

*The Redemption and Restoration of Man in the Thought of Richard Baxter,*  
**J.I. Packer**

(Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2003),  
reviewed by James M. Renihan

J.I. Packer's published writings cover a wide spectrum from popular to academic and are always thought-provoking and useful. This work, while most recently published, is one of his earliest pieces, having been the substance of his Oxford University doctoral thesis written in 1954. It is too bad that we have had to wait so long for such an excellent piece of work.

The seventeenth century was full of theological titans, and by any account Richard Baxter must be counted in their number. Certainly one of the most controversial of the mainstream Puritans (John Goodwin comes to mind as another), in his own day Baxter was a notable figure addressing most of the theological topics under debate in the English church. Often swimming against the current, he forcefully developed, maintained, and defended a self-consistent theological system that he believed would bring an end to division and strife among Christians. It is odd that, with all his confidence in his views, Baxterianism has not survived.

Baxter had no formal University training, but was well-equipped as a child in grammar schools. He seems to have been a true genius—his familiarity with the published writings of his day, his facility in Latin, and the incredible amount of published material from his pen testify to his unique intellectual qualities. He was a man who made the most of the opportunities set before him. He was dedicated to harnessing all of his faculties to the service of God and his people.

As a young man entering the ministry, he came under the influence of William Twisse, the supralapsarian prolocutor of the Westminster Assembly, and adopted Twisse's view of particular redemption. But in the course of study, abetted by his experience as a chaplain during the Civil War, he came to believe that this doctrine could only lead to one conclusion, i.e. dreaded antinomianism, and that it would utterly undo holiness in the Christian and the church. Setting himself to correct this problem, Baxter developed a system of theology more consistent with a general view of the atonement, adopting a position openly sympathetic with the French school at Saumur.

Baxter argued that the starting point for theology is the "political method," in which God is presented as the *rector* (ruler, governor) who reveals law—not as a transcript of his abiding character but rather as a body of legislation adapted to varying governmental circumstances. Baxter set out a system based on this principle. It allowed him to argue that just as Adam had a law to obey in the garden, so also all of his descendants have a law to obey after the fall. This law is different for sure, as are its governmental circumstances, and is revealed in the gospel, but it is still a law to be obeyed. As far as Baxter was concerned, anything less opened the door to antinomianism, and thus by definition could not be consonant with the Christian faith. This led him to assert a thoroughly unorthodox doctrine of justification, and called out some of the biggest guns against him—among them John Owen. But as Packer says, "His synthesis was no mere agglomeration of bits and pieces, but a connected, articulated whole, the product of organizing genius" (95). His foundation guided his formulations, and reflects a marvelous internal, though highly unorthodox, consistency.

Packer accurately portrays Baxter's amazing abilities and formulations, but at times is within shouting distance of hagiography. One ought to be able to admire the subject of his work, but when that subject develops an essentially heretical system, one needs to express this. I have come to appreciate Baxter's mind and abilities while abominating his doctrines. When Packer analyses the controversies fashioned by Baxter's views and the responses from confessionally orthodox contemporaries, he dismisses the charges of heresy made by these men as "ludicrous" (261). This indictment deserves the same term! To suggest that men like Owen did not understand Baxter because they did not comprehend his first principles, and thus that they missed his point, is itself preposterous. Perhaps some of his lesser opponents were baffled, but such a universal charge

simply cannot stand against the evidence. In his *Neonomianism Unmask'd: or, The Ancient Gospel Pleaded, against the other, called An New Law or A New Gospel* written in 1692, Isaac Chauncy clearly explains the “rectoral” basis of Baxterianism and refutes it thoroughly. Able men understood, examined, and disproved of Baxter’s system. They were correct in identifying it as heretical.

Packer’s book should perhaps, at this point be supplemented by another, written twelve years later, *The Rise of Moralism: The Proclamation of the Gospel from Hooker to Baxter* by C.F. Allison (London: SPCK, 1966; recently reprinted by Regent College Publishing). Allison demonstrates that Baxter must be viewed as the logical culmination of a process that gained momentum in the 1640s and was led by several highly significant Church of England authors, who moved away from a doctrine of justification based on the imputation of Christ’s righteousness as its formal cause, to one incorporating human works. The broader context of theological ferment indicates that Baxter was hardly an anomaly—he was in fact part of a growing movement. The presence of this debate in the mid-seventeenth century demonstrates that Packer is incorrect in his analysis of Baxter’s contemporaries. It is impossible to believe that they were ignorant of this broader discussion. They understood what Allison has described: Baxterianism was a precursor to the adoption of Socinian views of justification. His contemporary critics saw the issues quite clearly.

In contemplating Baxter, I am reminded of another titan from a later era, Augustus H. Strong, who similarly believed that he had solved the theological divisions afflicting his own day. Like Baxter, Strong attempted a synthesis that he believed was comprehensive and final, and fully expected his contemporaries to adopt his system, putting an end to the differences between them. Is it not curious that both these men (and others like them) confidently proposed systems that did not survive even half a century past their deaths? We are reminded of the dangers of innovation and over-confidence. Is the current circumstance of division among Christians beneficial? No. But there is no human who will be able to find a theological solution to the diverse views confessed by Christians. We wait for the Lord alone to do this work.

There is an interesting subtext in this work—not that Packer intended it to be so—but it is present nonetheless. As one reads the author’s analysis of Baxter, one notices explanations of some of the choices made by Packer himself during his career. While he is not at all cantankerous like Baxter, there is every appearance that Baxter’s attempts at being a “meer catholick,” finding middle ground with many diverse Christian groups, may have molded and shaped Packer’s own views on the subject. His commitment to Reformed Orthodoxy has been unswerving, and yet he has embraced, and to some degree, validated churches and movements with highly questionable and apparently unorthodox theological positions. Baxter sought a middle way. Has his student done the same?

Without question, this book deserves a careful reading. Packer writes expertly, and has digested Baxter’s system well. With the *caveats* mentioned above, I commend it as a stimulating piece of historical-theological writing. There are at least two editions available. Regent College Publishing’s edition is case bound with a color portrait of Baxter on the front cover. It is also available in paperback from Paternoster Press.