

POLITICS AND THEOLOGY  
IN THE THOUGHT OF RICHARD BAXTER  
PART II\*

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4. *Practical Implications of Baxter's Political Philosophy, and of  
His Theory of the Structure of Society*

The questions which we must ask now are these: What are the practical implications of Baxter's political philosophy? How may these be applied to man and society?

Baxter rejected a purely utilitarian social contract theory of the origin of the State. Political government is rather part of the divine constitution of the cosmos. "All government of men, is subservient to the government of God, to promote obedience to his laws."<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, Baxter showed great admiration for political theoreticians who defended this view:

They convinced me how unfit we are to write about Christ's Government, and Laws and Judgment, etc., while we understand not the true nature of Government, Laws and Judgment in the

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\* The first part of this article was published in *AUSS* 15 (1977): 115-126. The following abbreviated forms are used herein for works already cited in Part I:

*CD* = Richard Baxter, *Christian Directory* (1673);

*CT* = Richard Baxter, *Catholick Theologie* (1675);

*HC* = Richard Baxter, *A Holy Commonwealth* (1659);

Packer = James I. Packer, "The Redemption and Restoration of Man in the Thought of Richard Baxter" (D. Phil. dissertation, Oxford University, 1954);

Schlatter = R. B. Schlatter, *Richard Baxter and Puritan Politics* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1957);

*Works* = Richard Baxter's *Practical Works*, Orme ed., 23 vols. (1830).

<sup>23</sup> *CD*, p. 93.

general, and that he that is ignorant of Politics and of the Law of Nature will be ignorant and erroneous in Divinity and sacred scripture.<sup>24</sup>

Baxter with great care tried to draw out the practical implications of the relationship between theology and politics. In order to understand how this was done, his theory of the structure of society must be examined. Baxter maintains that in its basic structure, society is hierarchical and theocratic. In ultimate terms there could be no authority independent of God. Within society, it resides in three main spheres: the Church, the State, and the family. In each of these, the one who exercises authority receives his right to do so from God. Once this is acknowledged, this individual's command to rule must then be respected and obeyed.

But neither is the ruler himself free from obedience. His divinely delegated duties impose upon him a discipline and a responsibility which make him answerable to God. Baxter never ceases to emphasize that man in every situation of life is somehow dealing with God. This is the presupposition with which he discusses the function of the pastor in society. The pastor's authority, Baxter asserts, encompasses both private and public guidance and discipline within the Church. Moreover, the pastor's right to exercise authority and discipline is not purely utilitarian; it is a divine command, the pastor's obligation to society. Therefore, whenever this right was usurped or threatened either by a bishop or civil magistrate, Baxter fearlessly wrote and spoke against such practices. This was consistent with his teaching that the minister, being the shepherd of the Flock, had the moral authority to make known the wisdom and knowledge of God to the people.

And this moral authority includes discipline and catechizing. Hence this prerogative could not be shared by any from among the laity. On this point Baxter was at odds with his Presbyterian colleagues and herein lies a fundamental difference between

<sup>24</sup> *Reliquial Baxterianae*, ed. Matthew Sylvester (London, 1696), 2: 108. Hereafter cited as *RB*.

Parliamentary and Baxterian Presbyterianism.<sup>25</sup> Parliamentary Presbyterianism, says J. I. Packer, followed the Scottish system, while Baxterian Presbyterianism was inspired by the English Puritan tradition and Ussher's *Reduction of Episcopacy*.<sup>26</sup>

In his ministry, Baxter jealously guarded his divinely delegated authority. He considered his congregation as the class which "Christ hath committed to my Teaching and Oversight, as to an unworthy Usher under him in his Schoole."<sup>27</sup>

Baxter frequently employed this principle of delegated authority in his exposition of the prophetic office of Christ and the ordained ministry. "Christ's setting Ministers under him in his Church, is not resigning it to them: We are but Ushers, and Christ is the only Prophet and chief Master of the School."<sup>28</sup> The minister's chief preoccupation must be to teach and exhort, and the people's part is to obey and learn from the teachers whom Christ has appointed over them. No one is exempt. The civil magistrate is a church member, and the minister is truly his teacher.<sup>29</sup>

Regarding the second sphere, the State, Baxter says that the ruler should exercise *his duty to the glory of God*. Thus the connection between the civil authority and the minister must be complementary and must demonstrate a feeling of mutual respect. Ministers must learn that magistrates are their governors. Despite their divine appointment they are still citizens of society and as such must be subject to the jurisdiction of the magistrate.<sup>30</sup>

But it is also the duty of the minister to discipline the magistrate if this becomes necessary:

<sup>25</sup> See Alexander Gordon, *Heads of English Unitarian History* (1895), p. 65. Cf. Packer, p. 353.

