

THE GOSPEL TRUTH - Preface

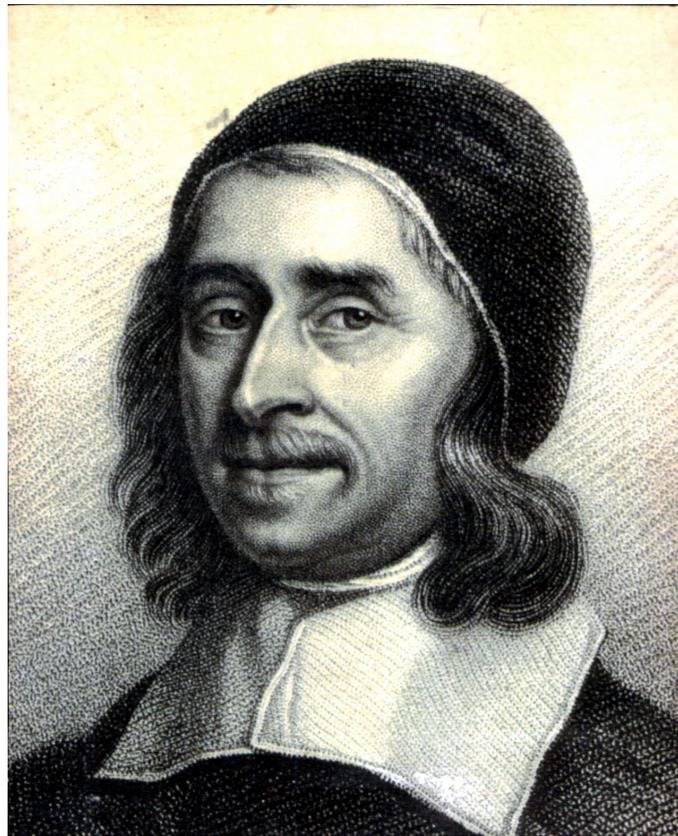
*In preparation*

# THE GOSPEL TRUTH

Honouring Richard Baxter and the Baxterian Brotherhood

Selected Writings of Alan C. Clifford

Edited by Jean-Moïse de Charenton



## **Preface**

This book is a response to requests that my various articles and papers - covering a period of over thirty years - should be published in a single volume. The selection is confined mainly to items relating to the major themes of my published doctoral thesis *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology 1640-1790 - An Evaluation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). While the tone and treatment of that work is appropriately academic and objective (though not without hints of subjective commitment), the present compilation does not

pretend to merely 'academic detachment'. As the title is intended to indicate, my personal convictions and pastoral calling forbid any appearance of neutrality. While I have always endeavoured to handle the material with analytical integrity and fairness, I am ultimately concerned with what I believe to be 'the Gospel truth'.

The book's subtitle further indicates that the writings of the great Puritan Richard Baxter (1615-91) - whose quatercentenary has been recently but inadequately celebrated - have been a dominant influence in my developing understanding of the Christian Faith. Since the publication of *Atonement and Justification*, I have explored the careers and contributions of others who, in their day, felt the influence of Baxter. I speak of 'Baxterian' pastors and preachers rather than academic historians whose personal - and often dubious - agendas (not obvious to the undiscerning reader) are usually hidden in the midst of documentary discussion and comment. While I am grateful for the latter's contributions, the mere historian is incapable of doing full justice to Baxter's testimony without sharing his passionately-held biblical, spiritual and protestant theological values. Indeed, the 'result' is more important than the 'game' (to invoke a soccer analogy). We are to answer the question: what is Truth? For instance, for all that is useful and informative in Dr Geoffrey Nuttall's Baxter biography (and other numerous related contributions), he admitted to me in a personal letter (notwithstanding his DD): 'I am a historian, not a theologian'. That said, while his book avoids any discussion of the big theological issues at the heart of Baxter's ministry, at least he had enough theological awareness to note that Baxter was 'no Arminian'. As if to illustrate the danger of evaluating Baxter without accurate knowledge of his theology, William Lamont's 1994 edition of Baxter's *A Holy Commonwealth* sets forth the Puritan as an 'Arminian' three times in the space of a dozen pages.

