



RICHARD BAXTER

AND

CONVERSION

*A Study of the Puritan concept
of becoming a Christian*



TIMOTHY K. BEOUGHER

MENTOR





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Dedicated to
my precious wife, Sharon,
in gratitude for her love, support, and patience
during the writing of this book.
Like Richard Baxter's Margaret, she is
'the meekest helper that I could have in the world.'

And to my children, Kristi, Jonathan, Kari and Karisa.
A dad could not be any prouder of his children
than I am of you. May your lives be characterized
by the passion for God that the Baxters displayed.





FOREWORD

BY

J. I. PACKER

Even where evangelism goes vigorously ahead (and, thank God, there are many places where it does), mental muddle about conversion is widespread, as is liberal Protestant hostility to all forms of evangelistic practice. Liberal prejudice can quickly be diagnosed as the result of equating Christianity with universal natural religion and seeing the Christian mission in terms of social uplift rather than personal change. But the evangelical muddle is not got rid of so easily.

Whence comes the muddle? It is a case of cognitive dissonance, the presence of unrecognised incompatibles side by side in the mind. In this case, the dissonance results from trying to combine evangelical theology with an evangelistic ethos of pressure tactics which for the past century and three-quarters has gripped the evangelical imagination and has not yet let go. Its sociological roots seem to be Enlightenment man-centredness, the romanticizing of evangelists as hero-figures, the development of techniques for manipulating human groups, small and large, and the modern craving for mastery in every field of endeavour. Its spiritual (or maybe I should say, unspiritual) fruits are that whenever evangelism is the agenda item, evangelicals jump to thinking in terms of



special out-of-course meetings at which a hero-evangelist in the Finney-Moody-Torrey-Sunday-Graham mould “draws in the net” – that is, skilfully induces the immediate response of conversion to Jesus Christ in repentance, faith, and whole-hearted discipleship. The trappings of the close of the meetings are well known: in contrast with its bright, lively and relaxed beginning, tension is whipped up; the choir, which at first sang loudly, now sings softly; the evangelist, who earlier shouted, now purrs; counsellors stand poised to instruct and pray; persuasive pressure, playing on felt deficiencies, holding out help for the helpless, hope for the hopeless, and security for the insecure, is at its height; the insinuation of all that is being said and done is that everyone can actively, savingly, respond to Jesus Christ in this net-drawing moment, and here and now find the fulness of a totally new life. So says the evangelical imagination; but evangelical theology tells us that it’s not necessarily so, for grace does not always work in this fashion; hence the dissonance and hence the muddle. The regular altar call in some churches witnesses to the same muddle.

Evangelical theology tells us that personal conversion, or God’s effectual calling, as older Reformed theology labelled it, is a process whereby, under the light of constant instruction about faith, repentance and true life in Christ, new creation – regeneration, that is – takes place secretly in the human heart, and shows itself by first desiring and then seeking Jesus Christ, and continuing to reach out for him and open one’s life to him and invoke his promises and adore his mercy till one knows that one has found him (or, putting it more correctly, knows that one has been found by him); after which one continues to walk with him in discipleship to him, living and obeying, loving and serving, worshipping and working in peace and in joy. Though realisation of the reality of the Saviour’s nearness, and consequent change in thought and behaviour, may be sudden in the final decisive stage of conversion, as it was for Paul on the Damascus road and has been for very many since, the process as a whole takes time, and it is God, not we who labour for conversions, who will decide how quickly or slowly it will advance, and when it will come to fruition,



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in each particular case. Pressing on others the urgency of seeking the Lord in conversion, which we must ever do, is not to confer on them the power to instantly repent, confidently trust in Christ, and radically turn one's life around, changing everything from the inside out – only God can do that. We who evangelize must resist the temptation to put our trust in techniques for, in effect, speeding up, short-circuiting, and forcing forward the conversion process. Let God be God in evangelism, as in all else!

