

## RICHARD BAXTER REVIEWED

**This review first appeared in the Welsh language weekly *Y Cymro* [The Welshman] on 17 March 2017. The following translation is kindly provided by the author, Dr J. Graham Jones.**

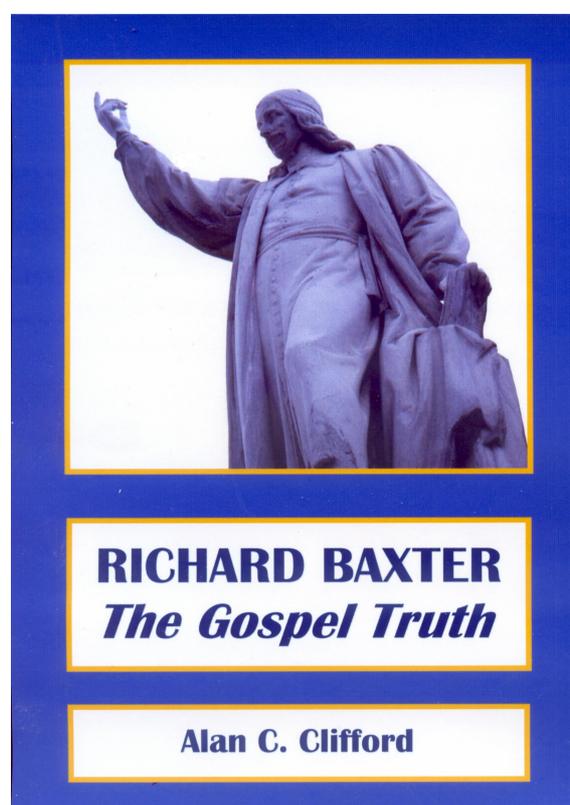
**RICHARD BAXTER: *The Gospel Truth***, Alan C. Clifford

Norwich: Charenton Reformed Publishing, 2016.

ISBN 978-0-9929465-0-0 (pbk); 978-0-9929465-3-1 (hbk)

459 pages. Paperback £15.00; Casebound £20.00

Available from the publisher ([www.christiancharenton.co.uk](http://www.christiancharenton.co.uk)), Amazon and bookshops.



We recall the author as the scholar who published an important biography of John Jones, Talsarn fairly recently, namely *John Jones, Talsarn – Pregethur y Bobl/The People's Preacher* (Norwich, 2013). And on this occasion Richard Baxter is the subject of his most praiseworthy efforts. This volume is a response to requests made by a large number of the author's friends to bring together his contributions on Baxter in different places over a period of thirty years. The majority of these contributions deal with the same themes as were discussed in the same author's previous seminal work *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology 1640-1790 - An Evaluation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), namely an enhanced version of

the author's doctoral thesis. The present work is an academic volume, but it also abounds with the author's personal ideas and prejudices.

Baxter's ideas were wholly central to the author's personal journey as a Christian. (This background is noted concisely in a note at the back of the volume: p. 459). And Baxter exerted a very heavy influence, too, on many of the individuals who are discussed in this readable study. But first and foremost this volume constitutes the author's personal tribute to Richard Baxter.

Richard Baxter was born at a place called Rowton in Shropshire in November 1615. Although his parents were Godly people, they simply did not have the resources to offer their talented, able son an education. But the works of prominent Puritan authors like William Perkins and Richard Sibbes exercised a profound influence on him, further increasing his exceptional thirst for knowledge. Following a private education, he was ordained by the Bishop of Worcester in 1638, and he served as a curate at Bridgenorth. He was much attracted by the elements and spirit of Puritanism, especially in response to measures taken by Archbishop William Laud. Baxter moved on to serve at Kidderminster for a period of sixteen years.

With the outbreak of the Civil Wars, Baxter came to support the Parliamentary cause, and he became a chaplain in the city of Coventry. He served in Colonel Whalley's regiment, and took part in a number of battles, but principally as an observer. But the experience of observing the events of the war exercised a far-reaching effect on his Christian beliefs. After he left the Army in 1647, he was extremely ill for a while. But it was during this very difficult time that he composed his two works *Aphorismes of Justification* and *The Saints Everlasting Rest*, substantial studies published in 1649, then returning to serve at Kidderminster where he was an outstanding success in his remarkable influence on his flock there who eagerly listened to his sermons on Sundays. He was also exceptionally prolific as an author during his extended period at Kidderminster.