<sup>26</sup> Packer, p. 353, n. 2. Nuttall notes that Baxter showed more admiration for Ussher than for any other of his contemporaries.

<sup>27</sup> Baxter, *Aphorisms of Justification*, "To the Reader." Cf. *The Worcester-shire Petition to the Parliament for the Ministry of England Defended* (March 28, 1653), p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Works*, 17:408.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 418.

Our (ministers') power is but *Perswasive*. It is but, *By the Word*; It is but on the Conscience; It is under the Magistrates' coercive Government . . . But . . . God hath *described our office, and limited the Magistrate's office*, so that he hath no power from God to hinder *the Ministry*.<sup>31</sup>

But Baxter warns against the use of the "keys" or "minister's power" to trespass on the prerogatives of the magistrates' authority. It was his deep conviction that the rulers in both spheres are to work harmoniously for the good of the Church and the Commonwealth. This is how he expresses the matter:

The King and Magistrates have *curam animarum*, though not in the sense that the Pastors have. They have charge of the Government . . . in order to promote men's holy, sober, and religious living, and to the saving of men's souls. The same points of Religion, the same sins and duties, come under the judgment of the Magistrate and the Pastor . . . the Magistrate is to Judge, who are to be corporally punished for Heresie and Murder, and Adultery, etc. And the Pastors are Judges of who are to be excommunicated as impenitent in such guilt.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, the role of the civil governor in ecclesiastical affairs, says Baxter, includes the seconding of church censures by civil penalties. This, indeed, he considered to be a key to restraining heresy:

The remedie for Heresie is not to impose another Rule of Faith than Scripture (as if this was insufficient and we could mend it) but to exercise Church Government carefully and if any be proved to teach any Doctrine contrary to the Scripture, that Magistrates and Pastors do their parts to correct such and restrain them.<sup>33</sup>

The magistrate is also to be a guardian of the Church in protecting it from scandalous and incompetent ministers. His *modus operandi* in this respect is the Word of God, for as Baxter remarked, "All human laws are but by-laws, subordinate to God's."<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Baxter, *The Difference between the Power of the Magistrate and Church Pastor* (1671), p. 21.

<sup>32</sup> *Works*, 18:43.

<sup>33</sup> Baxter, *The Judgment and Advice of the . . . Ministers of Worcestershire Concerning the Endeavours of Ecclesiastical Peace . . . Which Mr. John Durey doth Present . . .* (1658), p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Baxter, *Difference Between Magistrate and Church Pastor* (1671), p. 7.

Within the sphere in which his competence can be proved from Scripture, the magistrate must be implicitly obeyed.

We now consider the third sphere of authority within society, namely, the family. Baxter begins by assuming that the family belongs to both the Church and State. The *paterfamilias* exercises patriarchal government within the limits lawfully set by the rulers in each of the other two spheres. His rule in ultimate terms must lead to the same end. He has to exercise both spiritual and secular authority. Indeed, he functions as both pastor and magistrate, and his house is both Church and State.

In view of these responsibilities, the ruler in the family must not only rebuke and discipline, but he must also guide and instruct his family in the true worship of God, so that in the home as well as the Church and Commonwealth, God will be glorified:

Families are societies that must be sanctified to God as well as Churches; and the Governors of them have as truly a charge of souls that are therein, as pastors have of the Churches. . . . But while negligent ministers are (deservedly) cast out of their places, the negligent masters of families take themselves to be almost blameless . . .<sup>35</sup>

Baxter laments that too often fathers neglect the government and instruction of their families, not recognizing the indissoluble tie between the stability of the home and the security of both Church and Commonwealth. Such neglect consequently has adverse effects on the children. Baxter's reputation as a pastor in Kidderminster was due not only to his preaching but also to his close connection with rulers of families in instructing them on the proper way of caring for their households.<sup>36</sup>

It is now clear that Baxter's political philosophy fought shy of any attempt to divorce theology from politics. Indeed, his respect for law and for duly constituted authority was rooted in his conception of the interdependence and interrelationship of these concepts and their practical application in an ordered governed society.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Packer, p. 356.

<sup>36</sup> See *RB*, 2: 84-85.