Having no reason to amend my academic evaluation of Baxter since the publication of *Atonement and Justification*, I - as a Christian and a pastor - now offer a personal tribute to Richard Baxter, for whom I feel immense and increasing admiration. I state this in the face of ongoing criticism of him. Indeed, no scholar who is familiar with the broadly-sympathetic contributions of W. Orme, J. C. Ryle, G. P. Fisher, F. J. Powicke, J. M. Lloyd Thomas, A. R. Ladell, G. F. Nuttall, C. F. Allison, O. C. Watkins, E. Donnelly, N. H. Keeble, M. Roberts, H. Boersma, E. Evans, R. Strivens (and many, many others) can escape considering the 'odium' associated with Richard Baxter. Heated hostility towards 'Baxterianism' dates from his lifetime and shows no sign of cooling. One wonders whether the vituperation simply reflects the inability of his frustrated critics to deal with Baxter's views. In short, go for the 'man' rather than the 'ball'!

Some critics have balanced their criticisms with varying degrees of approval, while others have written with pronounced negativity. Half a century ago, J. I. Packer expressed an acute ambivalence towards the subject of his highly-acclaimed 1954 DPhil thesis. In his 1969 Puritan Conference paper and his preface to the 1974 Banner of Truth Trust edition of *The Reformed Pastor*, Packer effectively 'prosecutes' Baxter before he 'praises him'. More recently, in the 2004 Regent College edition of Baxter's *Saints' Everlasting Rest*, Packer fails to avoid a 'dig' at Baxter's alleged doctrinal defects. While commending his personal and pastoral accomplishments, he judged that Baxter's theology of atonement and justification was 'something of a disaster'. As I demonstrated in *Atonement and Justification*, it is strangely incoherent that Packer can lament Baxter's theological activity, yet praise his pastoral accomplishments. After all, many of the ideas objected to in the theological treatises can be found (albeit with reduced intensity) in the very devotional and practical writings Packer praises so highly. Baxter's theological and pastoral activities were all of a piece: the conclusions of his 'polemical' works drove the teaching evident in his 'practical' works. He was a thoroughly integrated 'pastor-theologian'. In short, there is no valid basis for Packer's dichotomy.

Packer also went for the 'man' rather than the 'ball'! Criticism of Baxter's alleged 'poor performance in public life' reveals more about Packer's Anglican and Owenite bias than Baxter's alleged failures. Had Baxter been charmingly diplomatic, are we to imagine he'd have been successful at the Savoy Conference (1661) in winning over intransigent clerics like Bishop Morley; and, in pursuit of Presbyterian-Independent unity (1669), stubborn 'over-orthodox' Puritans like John Owen? No, Baxter's lack of 'success' arguably reflects the reluctance of those who, unlike Baxter's numerous nationwide friends and supporters, were too entrenched in their ways meekly to appreciate the wisdom of his persuasive anti-sectarian Bible-based proposals.

Neither does Packer's dubious psycho-analysis of Baxter stand up to scrutiny. To attribute Baxter's 'plain' outspokenness to 'compensation for an inferiority complex' hardly fits with Packer's own acknowledgement that Baxter was 'a brilliant cross-bencher, widely learned, with an astounding capacity for instant analysis, argument and appeal', and one who 'could run rings round anyone in debate'. Clever and correct statements but their significance not-so-cleverly missed. Indeed, no man in England had less cause to feel inferior to anyone than Richard Baxter! It seems evident that his opponents were simply irritated by his over-matching intellectual brilliance and irresistible eloquence. Unlike the 'politically-correct', Baxter always told it 'as it was'. He was not in the business of obfuscation, especially in the presence of those determined to destroy his God-honouring

legacy.

The same applies to Packer's charge that 'Baxter's interventions regularly deepened division, as when in 1690 he published *The Scripture Gospel Defended* to stop Crisp's sermons from causing trouble and thereby wrecked the 'Happy Union' between Presbyterians and Independents almost before it had begun'. This assessment simply fails to grasp the gravity of Tobias Crisp's blasphemous antinomianism. For Baxter, to tolerate a gross perversion of Christianity would have led to a most 'unhappy' and ungodly union. It would also have added fuel to social and political suspicions regarding the morals of Protestant Dissenters and reinforced Roman Catholic detestation of Protestantism in general. For him, it was that fundamental, and he was right to speak up.

