

Richard Baxter on the Millennium

by Douglas E. Cox

Richard Baxter (1615-1691) was an influential Puritan leader in the seventeenth century, during a period when the meaning of the thousand years of Revelation 20 was a topic of controversy, especially in England. One of the last books written by Baxter was about Christ's reign in the present age.

This book was advertised as "Against the bold asserters of a future calling and reign of the Jews, and 1000 years before the Conflagration, And asserters of the 1000 years kingdom after the Conflagration; Opening the promise of the New Heaven and Earth, and the everlastingness of Christ's kingdom, against their debating it, who confine it to 1000 years, which with the Lord is as one day." [1]

Baxter said the chief writers arguing for a future Millennium were Conformists, "and men of the greatest learning and piety among them;" he listed Joseph Mede, Henry More, William Twisse, Dr. Cressoner, Thomas Beverley, and Increase Mather.

In previous times the leading Reformers had discredited chiliasm, as noted in the following paragraph from a Wikipedia article:

During the Reformation period, amillennialism continued to be the popular view of the Reformers. The Lutherans formally rejected chiliasm in The Augsburg Confession. "Art. XVII., condemns the Anabaptists and others 'who now scatter Jewish opinions that, before the resurrection of the dead, the godly shall

occupy the kingdom of the world, the wicked being everywhere suppressed." Likewise, the Swiss Reformer, Heinrich Bullinger wrote up the Second Helvetic Confession which reads "We also reject the Jewish dream of a millennium, or golden age on earth, before the last judgment." [Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church, Vol. 1, 307. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson)] Furthermore, John Calvin wrote in Institutes that millennialism is a "fiction" that is "too childish either to need or to be worth a refutation." [John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, XXV. v.] The Anglican Church originally formalized a statement against millennialism in the Anglican Articles. This is observed in the 41st of the Anglican Articles, drawn up by Thomas Cranmer (1553), described the millennium as a 'fable of Jewish dotage,' but it was omitted at a later time in the revision under Elizabeth (1563).

Baxter listed various opinions of scholars who viewed the thousand years of Revelation 20 as already fulfilled; some claimed it began at the birth of Christ, and was now past [Aretius, Bilney, Wicliffe, Walter Brute, Benno Cardin]; others that it began at the passion of Christ [Viegas, Pererius, Augustine, Primasius, Bede, Andreas]; others that it began at the destruction of the Jewish state in 70 AD [Junius, Pareus, Dent, Broughton, Bibliander, Usher]; others that it began at the reign of Constantine [Brightman, Majer, Forbes, Willet, Gerhard, Guild, Cartwright, Alcaser Casiglius] and others that it began at the fall of Maxentius, or Constantine's edict, and extended to the Ottoman Empire [John Fox, Hugo Grotius, Henry Hammond]. Baxter seems to have included himself in the last group; he wrote, ". . . the Dragon being bound up a Thousand Years from the Churches deliverance — from Constantine's Edict to the Ottoman Empire." [2]

In Baxter's view, the idea of a future earthly millennium was "a fiction full of contradictions" and was "dishonourable to Christ and his Kingdom." He wrote: [3]

XX. Christ's glorious appearance and judgment will be both the triumphant concluding parts of the kingdom of redemption and grace which he will deliver up when his recovering work is done: and the beginning of the kingdom of glory: in which, as his reward, he will ever in human nature be glorified, as the mediator of fruition, as he was of acquisition, and that in the heavens. His coming in the air is not there to reign a thousand years, but presently to judge the world, as in Matth. 25. he describeth it: and to confine his kingdom in human nature, and ours with him to a thousand years, and confine it to the air, and the survivors on earth, is a fiction full of contradictions, dishonourable to Christ and his Kingdom, uncomfortable to the Church.

The idea of two millenniums, later embraced by Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687-1752), was apparently already held by some. Baxter said that the scripture mentions only one thousand years. He wrote: [4]

XXI. There is but one thousand years mentioned in scripture, from whence they can fetch the least shew for their limitation; and it is only in Rev. 20. But it is most evident that the thousand years there mentioned was to be before the Conflagration, and New Earth, and resurrection: for it was to be before Satan was loosed, and before Gog and Magog, and their numberless armies assaulted the holy city; and before the fire from God came on them. And the Paradise restored state of the New Earth, in which dwelleth righteousness, is not consistent with so much wickedness of the inhabitants, and Satan's power over the nations: nor with a Laodicean lukewarmness, and danger of being spued out. They therefore that well expect a thousand years reign before the resurrection, have no pretence to expect another Millennium after.

The traditional interpretation of the thousand years had embarrassed protestant authors, because Roman Catholic writers could boast that their Church had reigned for a thousand years, and they could interpret the Reformation as a fulfillment of the prophecy of the hordes of Gog and Magog who assault the camp of the saints, which is the church.