This is where the team of Baxter (seventeenth-century Puritan pastor-evangelist) and Beougher (twenty-first-century Southern Baptist professor, student of Baxter) can help us. Baxter holds it all together – the sovereign grace of God, the renewal of the heart, the need to teach and learn the faith with maximum seriousness and urgency because of the eternal issues at stake, and the importance of every Christian congregation being an evangelistic powerhouse. And Beougher holds Baxter together, presenting him, his wisdom and his passion, with clarity of both thinking and writing.

Anyone who observes that a third of this book is endnotes and bibliography will jump to the conclusion that it was once a doctoral thesis, and he will be right. (I can testify; I supervised it.) It seems to me an outstanding piece of work, of great pastoral relevance for our time. So do not be frightened by the apparatus of scholarship; look for the jewels of wisdom. You will find them, and you will be blessed.

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It is the very drift of the gospel, the main design of the whole Word of God, to convert men from sin to God, and build them up when they are once converted.

... if you be not converted, you are not true Christians. You may have the name, but you have not the nature.

It is all one to be a man, and not to be born; as to be a true Christian, and not to be new-born: for as our conception and birth is the passage into the life and world of nature, so our conversion or new birth is the passage into the life of grace.

Conversion is the most blessed work, and the day of conversion the most blessed day, that this world is acquainted with.¹

Puritan religious experience centered around conversion, the 'new birth' of the soul. This focal point, exemplified here by the Puritan pastor, Richard Baxter, has been called the 'essence of Puritanism'.² Even those who argue that the heart of Puritanism is found in other characteristics³ cannot deny that



the Puritans regarded conversion as extremely significant. One cannot read far into the Puritans' works without encountering this emphasis time and time again. Preachers preached on it, books were written to explain it, and the saints painstakingly examined themselves as to its progress in their own lives.

This study seeks to answer the question, 'What understanding of conversion [the process of becoming a "true Christian"] did the Puritan pastor Richard Baxter have?' This analysis is called for because few of the earlier treatments of Puritan conversion have dealt with Baxter,⁴ while those works which have focused exclusively on Baxter have usually examined other areas of his life and thought.⁵

Why should we study Baxter's views to help us in our understanding of Puritan conversion? First, he wrote a great deal on the subject. Baxter devoted four of his major works exclusively to conversion,⁶ and the theme occurs regularly throughout the remainder of his writings.⁷ His methodical treatment of the subject provides ample material for an equitable examination of his views.

Second, Baxter's writings enjoyed widespread dissemination, both in England and abroad.⁸ Others eagerly read and applied what he taught concerning conversion.⁹ Baxter himself gives some indication of the influence of his *Call to the Unconverted*:

God hath blessed [it] with unexpected success beyond all the rest that I have written (except *The Saints Rest*). In a little more than a year there were about twenty thousand of them printed by my own consent, and about ten thousand since, besides many thousands by stolen impressions....

Through God's mercy I have had information of almost whole households converted by this small book.... God ... hath sent it over on his message to many beyond the seas.¹⁰

Orme suggests that the overall effects of this book in the conversion of people 'have been greater probably than have arisen from any other mere human performance', and that its influence is 'beyond all calculation'.¹¹

Third, Baxter, arguably the greatest of the Puritan pastors,¹² provides an excellent example of a theologian/pastor who not



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only wrote a great deal about conversion but also put it into practice in a parish ministry.¹³ The often quoted passage from his autobiography demonstrates his tremendous effectiveness:

The congregation was usually full, so that we were fain to build five galleries after my coming thither.... Our private meetings also were full. On the Lord's Days there was no disorder to be seen in the streets, but you might hear an 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 passed one family in the side of a street that did not so; and that did not by professing serious godliness, give us hopes of their sincerity.¹⁴

Baxter's ministry resulted in large numbers of people becoming 'true Christians'. What did he teach concerning conversion? How did he put that teaching into practice? To provide a context for our study, we next will undertake a brief review of the existing literature on Puritan conversion.