While ministering, he made major efforts to bring together different kinds of Protestants. At root he was a Conservative Puritan, and he was one who believed passionately that there was a need for further reform of the Church of England. One of the subjects which attracted his attention was the clash between the Calvinists and the Arminians, a theme which he examined in his substantial work *Richard Baxter's Catholic Theologie* (1675). And in the wake of this he set about re-examining in depth the contents of the Bible again. He did not approve either of the rule of Oliver Cromwell as the country's Lord Protector.

In the year 1660 Baxter migrated from Kidderminster to London and he played a prominent part in the plans to re-establish Charles II on the throne, preaching to Parliament at this time, and he played a prominent role in the Savoy Conference of 1661. But he was terribly disappointed following the restoration of Charles II to the throne, and Baxter resolved to leave the Church in 1662, with the passage of the Act of Uniformity, August 1662, now imminent, with as many as 2000 ministers being ejected from their livings. But his personal life was much happier by this time as he had married Margaret Charlton, a 23 year old young lady who hailed from Kidderminster, in September 1662, and he was all of 47 years of age at the

time – a subject of great scorn at that time. But the marriage was exceptionally content and happy – until Margaret died prematurely in the year 1681. In the wake of her passing, Baxter published his important work *Poetical Fragments*.

1665 was the year of the Great Plague, many thousands of people lost their lives because of it, but, mercifully Richard Baxter and his family survived, and the following year was the occasion of the Great Fire of London. These experiences were a huge shock to Baxter, but he continued preaching regularly and he published a large number of volumes between 1664 and 1672, among them *Reasons for the Christian Religion* (1667), a seminal work which is referred to quite often even today. Baxter also possessed a distinctive international perspective in his enactments and his outlook.

Because of his beliefs he was imprisoned for a week at Clerkenwell prison in 1669 and again for a period of two years in 1684-86 by which time he was fully seventy years of age. He faced a court case before Judge Jeffreys in 1685 when he was not given a fair opportunity to defend himself in the court. Following his release from prison in November 1686 he went ahead, in spite of his great age, to publish a number of further devotional works, among them *The Certainty of the World of Spirits*. Mercifully he lived to see better days – with William and Mary on the throne of Great Britain and the passage of the Toleration Act of 1689. Totally worn out, he died on 8 December 1691.

We have the opportunity to read a theological introduction to this substantial volume which analyses the impact of Richard Baxter, principally the influence of his numerous published works, on the lives and careers of others. And we are referred to a large number of works by other scholars, some of these quite critical of him in fact, which are a help to understand and interpret Baxter's own personal influence. Dr Clifford, however, it is clear, is a big fan of Baxter's and respects most highly his contribution during his lifetime and his influence ever since then – over a period of more than three centuries by today.

The first part of this study, namely 'Baxter's Friends', present a group of short articles which convey the opinions of some of his associates about him. These are Matthew Sylvester, Dr William Bates, and Dr Edmund Calamy. The focus of the essay on Sylvester is firmly on the circumstances of Richard Baxter's death in 1691, and there was some talk of him preparing a biography of his hero one day. Dr Bates, too, gives attention to Baxter's passing.

Dr Calamy, a minister of religion at Tothill Street, Westminster, joined forces with Matthew Sylvester in publishing Richard Baxter's work *Autobiography: the Reliquiae Baxterianae* (1696). Calamy was also responsible for editing *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter* (1707), a true *magnum opus* published in four volumes, and a work which exercised a far-reaching influence on the ideas and faith of a large number of his disciples, amongst them Philip Doddridge of Northampton (the subject of chapter 12 later on in this book). And Alan Clifford pays a great deal of attention here to Calamy's own theology and ideas. And in the book we are able to see pictures of both Bates and Calamy.

And in the important, substantial essay 'A Vindication of Richard Baxter' Dr Clifford attempts to defend Baxter against his many critics and enemies – both during his own lifetime and subsequently. Detailed reference is made here to the mass of publications which have discussed Baxter's works and the long-term influence of his teaching and many published works. The author is quite critical of J. I. Packer's emphasis in his works, and he refers us to his own important published work, namely *Atonement and Justification*, a substantial work on which he laboured during the 1980s and which was published in 1990.

