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### Richard Baxter— A Corrective for Reformed Preachers

by Edward Donnelly

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**W**hy Baxter? His theology was not entirely sound. His desire to promote church unity sometimes betrayed him into seeking common cause with those who were far removed from the biblical faith. Although an able controversialist, he confesses: 'I am too much inclined to such words in controver-sial writings which are too keen, and apt to provoke the person whom I write against.' In 'the Augustan period of evangelical literature' are there not other and safer preaching models?

The answer lies in his particular value for our present needs. In the providence of God we are seeing a renewed interest in reformed truth and a consequent increase in the number of men who have been raised up to preach the doctrines of grace. But any new development may run to extremes, and there is always the danger that a man, in the first flush of enthusiasm for what he has discovered, may, in his very efforts to be thoroughly reformed, become a caricature of that which he admires. It is precisely here that Baxter can help us, for, where he is strong, many today are weak. We shall consider three characteristics of his preaching which speak to our current situation.

*1. Baxter's preaching was characterized by clear, memorable instruction.* He believed that a preacher should reason with his hearers. 'We should be furnished with all kind of evidence so that we may come as with a torrent upon their understandings, and with our reasonings and expostulations to pour shame upon their vain objections, and bear down all before us, that they may be forced to yield to the power of truth.' Although well aware of the darkness of the unregenerate mind, he is always concerned to clear up possible misunderstandings, to give explanations for what he says. His sermons have a logical structure first the 'opening' of the text, then the explanation of difficulties, followed by the 'uses' and the appeal. Even in the midst of the most impassioned pleading he will turn to enlist the aid of reason. After beseeching with great tenderness and power at the close of 'Making Light of Christ and Salvation', he

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ends by enumerating nine false grounds of assurance, followed by eight tests by which his hearers may prove their own sincerity. A rhetorician would cringe at such squandering of ‘emotional impact’, but Baxter was content to let the truth make its own impact, and he was preaching, not primarily to move men, but to teach them.

The truths preached were the fundamentals. ‘Throughout the whole course of our ministry, we must insist chiefly upon the greatest, most certain and most necessary truths, and be more seldom and sparing upon the rest... Many other things are desirable to be known, but some must be known, or else our people are undone for ever.’ This is, however, very different from that preaching which traces a superficial path through a few well-trodden passages or, more usually, verses of Scripture, and despises anything else as ‘not the gospel’. Baxter covered all of Scripture. He dealt deeply and argued closely. He set forth these fundamentals in all the fulness of their interrelationship and application. But he believed that preaching should meet people’s needs, that it failed if their greatest needs were not met, and that the ‘matters of necessity’ should be at the forefront.

The great fundamentals were taught in simple language, for ‘there is no better way to make a good cause prevail than to make it plain.’ Since the purpose of the preacher was to teach, he must speak so as to be understood. In those days of sermon-tasters he was criticized for the plainness of his speech and had to combat the pride of his heart as it urged him to a more ornate style – ‘God commandeth us to be as plain as we can, that we may inform the ignorant... but pride stands by and contradicteth all, and produceth its toys and trifles... It persuadeth us to paint the window that it may dim the light.’

This surely challenges us, brethren. We aim at giving reasoned expositions of truth to our people, but do we, in our preparation, seek to answer any possible difficulties, do we marshal arguments to convince their minds – or have we been made lazy by their uncritical approval? Are we so afraid of being labelled ‘fundamentalists’ that we spend most of our time in the lesser-known corners of Scripture? It is possible for a man to win quite a reputation as the manager of a delicatessen for reformed gourmets, producing theological rarities which are unobtainable elsewhere – while many of his hungry flock look up and are not fed. It is a tragic mistake so to concentrate on ‘what is desirable to be known’ that we neglect ‘what must be known’. Do our people really understand the central truths concerning God’s covenants, Christ’s person and work, sin, regeneration, repentance and faith? Until the foundations of their faith are firmly established, we do well to lay less emphasis upon the superstructure. Do we preach in simple language? No doubt we try to avoid over-academic expressions, and it is quite

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true that many of the mighty words of Scripture must never be omitted from our vocabulary, but must rather be expounded and then incorporated into the thinking and speech of our hearers – but do we make the enormous conscious effort needed to avoid the hypnotic, thought-benumbing cliché, to present the truth in a fresh, contemporary garb? Baxter calls us to a preaching ministry in which the fundamentals of the faith are explained with attractiveness and clarity.