Review of the Literature

The interest in Puritan studies cultivated by scholars such as Haller, Knappen, Miller, and Woodhouse has blossomed into a prodigious literary output which shows no signs of slowing. Books and articles treating different aspects of the Puritan phenomenon continue to emerge from the presses on a regular basis. While several of these essays perpetuate the unceasing debate over definition,¹⁵ others highlight areas such as the Puritan view of work, family, education, ecclesiology, and bibliology, to name only a few.¹⁶ The study of Puritan conversion has received a great deal of attention in recent years. The purpose of this review of the literature is not to give an exhaustive list of the works on Puritan conversion, nor to evaluate even those listed here, but briefly to acquaint the reader with some of the previous research done in the field.¹⁷ Several of these works will be evaluated in the Conclusion in light of the results of this study.

Alan Simpson argues in his work *Puritanism in Old and New England* that conversion is the 'essence of Puritanism'. He maintains that the doctrine was a logical development among the English of the Protestant doctrines of predestination, justification by faith, and the authority of the Scriptures.¹⁸

Edmund Morgan examines Puritan conversion in the context of his discussion concerning requirements for church membership. He traces the growth of the idea of requiring a conversion narrative before one could be admitted to the membership of many New England churches, and argues for a basically uniform 'morphology of conversion'.¹⁹ Patricia Caldwell, in her work *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginning of American Expression*, argues against Morgan's position (which she previously held) concerning a morphology of conversion. Caldwell claims that, instead of producing 'stereotyped conversion experiences, stiff and formulaic, dutifully conforming to established theological conventions', individuals made significant and varied uses of the 'formula'.²⁰

Norman Pettit helped focus attention on the aspect of preparation in Puritan conversion with his book, *The Heart Prepared: Grace and Conversion in Puritan Spiritual Life*.²¹ Pettit argues that the Puritans changed the orthodox Reformed theology of the sixteenth century where the sinner was 'taken by storm', emphasizing instead that sinners were to 'prepare' themselves for saving grace. A more recent work dealing with the subject of preparation is Charles Hambrick-Stowe's *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England*.²² Hambrick-Stowe rejects Pettit's assertion that an unregenerate sinner could achieve preparation for conversion, and in the process redefines 'preparation' as a series of spiritual exercises (e.g. daily prayer, meditation, and worship on the Sabbath) by which Christians should prepare constantly and all their lives for final union with the risen Christ.²³

Lynn Baird Tipson's dissertation entitled 'The Development of a Puritan Understanding of Conversion'²⁴ is a thorough examination of the concept of conversion held by William



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Perkins and his best-known Elizabethan Puritan contemporaries. The study conceives conversion broadly as the whole process by which God was understood to draw sinful man back to himself and his service, by which men turned from resistance to active participation in God's design for the world. Tipson challenges the widely held belief that Perkins forced conversion into a series of well-defined stages, and argues instead that the key to understanding Perkins' view of conversion is 'the recognition that God's free grace allowed man's free will to co-operate with it and strengthen an initial weak faith into full assurance'.²⁵

Two other dissertations also focus attention on this crucial area of Puritan life. James Shields has examined the doctrine of regeneration as it was understood and taught by seven English Puritan theologians of the seventeenth century, noting that in that period 'regeneration was considered synonymous with conversion, resurrection, sanctification, and vocation or calling'.²⁶ Sidney Rooy's work discusses the theology of conversion of representative Puritans to elucidate the development of the theology of missions in the Puritan tradition.²⁷ Rooy notes that the conviction that persons must be brought to personal conversion 'dominates the Puritan message'.²⁸

An award-winning book by Charles Cohen focuses on the Puritan experience of conversion to examine how ministers elaborated the psychological imperatives of faith and how their listeners modified and internalized them. Through an extensive use of primary source material, Cohen attempts to emphasize and understand what conversion meant to the men and women of that century instead of searching for hidden meanings in their lives and actions.²⁹

Numerous other studies focusing on this general topic could be cited as well.³⁰ What then does this book purport to do? How does it differ from these other treatments?

First, it adds Baxter's voice to the chorus of Puritans whose views on conversion have received a thorough examination. We demonstrated earlier that a comprehensive analysis of Baxter's views is a significant lacuna in this field of study.

In light of Baxter's significance, our picture of the Puritan understanding of conversion cannot be complete without investigating his views.

