



Can any good come from Kidderminster?

Richard Baxter as Puritan, theologian and mere Christian

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Author's Preface

How does one measure success in Christian ministry? Lessons abound from the life and work of Richard Baxter. Well-known for his pastoral labours in the town of Kidderminster, England, Baxter was also renowned for his Christian learning and advocated unity and comprehension during a turbulent, divisive age. In writing, teaching, pastoring and visiting, he successfully modelled a Puritan's single-minded zeal to holy living, personal work, evangelism and devotional piety. He was less successful as a theologian, in particular setting forth controversial views of justification. More positively, Baxter as a "mere Christian" persistently advocated for unity and comprehension between ministers during the divisive era of 17th century England. Ultimately, Baxter's life and work challenges Christian leaders to stay focused on proclaiming repentance and faith in Christ, and to continually realign our heart motives for gospel ministry to be fixed on God's glory alone.

Can any good come from Kidderminster?

How does one measure success in Christian ministry? Christian leaders and workers wrestle with this question frequently. Evangelical Christians fawn over examples of large churches such as Hillsong in Sydney, or Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York. As impressive as these congregations are, however, the church in Kidderminster, England, offers a more dramatic “success story”. In 1641, when the newly appointed pastor first walked the streets of this town, he found “an ignorant, rude, and revelling people, for the most part...” who had “...hardly ever had any lively serious preaching among them.”¹ Yet between 1641 and 1660, this pastor - Richard Baxter - set about to preach, counsel and visit his way through Kidderminster, until virtually the entire town of 2,000 adults was converted:

“... On the Lord’s Day there was no disorder to be seen in the streets, but you might hear and hundred Families singing Psalms and repeating Sermons, as you passed through the Streets. In a word, when I came thither first, there was about one family in a Street that worshipped God and called on His Name, and when I came away there were some streets where there was not past one Family in the side of Street that did not so; and that did not by professing serious Godliness, give us hopes of their sincerity...”²

¹ Richard Baxter. *Reliquiae Baxterianae, or, Mr. Richard Baxter's narrative of the most memorable passages of his life and times*, ed. Matthew Sylvester (London: Printed for T. Parkhurst, J. Robinson, J. Lawrence, and J. Dunton, 1696), Part 1, 20.

² Baxter, *R.B.*, 1.84-85.

Baxter polarised those around him. He was “caricatured by satirists [and] persecuted by enemies...”³ but also won much admiration and praise.⁴ Nearly 200 years after Baxter’s death (1691), the people of Kidderminster thought it important for future generations to remember Baxter’s life and work. In 1875, they dedicated a statue of him with the following 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.”

What can we learn from this man who “wrote, preached, taught, and visited his way to become the model pastor?”⁵ While space does not permit an in-depth analysis of all his endeavours,⁶ several key writings and events in his life will help us to evaluate Baxter as a Puritan pastor. We will also draw some lessons from Baxter as a controversial theologian, and as a “mere Christian”.

³ Richard Baxter, *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter*, ed. J. M. Lloyd Thomas (London: J.M. Dent, 1931), vii.

⁴ Thomas Manton, a contemporary, was reported to have said that Richard Baxter “came nearer the apostolical inspired writings, than any man in the age”. Cited in G. Virtue, “Review of Religious Publications,” *The Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle* 17 (1839), 23.

⁵ Paul C.H. Lim, “A Pen in God’s Hand,” *Christianity Today Magazine*; March 3, 2006.

⁶ J.I. Packer notes that Baxter was “in fact the most voluminous English theologian of all time”, totalling “approximately four million words of pastoral, apologetic, devotional and homiletic writing” and six million words on theological issues. Packer, *Puritan Portraits*, 161.

Pointing the way to everlasting rest: Baxter as Puritan pastor

Baxter was a Puritan - a term which conjures up prejudice and suspicion, then and now. Yet at its heart, Puritans were men and women on a “quest for a life reformed by the Word of God”⁷ and sought genuine conversion and communion with God across personal, family, church and political spheres. They were Christians who “sought a pure church and a pure life”⁸ by submitting all areas of life under the authority of God’s Word.⁹ As a result, during 17th century England, many refused to conform to the Anglican Prayer Book, the use of bishops in church governance, and the King as supreme head over the church.