2. *Baxter's preaching was characterized by a passionate evangelistic appeal.* The great reality which moulded his ministry was the fact that we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. Extreme bodily weakness increased his awareness that there was but a step between him and death, whom he called his 'neighbour'. Every duty was to be carried out, every sermon preached, in the light of the great day. 'I daily know and think of that approaching hour', he says. His congregation is described as 'a company of ignorant, carnal, miserable sinners... who must be changed or damned. Methinks I even see them entering upon their final woe! Methinks I hear them crying out for help, for speediest help!'

This awareness of eternity made Baxter an emotional preacher. 'If you want to know the art of pleading' said Spurgeon, 'read Baxter.' Yet his emotion was not undisciplined, but fuelled by his comprehension of truth, for he had no time for 'an affected fervency.' 'Light first, then heat' was his motto – first the exposition of the truth, then the words of piercing appeal springing from that truth. At the close of 'A Call to the Unconverted to turn and live' he appeals to his hearers with such tender earnestness that we can almost see the tears upon his cheeks. 'My heart is troubled to think how I shall leave you, lest... I should leave you as I found you, till you awake in hell... I am as hearty a beggar with you this day, for the saving of your souls, as I would be for my own supply, if I were forced to come a begging to your doors. And therefore if you would hear me then, hear me now. If you would pity me then, be entreated now to pity yourselves... O sirs, believe it, death and judgment, heaven and hell, are other matters when you come near them, than they seem to carnal eyes afar off. Then you will hear such a message as I bring you with more awakened, regardful hearts.'

The focus of his preaching was an urgent invitation to receive Christ. Baxter preached for a verdict, he sought to 'drive sinners to a stand and make them see... that they must unavoidably be either converted or condemned.' His words at the close of 'Making Light of Christ and Salvation' are powerful and pointed: 'When God hath shaken those careless souls out of their bodies, and you must answer for all your sins in your own name; Oh then what would you give for a saviour!...When you see the world hath left you, and your companions in sin have deceived themselves and you, and all your merry days are gone; then what

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would you give for that Christ and salvation that now you account not worth your labour!... You that cannot make light of a little sickness, or of want, or of natural death, no, not of a toothache, but groan as if you were undone; how will you then make light of the fury of the Lord, which will burn against the condemners of His grace? I come now to know your resolution for the time to come. What say you? Do you mean to set as light by Christ and salvation as hitherto you have done and to be the same men after all this? I hope not.' The sharp edge was always present - a choice had to be made, a verdict given, an offer of mercy accepted or rejected.

Yet this is far removed from shallow decisionism. The Arminian preacher is afraid of what the mind may say to the heart after the meeting has finished, and so he tries to compel a decision from the will before the second thoughts of his hearers can lead them from Christ. Not only was Baxter not afraid of second thoughts, he was counting on them, hoping that his hearers would reflect deeply upon what had been preached. So we find him planting time-bombs in the minds of his people, applications which would continue to speak after his voice had fallen silent. 'I cannot now follow you to your several habitations to apply this word to your particular necessities, but O that I might make every man's conscience a preacher to himself, that it might do it, which is ever with you! That the next time you go prayerless to bed, or about your business, conscience might cry out, Dost thou set no more by Christ and thy salvation?... That the next time you are ready to rush upon known sin... conscience might cry out, Is Christ and salvation no more worth, than to cast them away, or venture them for thy lusts?... That when you are next spending the Lord's day in idleness or vain sports, conscience might tell you what you are doing.' He takes each facet of life and enlists it as a preacher, so that the sinner may be hemmed in by an environment in which every part declares the claims of God.

Whether fairly or not, reformed preachers have, in many quarters, a reputation for being restrained and impersonal in their delivery. It may be a reaction against the excesses of the age, against zeal without knowledge, heat without light, sound without sense. But has it become overreaction? We, who see God in all of life, should be most deeply impressed with the reality of eternal things. Understanding the misery of human depravity and the wonder of sovereign grace, we should be most deeply moved when such truth grips us. Has the development of our heads so shrivelled our hearts as to render us suspicious of genuine emotion? Do we hesitate to press the gospel upon men for fear of being thought Arminian? The 'five points' can be treated as a theological minefield through which the preacher tiptoes, so afraid of blowing himself up on the horns of a careless expression that he ceases to long for the conversion of his hearers.

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The life and impact of a sermon bleed away in the death of a thousand qualifications. But our preaching is a travesty if it lacks an earnest pleading with men to receive an all-sufficient Christ, freely offered to all who will come. The truths of Calvinism are not barriers which must be surmounted before the gospel can be preached, but a platform from which to preach more powerfully. It is precisely because grace is sovereign and free that we can urge it passionately – because the redemption purchased by Christ is complete and certain that we can commend it so glowingly –because God has chosen some out of His mere good pleasure that we can preach confidently. If we are to stand in the line of biblical, reformed preachers, we will take note of this element in Baxter’s preaching.