Then, in the second part of the book, we have the opportunity to read the texts of two of Baxter's most important published works, namely *Making Light of Christ and Salvation* and *The Grand Question Resolved: What we Must do to be Saved*. The sub-title of the second work is Instructions for a Holy Life. This publication is of especial significance because it would appear that Baxter completed it only a few days before his death in December 1691, while the work was then published by Thomas Parkhurst of Cheapside in the following year. And throughout the text of Dr Clifford's work we are referred regularly to appropriate passages from the Scriptures in footnotes which are full and genuinely helpful.

The final part of the book, namely 'Baxter's Legacy', comprises a series of trenchant articles on those who inspired, reflected and perpetuated his influence, namely John Calvin, John Davenant, Moïse Amyraut, Matthew Henry, Edmund Calamy, Philip Doddridge, John Wesley (discussed with Calvin in one short article), and John Jones, Talsarn.

Alan Clifford's examination of John Calvin's basic theological beliefs is very interesting, and attention is given here to John Owen's *Death of Death*. And constant reference is made to the important works of Paul Helm and R. T. Kendall in this field of study. There has been a great deal of profound disagreement between these scholars on the nature of Calvinism. And Dr Clifford himself invites us to reconsider Calvin's importance and legacy (see pp. 230-31 in the book.)

John Calvin's ideas are totally central to the essay on John Davenant which in reality is a re-publication of Alan Clifford's introduction to the work by Bishop John Davenant, *Dissertation on the Death of Christ* (Quinta Press). This work was seminal to our understanding of the debate between the Calvinists and the Arminians, and relatively little attention, it would appear, has been paid to it by scholars over the years.

The next chapter, namely 'The Gospel According to Moïse Amyraut' (1596-1664) was originally a paper presented at a conference in 2006. The argument here is that Amyraut's ideas confirm the original teaching of John Calvin, and, more importantly, support the true message of God's word. Amyraut, although he authored a number of important works in his day, has been rather forgotten when compared with someone like Richard Baxter. And the details of some of the periods in his life are rather hazy. It is clear that this chapter is the result of detailed research and wide reading over a number of years and leans substantially on the work of John Quick, the author who wrote an important biography of Amyraut in 1696.

Matthew Henry, the subject of chapter 10 in this volume, was a native of Flintshire. Henry was a prolific author, and his works remain popular within some churches even until today. He was an influential minister and exceptionally popular at Chester and Hackney from May 1712 onwards. But he died prematurely in 1714 following a riding accident. And his most important published work was his *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments* which is of permanent value even in our own age. Every word of the scriptures was wholly crucial to Henry as indeed to Richard Baxter, and amongst his most loyal adherents was none other than John Jones, Talsarn, namely 'the Welsh Baxter' in Alan Clifford's opinion. And we are presented with an ideal opportunity here to enjoy an extract from one of that remarkable man's sermons dating from 1835 (pp. 286-87).

In chapter 11 we return once more to Dr Edmund Calamy, one of the author's favourite people because of his personal closeness to Richard Baxter himself, and we are here presented with full details of his career and his contribution as a minister of religion which is of long term value – he was a minister at London for no less than 38 years – , as one who published many of his sermons, and as a historian. And Philip Doddridge is the subject of the next chapter.

Then we have a short essay which analyses the influence of John Calvin on John Wesley himself (1703-91), and, to close, we are presented with a masterly article on John Jones, Talsarn, a subject on whom the author is a long-established unrivalled expert. Here he is compared with Daniel Rowland, Llangeitho (1711-90). And it is a great pity that there has been no full biography of John Jones since the publication of the massive 1000 page volume by Dr Owen Thomas in 1874.

In appendices we can read the author's review of the volume *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her ...* (2013), a work edited by David and Jonathan Gibson, and then a critical analysis of the work of J. C. Ryle, J. I. Packer and Iain H. Murray, a contribution where Dr Alan Clifford is somewhat critical of the ideas and interpretations of these three scholars.

It is a real pleasure to be able to make use of footnotes, a bibliography and indexes which are so full and so helpful, and to savour a large number of photographs and pictures.

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