His determination to preserve this interrelationship drove him to challenge and refute Hobbesian materialism. He insisted that a theory which locates the origin of political government in the surrender to a human sovereign of an absolute right that each man naturally has over himself is not only artificial but challenges the Christian premise of the sovereignty of God. Political government, he reiterates, is an order of existence by divine ordination, and not a matter left to human choice.<sup>37</sup>

### 5. *Baxter Versus Hobbes and Harrington*

In his criticism against thinkers such as Hobbes and Harrington, Baxter declares: "I must begin at the bottom and touch these Praecognita which the politicians doth presuppose because I have to do with some that will deny as much, as shame will suffer them to deny."<sup>38</sup>

From Baxter's perspective, Hobbes' mistake was that in his doctrine of "absolute impious Monarchy" he gives priority to man by making sovereign the will of man rather than the will of God. Baxter deplored any attempt to draw criteria for right and wrong from man's will.<sup>39</sup>

As for Harrington, his great fallacy consisted in denying God's sovereignty by making "God the Proposer, and the people the Resolvers or Confirmers of all their laws."<sup>40</sup>

If his [Harrington's] doctrine be true, the Law of nature is no Law, till men consent to it. At least where the Major Vote can carry it, Atheism, Idolatry, Murder, Theft, Whoredome, etc., are no sins against God. Yea no man sinneth against God but he that consenteth to his Laws. The people have greater authority or Government than God.<sup>41</sup>

In Baxter's view, such conceptions of politics and its practice as

<sup>37</sup> *HC*, p. 52.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> See Schlatter, pp. 15-16.

<sup>40</sup> *HC*, p. 45.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

those of Hobbes and Harrington are suited to atheists and heathen.

Baxter raised his voice against Hobbes and Harrington because they had discarded a theological foundation of political theory for a theory which traced the origin of government to purely utilitarian motivations. In this latter theory men are first viewed as isolated naturally free individuals. Baxter states:

. . . Those that make the Will as much necessitated by a train of natural *second Causes*, which is *Hobbs* his way, (and, alas, the way of great and excellent healing *Camero*) . . . I now deal with none but those who confess, that God made man's will at first with a natural self-determining power suited to this earthly state of government.<sup>42</sup>

Baxter refutes the argument that when men enter into a political relationship they do so out of the inconveniences and violences of that naturally free but insecure state. The presupposition that man possesses sovereignty over himself and does not need to depend upon God, was, as we have said, at radical variance with Baxter's fundamental affirmation, the absolute sovereignty of God. The social contract theory is therefore not consistent, in Baxter's view, with the biblical revelation about the nature of man and the structure of society.

And so, declares Baxter,

if there were no God (and yet man could be man) and if the world had no universal King, that had instituted offices under him by Law, and distinguished the world into Rulers and subjects, then indeed the people might pretend to give the power as far as they have it to give, and be the Original of it: But when God hath given it already by a stated Law, to those that shall be lawfully nominated the people's claim comes in too late.<sup>43</sup>

To make effective his ideal of limited government under law, Baxter enunciated doctrines of inalienable human rights which are necessarily grounded in inalienable duties, constitutional limits on rulers, and a right of resistance to abuses of power.

<sup>42</sup> *CT*, 2:4-5: a reference to *Camero*.

<sup>43</sup> *HC*, pp. 194-195.

It is not to be presumed, however, that Baxter was a political "liberal." To be sure, he steadfastly maintained that the reason and end of political as well as ecclesiastical governments are the promotion of the common good and the exaltation of the sovereignty of God. For this reason he felt that rulers should be given fairly broad powers in order to fulfill these aims.

Baxter pointed to an ascending scale of ends to which political government must tend. The most immediate, he asserts, is the good order of the body procured by the administration, or "the orderly state and behaviour of the society which is the exercise of Government and subjection, and the obedience to God, and just behaviour unto men that is manifested therein."<sup>44</sup> Thus, the immediate end of political government is order and justice. But this is only a means to the intermediate and final end. The intermediate end is the common good. The final end is the everlasting happiness of men and the eternal glory of God.<sup>45</sup>

Consequently, men's striving must not be for power and property, but holiness and goodness; for these constitute the good life and lead to the enjoyment of God in eternity.<sup>46</sup> Geoffrey Nuttall has succinctly summarized Baxter's political position by pointing to the fact that "in politics as well as ecclesiastical matters Baxter *constantly* adhered to a 'moderate' position which from both sides would bring him charges of betrayal or insincerity. . . ."<sup>47</sup>

(Concluded)

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 79-80.

<sup>47</sup> G. F. Nuttall, *Richard Baxter* (London, 1966), p. 31. Italics are mine.