At this point, it is important to remind ourselves of the context surrounding Baxter’s life and work. Baxter lived through 76 years of hardship and conflict, spanning “an era in English history that was tragic, heroic, and pathetic by turns to an extraordinary degree.”¹⁰ Baxter not only witnessed High Anglicans and Puritan non-Conformists battle for the right to shape the life and fabric of English church and society, but was also a key participant and leader himself among moderate non-Conformists. His 800-page autobiography (*Reliquiae Baxterianae*, 1696) remains a key primary source for much of this religious, political and social history.

⁷ Joel Beeke, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2012), Location 420, Kindle edition. Beeke also notes that defining Puritanism is one of the most difficult tasks for a church historian.

⁸ Stephen Nichol, *The Reformation: How a Monk and a Mallet Changed the Whole World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 100.

⁹ Packer, *Puritan Portraits*, 159.

Packer further summarises Puritanism as “a total view of Christianity, Bible-based, church-centred, God-honouring, literate, orthodox, pastoral, and Reformation, that saw personal, domestic, professional, political, churchly, and economic existence as aspects of a single whole, and that called on everybody to order every department and every relationship of their life according to the Word of God, so that all would be sanctified and become ‘holiness to the Lord’.

¹⁰ Packer, *Puritan Portraits*, 157.

One could say that Baxter was destined to be Puritan from birth. Born in 1615,¹¹ he recalled childhood memories of his father struggling to lead family devotions while the rest of the town revelled in the town square, dancing to “the great disturbance of the tabor and pipe and noise in the streets.”¹² Baxter wrote that “But when I heard them call my father Puritan it did much to cure me and alienate me from them; for I considered that my father's exercise of reading the Scripture was better than theirs, and would surely be better thought on by all men at the last...”¹³ Despite a predominantly self-taught education, Baxter acquired a love of God and faith in Christ by reading Puritan writings.¹⁴

The Puritanism Baxter soaked himself in stressed a holistic view of Christianity. It focused on self-examination of sins, repentance and faith in Christ, the necessity of regeneration and holy living in evidence of it.¹⁵ Baxter echoed the focus on genuine conversion in his well-known book *The Reformed Pastor* (1656): “Alas! Can we think that the reformation is wrought, when we cast out a few ceremonies, and changed some vestures, and gestures, and forms! Oh no, sirs! It is the converting and saving of souls that is our business. That is the chiefest part of reformation, that doth most good, and tendeth most to the salvation of the people.”¹⁶ Baxter also urged pastors to examine themselves first before pursuing gospel ministry: “Believe it, sirs, God is no respecter of persons: he saveth not men for their coats or callings; a holy calling will

¹¹ Baxter, *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter*, 3.

¹² *Ibid*, 6.

¹³ *Ibid*, 6.

¹⁴ In particular, Richard Sibbes's *The Bruised Reed*, from which Baxter learned “the Love of God to me, and... the mystery of Redemption...” (*R.B.*, I.4); and William Perkins's works, of which “they taught me how to live by Faith on Christ.” (*R.B.*, I.5).

¹⁵ Packer, *Puritan Portraits*, 159.

¹⁶ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Glasgow: William Collins, 1835), 304-305.

not save an unholy man.”¹⁷ Baxter strongly rebuked ministers motivated not by soul winning, but by prestige or financial gain.

Baxter’s broader vision of pastoral ministry is worth reflecting upon. During the Kidderminster years, not only did he preach weekly and write prolifically, but from 1653 onwards he devoted Mondays and Tuesdays to personally catechising his entire parish.¹⁸ In this way, he and his assistants were able to exhort 800 families a year, or 15-16 families a week.¹⁹ This hands-on approach to casuistry arose out of Baxter’s Puritan convictions that doctrine should be applied to life, and that a minister is called to study his flock as much as his books: “For my part, I conceive, that by serious talking of everlasting things [during personal visitation], and teaching the creed, or some short catechism, you may grow more in knowledge... than if you spent that time in studying common or curious, yet less necessary things.”²⁰ The success of the Kidderminster revival not only vindicated Baxter’s personal method, but reinforced his reputation as a faithful pastor who knew and loved his flock.²¹ His example also prompts us to consider whether we will devote ourselves to personal work in our ministries, or if we will divorce ourselves from the real-life concerns of those we serve.

Puritans were renowned for their devotional theology, and Baxter was no different.