*3. Baxter’s preaching was followed by systematic pastoral counselling.*

He made no division, such as is now common, between preaching and pastoral work, for he understood what Paul meant when he reminded the Ephesians that he had taught them ‘publicly and from house to house.’ The task is one – the same truth communicated to the same people for the same end – the glory of God through their salvation or condemnation. Perhaps this is where Baxter may prove most serviceable to the ministers of today –in the forging of a strong link between pulpit and pastorate.

Baxter expected conversions to result from his preaching. He advised his brother ministers: ‘If you long not to see the conversion and edification of your hearers, and do not preach and study in hope, you are not likely to see much success.’ While depending wholly upon the Lord for success in his preaching, he attacked with all his might the abhorrent notion that God’s sovereignty in granting or withholding blessing can be used as a cloak for indifference. The preacher must long for the conversion of his hearers and be filled with grief if they do not respond. ‘I know that a faithful minister may have comfort when he lacks success... but then, he that longeth not for the success of his labours can have none of this comfort, because he was not a faithful labourer... What if God will accept a physician though the patient die? He must, notwithstanding that, work in compassion, and long for a better issue and be sorry if he miss it.’

This longing for results drove him to the homes of his people and to the work of personal catechizing. He wanted to discover how much of the preaching they had understood, what effect it had had upon them, whether or not they had embraced the gospel offer of mercy. Did the seed which he had sown need further cultivation? Were there weeds to be removed from the soil? These questions could be answered only in personal conversation. At first., he shrank from the work: ‘Many of us have a foolish bashfulness, which makes us backward to begin

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with them, and to speak plainly to them' –but, as he gained experience, this pastoral counselling became 'the most comfortable work, except public preaching, that ever I yet did set my hand to.' It must be stressed that it was his earnestness as a preacher which made him such a diligent pastor. His home visitation was a means of expanding and further applying what had been said in the pulpit. He found indeed that people would not take his preaching seriously unless it was enforced by close personal dealing. In a classic passage from the 'Reformed Pastor' he says: 'They will give you leave to preach against their sins, and to talk as much as you will for godliness in the pulpit, if you will but let them alone afterwards, and be friendly and merry with them when you have done... For they take the pulpit to be a stage; a place where preachers must show themselves and play their parts; where you have liberty for an hour to say what you list; and what you say they regard not, if you show them not, by saying it personally to their faces, that you were in good earnest and did indeed mean them.' His pastoral work not only enforced his past preaching but helped him to preach more pointedly and relevantly in the future. 'It will furnish you with useful matter for your sermons, to talk an hour with an ignorant or obstinate sinner, as much as an hour's study will do, for you will learn what you have need to insist on and what objections of theirs to repel.' He got to know his people – their personalities, problems, temptations, way of life. He sat where they sat and was thus enabled to preach sermons which were tailored to their peculiar needs. In order to be a true preacher, a man must be a true pastor. We may recognize the centrality of preaching, but do we ever use this as an excuse for pastoral cowardice or indifference? Does the fact of having preached publicly against men's sins absolve us from the responsibility of confronting them in their homes concerning those same sins? We are called to be diligent students, to labour in the Word, to be much in the secret place. But the study may become a convenient refuge from reality and we may all too easily salve our consciences over an unpaid visit by reading yet another book. Many of us have discovered, to our shame, that the courage with which we have preached can evaporate during the walk to the door of the meeting-house. Having thundered boldly against sin, we have found ourselves trying to conciliate with an especially warm smile or handshake those very individuals whose consciences we were seeking to wound, 'to be friendly and merry with them,' to prefer that God should be angry with them than that they should be angry with us.

In an attempt to stress the importance of preaching, it is possible to over-react by minimizing personal work. Personal counselling can be no substitute for the preached Word, but, as a means of enforcing and applying that Word to the individual conscience, it fulfils a unique function. It will also serve to make us better preachers – not worse. As we go from house to house, the mists of the study

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will be blown away and we will return to prepare sermons which are rooted in the life and language of the people.

This then is Richard Baxter of Kidderminster. A preacher who laboured to make plain the truth of God, who spoke from a burning heart as he pleaded with his people to close with Christ. A pastor who knew his sheep by name, who spoke to them personally about the great concerns of their souls. He is not merely an historical curiosity, a fossil to be marvelled at, but a stimulus, a rebuke, an encouragement. In his 'Dying Thoughts', he lays bare the preacher's heart: 'My Lord, I have nothing to do in this world, but to seek and serve thee; I have nothing to do with a heart and its affections but to breathe after thee; I have nothing to do with my tongue and pen, but to speak to thee, and for thee, and to publish thy glory and thy will.'

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