

Leonard Ravenhill:

Scriptural pedigree is fascinating: "Isaac begat Jacob; Jacob begat the twelve patriarchs. . . ." No less intriguing is evangelical pedigree: "Walter Craddock begat Richard Baxter; Richard Baxter, through his fiery preaching and writings, begat a multitude that no man could number."

Richard Baxter was born in London in 1615. I know no date for his conversion. He "felt a great pull on his soul" about the year 1634 from the anointed preaching of Walter Craddock and Joseph Symonds.

Step back a little and get a picture of the lean, lanky Richard Baxter strolling as a teenager through the woods and meditating amidst the fragrance of wild nature. He is mentally masticating the thoughts derived from three writers of his time - Bunney, Sibbes, and Perkins. From confusion he merges to conviction, from there to conversion, and then to confession of Christ.

After Baxter's marvellous regeneration, the things of earth grew strangely dim, and he lived, moved, and had his being in God. He had in his soul the blaze of a seraph and tried to cram eternity into a lifetime.

Within four years after his personal surrender to Christ, he was ordained (1641) and appointed to the church at Kidderminster, England.

Baxter was opposed to the idea that in order to minister in the things of God a man must have the ordination of the bishops and pass through the schools of learning. He declared that he feared no man's displeasure nor hoped for any man's preferment. The latter phrase he proved by refusing a bishop's miter.

Let us now glimpse Baxter as a preacher, revivalist, and soul-winner. No gladiator ever watched the eye of a Caesar or yearned for the plaudits of men for his skill as much as this tireless Puritan looked into the face of his God in prayer and listened for the sweet voice of the Spirit. No miser ever loved his gold as Baxter loved souls. No man, trapped by human love, ever wooed a maid as this man pled with impenitent sinners. His couplet was true:

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

It might be a bitter herb for us present-day ministers to chew when we say that converts often take upon themselves the likeness of their spiritual father. Sparks from the soul of Baxter seem to have fallen on the souls that he so visibly affected for his Lord. Here is his record: "Day and night they thirsted after the salvation of their neighbors. "

The outcome of this contagious passion is best measured by Baxter's own words: "To the praise of my gracious Master.. . the church at Kidderminster became so full on the Lord's Day that we had to build galleries to contain all the people. Our weekday meetings also were always full. On the Lord's Day all disorder became quite banished out of the town. As you passed along the streets on the Sabbath morning, you might hear a hundred households singing psalms at their family worship. In a word, when I came to Kidderminster, there was only about one family in a whole street that worshipped God and called upon His name. When I left, there were some streets where not a family did not do so. And though we had 600 communicants, there were not twelve in whose salvation I had not perfect confidence."

Hear his answer to the taunt that he was idle: "The worst I wish you is that you had my ease instead of your labor. I have reason to take myself for the least of all saints, and yet I fear not to tell the accuser that in comparison to mine, I take the labor of most of the town's tradesmen to be a pleasure to the body, though I would not exchange it with the greatest prince. Their labor preserveth health; mine consumeth it. They work in ease; I in continual pain. They have hours and days of recreation; I have scarce time to eat and drink. Nobody molesteth them for their labor; the more I do, the more hatred and trouble I draw upon me."

The leading theologians of our day "work out religious theories," but - and note this well - they are not known as soul-winners. My gripe against the leading theologians of our day is that they are Bible critics lounging on flowery beds of ease and offer us from their sinecures mental suits of tailor-made theology.

The opposite to this was the case with Baxter. His soul ached for the souls of men. Off he went beaming the blessed message of the blood of the everlasting covenant. He was no spiritual dreamer locked away in an ivory theological tower. Nor was he operating a theological laboratory, dissecting dead dogma. Like Wesley, Baxter

was a practical saint. Baxter stood firm as a rock in season and out of season!

In all, Baxter labored some nineteen years in Kidderminster and, as one writer expresses with beauty, "Through his preaching and the power of his holy life, the whole community was changed from a habitation of cruelty and immorality to a garden of true piety." This writer then adds: "It stands as a moral distortion that Richard Baxter, the purest of 17th century theologians, the man who longed for, fought for, prayed for, and would cheerfully have sacrificed his life for the unification of the church, should have been imprisoned by a Protestant judge and a Protestant jury."

The Act of Uniformity, which came into being about 1662, meant that a revised prayer book had to be used and that all ministers not ordained by the Episcopalian Church should be unfrocked. Baxter withstood this act, and so with 2,000 other ministers, found himself without a charge. He was maligned, misquoted, and misrepresented. "In perils oft" was as true of him as the blest Covenanters, who at the same time were dyeing the heaths of Scotland with their blood.

The final humiliation of this great soul, Richard Baxter, was in May 1685 at the hands of the notorious Judge Jeffries of the "Bloody Assize." Especially in his Paraphrase of the New Testament, Baxter was foolishly charged with libeling the church. For these false charges this saint was fined a sum of 400 pounds (\$2,000) - a fortune in those days. Until this was paid, he was to lie in prison, bound over to keep the peace for seven years. It was last-minute clemency that saved this seventy-year-old Baxter from being tied to a cart's tail and whipped through the streets of London.

After God, books were Baxter's chief interest. He wrote them, bought them, read them, quoted them, and gave them away. His own pen never dried. His literary efforts are staggering. In all, he wrote some 200 books. Another 200 pamphlets are accredited to him. He gave us a metrical version of the Psalms and two volumes of poetry.

Boswell asked the famed Dr. Johnson, "Which of Baxter's books should I read?" Johnson's reply was this: "Read any of them; they are all good." Treat yourself to Baxter's *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* or his *Call to the Unconverted*. And don't miss his *Reformed Pastor*. Some fortunate soul might find Baxter's *Autobiography*. Pastor, if you see it, buy it at any cost. Also read Dean Boyle's writings on Baxter (if you can find them).

"Baxter never tampered with his oracle and never sold the truth to serve the hour." As he aged, enfeebled in limb and racked with cruel pain, he preferred prisons to pensions and the smile of the King invisible to that of the king present. No word that he wrote did he ever withdraw.

In that great day for which creation and all its tribes were made, I for one will sit in fascination as the King of kings rewards this faithful servant, Richard Baxter. His secret is not hard to find. "He was animated with the Holy Spirit and breathed celestial fire to inspire heat and life into dead sinners and to melt the obdurate in their frozen tombs."

In this spiritual ice age we, like, Baxter, also need an anointing.

Let me string for you a few pearls of other men's opinions about Baxter. "If Baxter had lived in primitive times, he would have been one of the fathers of the church," observed Bishop Wilkins.

Archbishop Usher esteemed him highly.

Lord Morley called Richard Baxter "the profoundest theologian of them all."

Coleridge speaks of Baxter's *Autobiography* on this wise: "I could almost as soon doubt the gospel veracity as Baxter's veracity.... Baxter feels and reasons more like an angel than a man."

"In labors more abundant" might well have been his life's motto. Had this great soul lived as long as Methuselah, he would have given "every flying minute something to keep in store!"

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