Looking back at my assessment of Packer in *Atonement and Justification*, I think I was too lenient with Packer and perhaps too critical of Baxter. One wonders too whether Packer's negativity towards Baxter was due to his awareness of the great Puritan's irrefutable criticisms of unbiblical Anglican church order. Having affirmed - contrary to the Anglican Articles and Prayer Book - John Owen's view of limited atonement in 1959, he was also involved a decade later - at the very time he was demolishing Baxterianism (1969) - with non-evangelical churchmen in the highly-dubious ecumenical proposals outlined in *Growing into Union* (1970). This publication precipitated a division within the growing Reformed constituency. It led to a cancellation of the Puritan conference that year, the gathering re-emerging as the Westminster Conference in 1971.

While Geoffrey Nuttall's 1965 biography had reminded the Christian world that Richard Baxter was an ecumenical pioneer, nothing of his contribution appears in *Growing into Union*. Baxter would have every reason not to be amused! One may say that Packer's anomalous public behaviour raises questions about his own 'psychology'. Puzzled as I was at the time that Packer could appear as a stalwart pro-Owen Puritan one year, then as a compromised anti-puritan ecumenist the next, I asked an Anglican friend to explain the anomaly. The reply was striking: "When Dr Packer sits around the fire with those of contrary views, his convictions begin to melt in the heat." This propensity became even more evident in the 'Evangelicals and Roman Catholics Together' era when Packer took part in a public discussion in Belfast with a Roman Catholic priest (*Evangelicals and Roman Catholics in Relationship: Issues for the 21st Century*, 2003). How extraordinary all this is! Baxter, who wrote several hard-hitting books against Rome, is still pilloried for flirting with Rome, while Packer can retain his standing within the Reformed constituency despite his own highly-

publicized flirtations!

Judging by his Foreword to the big 2013 Crossway tome on the atonement, *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*, and a recent issue of the Banner of Truth magazine (May 2015), it is unfortunate to see Packer's ongoing unquestioning propagation of 'Owenism'. More recently, sympathetic admirers such as Joel Beeke have not been able to avoid highlighting Baxter's alleged defects over justification and his 'Arminian tendencies'. Then, in late 2015, American 'pro-Owen' scholar R. Scott Clarke decried Baxter's doctrine of justification as 'theological arsenic'. We are told that Baxter 'effectively scuttled the Reformation doctrine of justification'. The question for such critics is simply stated: from a strictly Christian perspective, how could Baxter be so successful if he was so unsound?

Considering the stances and careers of many of Richard Baxter's critics, it is difficult not to accuse them of sheer impertinence. More than three centuries on, what have any of us achieved in the light of Baxter's magnificent and wonderful accomplishments, not to speak of his courageous sufferings for Christ? In the spirit of a public defence of Baxter I made at the Westminster Conference in December 2014, and despite all that has been said, I intend in my unashamedly-hagiographical tribute to align myself with men who knew, heard and loved Richard Baxter - Matthew Sylvester, Dr William Bates and Dr Edmund Calamy. With reference to these able and godly men, I intend - to the glory of God - to vindicate, then celebrate, the life and testimony of Richard Baxter. My stance is that of William Bates, who declared: 'His name will shine longer than his enemies shall bark'.

I close this preface with a personal expression of regret. Had the 'Reformed revival' of the late 1950s (associated with the Banner of Truth Trust and other publishers) given 'iconic' status to Richard Baxter instead of John Owen, I believe - on many levels - that evangelical witness would have been generally more effective and fruitful. Evangelism would have been warmer and less-inhibited, holiness more evidently fruitful, and biblical church unity more fervently pursued. In view of J. I. Packer's ambivalence towards Baxter, is one surprised that the latter's works have been so under-promoted? Young ministers were not likely to devour the practical works commended so highly by Packer if Baxter's theology was 'so disastrous'. As we shall see, there is a precedent for my criticism in one of Baxter's fervent but little-known admirers, one Samuel Clifford (d. 1726), son of the ejected Rector of East Knoyle in Wiltshire, also Samuel (d. 1699). A consideration of Clifford's brief but significant contribution *plus* an extensive theological vindication of Baxter, will serve to introduce us to the sadly-neglected positive assessments of Bates, Sylvester and Calamy.