Second, this study attempts to view conversion in its various aspects by studying Baxter's views holistically. Because conversion is intrinsically related to other doctrinal and practical issues, to gain an accurate picture of his teaching, we must examine it in its complete context.

The book contains two main sections. Part One explores Baxter's theology of conversion, followed by Part Two which investigates his practice of 'soul-winning'. The Puritans would have disdained the modern practice of separating theology from practice; in fairness to Baxter and his Puritan heritage, I have chosen to treat both together in this study. It is hoped that this holistic approach will shed more light on Baxter's understanding of conversion as we are able to examine it both in theory and in practice.

Chapter One provides the historical background for our treatment. A brief summary of Baxter's life and ministry positions the study of his theology in its proper context. Particular attention is given to Baxter's own conversion experience. What light does it shed on the debate over a 'morphology of conversion'? Did his own experience perhaps affect his theological formulations?

Chapter Two analyzes the theological foundation of conversion. In order to appreciate how Baxter arrived at his conclusions, this chapter begins with an explanation of his theological method. How did he use Scripture? What use did he make of natural theology? Next, his teaching concerning the need for conversion and the basis for conversion are set forth. Why is conversion necessary? How did Baxter view man's predicament? What was the effect of Christ's death? Did he die for all men, or only for the 'elect'?

Chapter Three considers Baxter's understanding of the doctrine of Justification.

Chapter Four looks at the process of conversion. What does it mean to become a 'true Christian'? How did someone actually become 'converted'? What role did preparation play



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in the process? Was humiliation a necessary step? Was there a 'morphology of conversion'? What kind of assurance could the Christian expect? This chapter elucidates Baxter's perceptions on these key issues.

The second section of the book begins with Chapter Five, which describes Baxter's teaching and practice regarding the presentation of the gospel. How should the gospel be shared? What method(s) should be employed? In what manner should the presentation be made? How did he appeal to the unconverted to 'turn and live'?

Chapter Six examines the church and conversion. How did Baxter's concern for adult conversion impact his view of the Church? How did he relate the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper to conversion? How did he work within the concept of a national church to seek the conversion of the unregenerate in its midst? How did he attempt to keep conversion piety within the framework of the national church?

The Conclusion summarizes the findings of the investigation and evaluates their significance for Baxter studies and for our understanding of Puritan conversion. Secondary literature is assessed in light of the results of this research on Baxter.

Because this study centers upon one man, the dates of his life span form natural chronological boundaries, in this case 1615–1691. The method for handling the material is logical rather than chronological, though the study attempts to be sensitive to the issue of development in Baxter's thought.³¹ Since this study is concerned with Baxter, the focus is on the writings of Baxter himself. He was a prolific author, with the most accurate bibliography of merely his published writings listing one hundred forty-one titles,³² while other scholars argue for yet more.³³ Many of these writings fall outside the bounds of the topic under consideration and are not examined.³⁴

What is the significance of this study? What contribution might it make? First, it will deepen our understanding of Puritanism as a whole. The twentieth century witnessed a renewed interest in the subject of Puritanism, a movement

which often has been misunderstood and misrepresented. This study seeks to join the many others which are helping to reshape long-held misconceptions of Puritanism.³⁵

Second, this study will add to our understanding of the Puritan view of conversion. Earlier citations have demonstrated that there is no consensus as to what the Puritans taught concerning conversion. Debate continues on issues such as preparation, the legitimacy of a 'morphology of conversion', and the relationship between faith and assurance. This study will shed further light on these and other related issues, particularly for the period of Puritanism which Baxter represented.

Third, this study will hopefully help clear up some of the confusion surrounding judgments of Baxter's views.³⁶ 'His opinions,' said Stoughton, 'have been a battle-ground for critics ever since he left the world.'³⁷ Recent studies have labelled his beliefs as Pelagian,³⁸ moderate Arminian,³⁹ Amyraldian,⁴⁰ improved Amyraldian,⁴¹ and faithful Calvinistic.⁴² In his own day, Baxter was accused variously of being a Papist, a Socinian, and an Arminian.⁴³

It is to his day, England of the seventeenth-century, and his life, beginning in 1615, that we now turn.