wish that all ejected 2,000 clergy could have become overseas missionaries.

3: Puritanism: The term Puritan first used in 1560s of English Protestants who considered reforms under Elizabeth incomplete & wanted more 'purification'. John Flavel (1630-1691) "The scriptures teach us the best way of living, the noblest way of suffering, and the most comfortable way of dying." The Puritans understood that a mindless Christianity fosters a spineless Christianity. They taught that preparing to die is the first step in learning to live. Puritanism was a theological movement tied to the Reformation, Scriptures, Trinitarian theology, reformed church service, rights of conscience, stressed conversion; political involvement. 'Puritanism' was initially a term of abuse but refers to desire for further reform of Elizabethan & Stuart C of E. and focus on Reformed theology. Faith shaped by struggle with popular religious culture and Roman Catholicism.

In preaching and pastoral work, Puritans strongly emphasised **the conscience**; scrupulous to know the truth and put truth into practice irrespective of the cost. Puritan preachers never finished preaching until they proclaimed the 'application.' Many were University graduates but they did not emphasise an intellectual or theoretical view of Truth. **Spiritual conflict made Puritan maturity; they accepted conflict as their calling.** An American Indian leader, by comparison, described North American Protestantism as: *man-centred, manipulative, success-orientated, self-indulgent and sentimental; three thousand miles wide and half an inch deep; spiritual dwarfs!*

English born, retired Professor of Theology at Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia; J. I. Packer, who became an expert in Puritanism; chose Richard Baxter as his research topic for an Oxford Doctorate. Baxter's reprinted works cover some twenty-three volumes; about two-thirds of his total writing. Dr Geoffrey Nuttall was appointed to supervise Packer's thesis: *The Redemption and Restoration of Man in the Thought of Richard Baxter*. The

extensive work of 499 pages and nearly 150,000 words, earned Packer an Oxford DPhil. The thesis is on deposit at the Bodleian Library, Oxford; but unfortunately was not published for another fifty years. *J.I. Packer: Puritanism was an evangelical holiness movement with the vision of spiritual renewal, national and personal, in the state, the church, the home; in education, evangelism and economics; in individual discipleship and devotion and in pastoral care and competence.* Baxter was ordained Deacon by the Bishop of Worcester in 1638; continued his studies and began to preach. He continued reading Puritan authors; William Ames and Anthony Burgess. He became assistant curate at Bridgenorth but described the people as gospel-hardened.

4: Kidderminster (1641 - 60) A town of some 2,000 mainly revelling, ignorant, rude adults; bereft of any lively serious preaching. Baxter records that when he arrived there was about one family in a street that worshipped God and called on His Name. He set forth the need for personal conversion; instruction about faith, repentance, being found by Christ and true life in Christ, regeneration and walking with Christ in discipleship. He preached from a manuscript for an hour; his sermons described as a combination of piercing words and a gentle, loving spirit. An evangelist, he frequently directed his hearers to life-and-death questions; will you, or will you not, turn and live? Will you now take seriously the things you say you believe about sin, Christ, heaven and hell? He has written of sovereign grace, the renewal of the heart and the need to learn and teach the faith in; *Gildas Silvianus*, known as *The Reformed Pastor*. God soon began to work in the town. The church building held about one thousand and it was soon necessary to build five galleries. From about 1653 he commenced the practice of helping his people by catechising with questions regarding the state of their souls before God. With two assistants assisting he spent two days a week examining his people in the Catechism. His pastoral ministry was marked by a dramatic transformation of the whole life of the community. Baxter himself gives the account that the Lord's Day had been sports day before his arrival. Now there was the absence of disorder in the streets which echoed with some one hundred families singing Psalms and repeating sermons. Scottish preacher Sinclair Ferguson has written: 'Richard Baxter preached in such a way that his sermons so connected with life in seventeenth-century Kidderminster, England, that the truth he spoke exploded during the week like time bombs planted in his congregation's memories.'² In 1875, a statue of

² Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Some Pastors and Teachers*, Banner of Truth Trust, 2017, 728

Baxter preaching was erected in the town centre of Kidderminster, with the inscription:

Between the years 1641 and 1660 this town was the scene of the labours of Richard Baxter renowned equally for his Christian learning and pastoral fidelity. In a stormy and divided age he advocated unity and comprehension pointing the way to the everlasting rest. Churchmen and nonconformists united to raise the memorial, A.D. 1875.

He was constantly studying, reading and remembering what he read, despite being constantly sick throughout his life. Although Puritans as a group were great sufferers; Baxter suffered more than most. From the age of twenty-one, 'seldom an hour free from pain.' A tubercular cough, nosebleeds, fingernail bleeding, migraines, inflamed eyes, kidney stones, gallstones plus more. Following the 1662 ejection, hatred and harassment increased due to his now being a prominent nonconformist leader. He was arrested several times for preaching plus periods in prison, confiscation of his belongings to pay his fines, including his own bed on which he was lying ill. Plus a trial before the evil, obnoxious Judge Jeffreys at the age of seventy followed by eighteen months gaol. Jeffreys drank himself into the grave, aged forty.

After being single for much of his life Baxter married Margaret Charlton, a brilliant woman twenty-one years younger; highly strung and obsessive. They ministered to each other until she died nineteen years later in 1681.

The day before Richard Baxter died he was continuing his practice of the past forty or more years, meditating on heaven, the description of the heavenly Jerusalem; *Hebrews 12: 22 – 24; But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.* He said through pain; 'Oh I thank Him, I thank Him. The Lord teach you to die.'

Baxter's words haunt all believers, especially preachers: "Let the awful and important thoughts of souls being saved by my preaching, or left to perish and be condemned to hell by negligency, I say let this awful and tremendous thought dwell ever upon your spirit".