

Faith Story: Richard Baxter

By a show of hands -- how many of you have heard of Richard Baxter before this morning?

I thought he might be unfamiliar, and I am delighted to have a chance to introduce him to you.

Richard Baxter was a 17th century churchman, theologian, and author. He advocated for ecumenism in an age of great and growing division between religious groups. He lived during a time of tremendous upheaval in both church and state and found himself at the center of every major controversy in England during his lifetime. While not a household name, Baxter remains influential among Reformed pastors even today. 20th century Protestant theologian J. I. Packer describes Baxter as “the most outstanding pastor, evangelist, and writer on practical and devotional themes that Puritanism produced”.

Baxter was born in 1615, the only son of a gentleman of “competent estate”. His family did not particularly value education and so he was largely self-educated. He felt called to begin studying theology at 15 when, in his words, “it pleased God to awaken” his soul. At 23, Baxter was ordained into the Church of England, where he ministered for many years in the parish church of Kidderminster, a town of 2000 people in west-central England. His work there was so effective that nearly the whole town was converted and the church had to be enlarged to accommodate the crowds attracted by his “moving voice, handsome features, and sincerity”.

His pastorate in Kidderminster was interrupted by the English Civil War, during which Baxter spent five years serving as a Chaplain in Oliver Cromwell’s army. As a moderate who believed in a limited monarchy, Baxter later helped bring about the restoration of the king in 1660. He defended monarchy as the best form of government, provided that the king subordinated himself to the law of “God, the Universal Monarch”.

Within the Church of England, Baxter worked for toleration of moderate dissent, but found common ground with those who considered themselves Puritans and who opposed the church’s episcopal hierarchy. He advocated for a Restoration



Church of England which would include, alongside Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and some Baptists, not as sects but as members of one mutually acceptable catholic (small “c”) church body. The Anglican hierarchy vehemently opposed this plan and the Act of Uniformity led to Baxter being removed from the Anglican Church when he was nearly 50. Unable to continue to identify as Anglican, he registered himself as “a mere Nonconformist”. He never again worked as a pastor and was jailed on at least two occasions for his nonconformist teaching.

Baxter was a prolific writer who produced millions of words in genres such as devotional manuals, pastoral handbooks, theology treatises, and autobiography. His devotional classic *The Saints’ Everlasting Rest* was one of the most widely-read books of the century and, if you are so inclined, you can go home this afternoon and order a copy of that or *The Reformed Pastor* or several of his other books from Amazon.

Few people have worked harder for Christian unity than Richard Baxter, who consistently encouraged his church colleagues to seek a path of cooperation. One of his best-known sayings is “In necessary things, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; in all things, charity.”

Shortly before his death in 1691, Baxter wrote these words:

The Gospel dieth not when I die; the church dieth not; the praises of God die not; the world dieth not; and perhaps it shall grow better. It may be that some of the seed that I have sown shall spring up to some benefit of the dark unpeaceable world when I am dead.”

Richard Baxter, who lived and preached and wrote and served as a moderate in an age of extremes, did indeed sow seed which continues to nourish us with theological wisdom and spiritual counsel. He offers us a faith story for his age and for our own.

Works Consulted:

- *131 Christians Everyone Should Know*; published by *Christian History* magazine
- www.biography.yourdictionary.com
- www.britannica.com
- www.challies.com
- The Gospel Coalition website