Once, when faced with death from a serious illness, Baxter wrote *The Saints’*

Everlasting Rest (1650). Largely a meditation on Hebrews 4:9, it remains Baxter’s

¹⁷ Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 117.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 81.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 81.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 308.

²¹ One example of this knowledge can be seen in Baxter’s 12 categories in *The Reformed Pastor*, which offer astute observations of different kinds of people one will encounter in parish ministry.

most well-known work. In it, he presents the believer's future hope of "perfect, endless enjoyment of God"²² and shows how dwelling on the saints' rest in heaven spurs us to seek this same rest on earth, and to help others seek it as well: "Christian, believe this, and think on it—you shall be embraced in the arms of that love which brought the Son of God from heaven to earth, from earth to the cross, from the cross to the grave, from the grave to glory. Know this, believer, to your everlasting comfort; if those arms have once embraced you, neither sin, nor hell can get you again forever."²³ Baxter writes with a Puritan's elation and confidence in knowing Christ, and as someone whose theology has flowered into doxology, from mental assent to heart-felt delight.

Baxter also published *A Christian Directory* (1673) - a comprehensive, 1000-page manual on Christian living.²⁴ In keeping with the Puritan conviction of applying God's Word to all of life, no stone is left unturned: there are directions for the unconverted, for weak Christians, against unbelief, hardness of heart, pride, covetousness, governing the senses of the body, sin in sports and recreation, about what to wear, Lord's day practice, marriage, family worship, parental duties, baptism, evangelism, wealth, social justice and more. Baxter taught alongside other Reformers that many callings and occupations contributed to the public good and could therefore be undertaken to God's glory. His advice is simple and accessible: "We must endeavour after the most successful way, and pray for a just prosperity for our Labours; And when God doth prosper us with wealth, we must take it thankfully (tho' with fear)

²² Richard Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* (Exeter, UK: J & B Williams, 1835), 18.

²³ Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 28.

²⁴ Baxter wrote this after the Act of Uniformity in 1662 meant he was no longer permitted to pastor a congregation in the Church of England. It is a monumental treatise on the Christian life, covering Christian ethics, family duties, church duties and duties to neighbours and ruling authorities.

and use it to his Service, and do all the good we can with it.”²⁵ He goes as far as to lay out biblical principles for specific professions: lawyers, doctors, schoolmasters and soldiers. All are valuable vocations, but in fulfilling our calling we must not forget to “Look up to Heaven... remember that there is thy Home, and there is thy Hope... it is for that that thou must care and labour.”²⁶ These directions retain a striking relevance today amidst our modern-day temptations to offer sacrifices to our modern-day idols of money and career.

Baxter’s concern for genuine conversion is also seen in the message he proclaimed. In *A Call to the Unconverted* (1658) — originally preached as sermons in Kidderminster — Baxter outlined a historic gospel message with a Puritan order of salvation. He observed genuine conversion as a process of repentance and faith taking place secretly in the hearts of those on the road to hell, followed by an ongoing walk with Christ characterised by obedience and service.²⁷ Baxter urged his hearers to turn from self-centred sin and to adore the crucified and risen Christ as Saviour and Lord: “But take this with you to your sorrow, though you may put this out of your minds, you cannot put it out of the Bible; but there it will stand as a settled truth, which you shall experimentally know forever, that there is no other way but, *turn*, or *die*.”²⁸ He preached with brutal honesty and called for immediate action: “...if I stay till either my heart be forsaken of God, in blindness or hardness, or till I be caught away by

²⁵ Richard Baxter, *Christian Directory Vol 3*, 658b. Cited in: D. R. Wooldridge, “Richard Baxter’s Social and Economic Teaching”, in *Puritan Papers Vol 1, 1956-1959*, ed. Martin Lloyd-Jones (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000), 234.

²⁶ Baxter, *Christian Directory Vol 1*, 206a, cited in Wooldridge, *Puritan Papers Vol 1*, 234.

²⁷ Packer, *Puritan Portraits*, 171. Packer summarises Baxter’s order of salvation as follows: “... regeneration... takes place secretly in the human heart... after this the converted person will continue to walk with Christ in discipleship, learning and obeying...”

²⁸ Richard Baxter, *A Call to the Unconverted to Turn and Live* (New York: American Tract Society, 1825), 41.

death, it is then too late. There is no place for repentance and conversion then: I know it must be now or never.”²⁹ Where we might have been tempted to water down our proclamations, Baxter persisted in proclaiming an unchanged gospel: whether to private correspondents, before working-class weavers, or even before King Charles II and his royal court.³⁰

Renowned equally... for his controversial theology

We have surveyed some of the highlights of Baxter’s life and work. However, the book that kicked off his prolific literary career was the controversial *Aphorisms on Justification* (1649). This debut publication was borne out of Baxter’s dismay at the rampant licentiousness observed in Oliver Cromwell’s Parliamentary Army, and his shock that antinomian teachings were used to defend it. In *Aphorisms*, we get our first glimpse of him as the youthful controversialist.³¹ He understood justification in two parts: legal righteousness, fulfilled wholly by Christ, and evangelical righteousness, which is our Spirit-empowered work and qualifies us for the salvation offered.³² He argued: “As there are two Covenants, with their distinct Conditions: so there is a

²⁹ Baxter, *A Call to the Unconverted to Turn and Live*, 59.

³⁰ Of this, J.I. Packer comments: “The quality that the 1875 inscription calls ‘pastoral fidelity’ made Baxter willing to say ‘boo’ to any goose, even a royal one. That was the kind of preacher he was.” Packer, *Puritan Portraits*, 174.

³¹ At 33 years of age, Baxter waded into this theological battle with a candor that he would later temper: “In my youth I was quickly past my fundamentals and was running up into a multitude of controversies... But the elder I grew the smaller the stress I laid upon those controversies and curiosities (though still my intellect abhorreth confusion)...” Baxter, *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter*, 107.

³² For a comprehensive critique of Baxter’s teaching on justification, see chapter 10 of J.I. Packer, *The Redemption and Restoration of Man in the Thought of Richard Baxter* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2001), 242-263.

twofold Righteousness, and both of them absolutely necessary to Salvation.”³³ In subsequent writings he would continue to argue that justification was a combination of divine grace and human cooperation: “Faith, Repentance, Love, Thankfulness, sincere Obedience, together with Final Perseverance, do make up the Condition of our final Absolution in Judgement, and our eternal Glorification.”³⁴

Baxter’s views on justification was cause for much suspicion, then and now. Those who equate Puritanism with Reformed orthodoxy³⁵ hesitate to include Baxter in their ranks.³⁶ Indeed, to imply any sense of “justification by works” is to repudiate the gospel, separating the one-time act of justification from the ongoing work of sanctification. The antinomian has misunderstood the gospel, but to classify holy living as a subset of justification is to turn faith and repentance into new laws that must be obeyed apart from Christ’s transforming grace. This grace includes both judicial payment for our sins, and the power for ongoing holy living. Therefore, the proper antidote for antinomianism cannot be Baxter’s neonomianism, but a return to the gospel of the reformation: “the righteous shall live by faith.” (Rom 1:17) It is clearer to say with the Apostle Paul that “by grace you have been saved through

³³ Richard Baxter, *Aphorisms on Justification, with their explication annexed* (Hague: Abraham Brown, 1665), XVII, 66.

³⁴ *Richard Baxter’s Confession of his faith: especially concerning the interest of repentance and sincere obedience to Christ, in our justification & salvation* (London: R.W. for T. Underhill and F Tyton, 1655), 56.

³⁵ i.e. agreement with a confessional summary of Reformed beliefs, such as the Westminster Standards, the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism, and/or the Canons of Dort.

³⁶ Some go as far as to imply Baxter’s exclusion from saving faith, for example: “To deny this doctrine [justification by faith alone on the grounds of Christ’s imputed righteousness] is to deny the very heart and power of the gospel... Because denying justification is denying the gospel itself, those who do it should be ‘cast out’ of the church.” Tom Hicks, “Why is denying justification such a serious error?” *Founders Ministries*, 19 February 2015, <http://founders.org/2015/02/19/why-is-denying-justification-such-a-serious-error/>. See also Tom Hicks, “An Analysis of the Doctrine of Justification in the Theologies of Richard Baxter and Benjamin Keach,” unpublished Doctoral Dissertation (Louisville, KY: Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009). My opinion is that, though in serious error, Baxter remains a brother in Christ.

faith...” (Eph 2:8), and consequently, “we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Eph 2:10).

The doctrinal and denominational divisions within present-day Christianity is certainly cause for sorrow, but any human attempt at a theological synthesis must be conducted with great caution. Unfortunately, in seeking to find a middle ground between bitterly contested theological positions in his time, Baxter formulated doctrines that pleased no one, and went beyond the plain teaching of Scripture. In this, he is not an example we should emulate.

Advocating unity and comprehension: Baxter as “mere Christian”

It remains to reflect briefly on Baxter’s desire for unity and comprehension. During his Kidderminster years, Baxter demonstrated a willingness to work across parish lines to promote “Christian concord”. He met monthly with other ministers in the Worcestershire region to discuss cases of church discipline and “an hour or two in disputation on some question which was chosen the week before.”³⁷ Baxter regarded this regular fraternal as “the comfortablest time of all my life, through the great delight I had in the company of that society of honest, sincere, laborious, humble

³⁷ Baxter, *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter*, 137.

ministers of Christ.”³⁸ Gospel workers today will likewise find friendships with fellow workers, even outside denominational boundaries, enriching and helpful.

Amidst the denominational consciousness developing in England following the Restoration, Baxter wrote: “I am not for narrowing the Church more than Christ himself alloweth us, nor for robbing him of any of his flock.”³⁹ Ahead of the 1662 Act of Uniformity, Baxter worked tirelessly with his fellow ministers to negotiate agreement on the Church of England’s liturgy and church governance (he was ultimately unsuccessful). He would distinguish himself as “meerly Christian”⁴⁰ centuries before C.S. Lewis popularised the term. He went so far as to declare a willingness to hold communion with Greek [Orthodox], Lutherans, Independents and Anabaptists, “though my most usual communion should be with that society which I thought most agreeable to the Word of God.”⁴¹ He rationalised this by holding not to a paper-thin unity,⁴² but one anchored to the teachings of the Apostle’s Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, “which at least contain all that is necessary to salvation, and hath been by all the ancient Churches taken for the sum of their religion.”⁴³ Baxter’s non-denominational stance won few friends in an era of fierce rivalries, yet in hindsight it carries a prophetic edge. It is worth asking ourselves: will we likewise pursue fellowship and mutual cooperation with other

³⁸ Ibid, 137.

³⁹ Ibid, 116.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 293.

⁴¹ Ibid, 123.

⁴² Tim George notes that, unlike later authors and preachers, Baxter uses the term “mere” in a fundamental, rather than a minimalist sense: “Both Lewis and Baxter used the word mere in what is today a—regrettably—obsolete sense, meaning “nothing less than,” “absolute,” “sure,” “unqualified,” as opposed to today’s weakened sense of “only this,” “nothing more than,” “such and no more,” “barely,” “hardly.”... Baxter had no use for a substanceless, colorless homogeneity bought at the expense of the true catholic faith.” Timothy George, “The Unity of Faith: Evangelicalism & Mere Christianity,” *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* 16 (2003), retrieved from <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=16-06-058-f>

⁴³ Baxter, *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter*, 139.

Christians who hold beliefs different to our own, or will we cling to the same tribalism as many of Baxter's contemporaries did? If Baxter lived today, would our denominational fences include or exclude him from the communion table or gospel partnership?

Conclusion

We return now to the question first posed: how does one measure success in Christian ministry? Lessons abound from the life and work of Baxter. He successfully applied a God-centred approach to holy living, personal work, evangelism and devotional piety. He displayed a single-minded zeal to glorify God in his soul-winning and relational pastoring. His exemplary pastoring provokes us to search out any spiritual malaise or lack of direction in our own Christian service. Baxter's significant successes were closely intertwined with his failures. That there are no "Baxterian" denominations today underscores the failure of his neonomian concept of justification to gain significant credibility. Yet his practice of seeking concord between ministers and denominations serves as a model for "mere Christianity" – a meaningful unity shaped around nothing less than the fundamentals of Christian faith. Ultimately, Baxter's life and work serves as a model and challenge for Christian leaders - both to stay focused on our main task of proclaiming repentance and faith in Christ, and to continually realign our heart motives for ministry to be fixed on God's glory alone. As Baxter himself once said: "I was but a pen in God's hand, and what praise is due to a Pen?"⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Quoted by Matthew Henry during a friend's funeral sermon. Matthew Henry, *The Miscellaneous Works of the Rev. Matthew Henry* (New York: R. Carter & Brothers, 1855), 1084, retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/miscellaneouswo00henrgoog>

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