Daniel Whitby (1638-1726) argued that Old Testament prophecies about the re-establishment of the throne of David applied to the Church. He thought a national conversion of the Jews would precede the millennium, which was yet future. [5] Baxter commented: [6]

XXII. To expect a thousand years, and after that the fall of Papal Rome, before the Resurrection, is a supposition that this world will endure a far longer time than Christians have hitherto believed: and that the great Sabbatism is to be before the New Earth: And what a Sabbatism that will be, the description of Gog and Magog, and of their Laodicea, may tell you: Far unlike a Paradise state, when all things shall be restored, and the groaning creation be delivered from the bondage of corruption, into the glorious liberty of the sons of God.

Baxter also criticized those looking for a conversion of Jews at Jerusalem, and pointed out that if such a conversion were to occur they would not remain Jews. [7]

XXIII. They that assign this thousand years on this side of the Conflagration and resurrection, for the setting up a Fifth Monarchy of the converted Jews at Jerusalem, are the grossest feigners of all the rest. Well did Jerome say, that the Millenaries fetch their error from the Jews, and would set up Judaism by it. (He that dwelt so long at Bethlehem knew the Jews' opinions.) For (to pass by what else is after to be said) their very fiction is a contradiction. Were our Jews converted, they would in less than a hundred years be no longer a Jewish nation: for their state of peculiarity with the Mosaical policy is abolished by Christ, and must never be restored: and they must and would marry with

Gentile Christians, and fall into the Catholic Church as rivers into the sea, and lose the name of Jews; so did their converted predecessors.

Baxter pointed out that there was much disagreement among the Millenaries. He wrote:
[8]

XXV. It is a marvel that the great disagreement of the Millenaries among themselves, yet hindereth not their seeming concord, while they can but cry up the thousand years reign, though most of them know not what the words mean. Some of them say, the thousand years are on earth, and some say, they are only the souls of the martyrs and confessors in heaven: some say, they are both in heaven, or in the air, and on earth at once. Some say, that they shall be a Jewish monarchy at Jerusalem; and some, that it shall be of the godly all over the world. Some say, Christ will reign there visibly in his humane nature; others, that he will only sometime appear, as he did after his resurrection: and some, that he will rule there only by reforming Christian princes. Some hold but one thousand years, and some two, (one being after the other.) Some hold two New Jerusalems, and some but one. Some say, that the day of judgment is the thousand years (and yet that scripture hath not told us how long Christ will be judging us.) And some, that it is only the beginning and the end of the thousand years, that the judgment will take up, and the rest will be in other government. Some think that execution on men and devils will be but that thousand years; which some decry. Some think that the first resurrection, is from an aerial vehicle or body into an ethereal; and others that it is from earthly dust to a heavenly body by a transmutation of elements: and others that it is to be a paradise body, like Adam's before he sinned. Other differences seem almost reconciled to some, by the bare name of a thousand years reign.

One of the most telling arguments against Millenary opinions was that while it stirred up much zeal amongst its supporters this had failed to "make them zealous in holy love for God and man." He wrote: [9]

XXVIII. We find it so easy to possess men with a fervent Zeal for the Millenary opinion, and so hard to make them zealous in holy love for God and man, and in a heavenly conversation, as make us suspicious that both sorts of zeal have not the same original: I am not willing to name some tremendous instances of men nearly known to me, hereabout.

As for Baxter, his own life was exemplary in many ways. In *Discrete Millennialism*, the thousand years is symbolic, and applies to individuals, not to the whole age of the church, or to a particular part of it. Satan is bound for individuals, rather than for a particular age,

as was true in the case of Jesus Christ. Baxter's description of what it means to walk with God, in the quote below, might also apply to individual saints who reign with Christ. [10]

To walk with God is a word so high, that I should have feared the guilt of arrogance in using it, if I had not found it in the Holy Scriptures. It is a word that importeth so high and holy a frame of soul, and expresseth such high and holy actions, that the naming of it striketh my heart with reverence, as if I had heard the voice to Moses, 'Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.' Methinks he that shall say to us, 'Come see a man that walks with God,' doth call me to see one that is an angel or glorified soul. It is a far more reverend object in my eye than ten thousand lords or princes, considered only in their fleshly glory. It is a wiser action for people to run and crowd together to see a man that walks with God than to see the pompous train of princes, their entertainments, or their triumph. O happy man that walks with God, though neglected and contemned by all about him! What blessed sights doth he daily see! What ravishing tidings, what pleasant melody doth he daily hear! What delectable food doth he daily taste! He seeth, by faith, the God, the glory, which the blessed spirits see at hand by nearest intuition. He seeth that in a glass darkly, which they behold with open face. He seeth the glorious majesty of his Creator, the Eternal King, the Cause of causes, the Composer, Upholder, Preserver, and Governor of all worlds. He beholdeth the wonderful methods of His Providence; and what he cannot reach to see, he admireth, and waiteth for the time when that also shall be open to his view. He seeth by faith the world of spirits, the hosts that attend the throne of God; their perfect righteousness, their full devotedness to God, their ardent love, their flaming zeal, their ready and cheerful obedience, their dignity and shining glory, in which the lowest of them exceeds that which the disciples saw on Moses and Elias, when they appeared in the holy mount, and talked with Christ. He hears by faith the heavenly concert, the high and harmonious songs of praise, the joyful triumphs of crowned saints, the sweet commemoration of the things that were done and suffered on earth, with the praises of Him that redeemed them by His blood, and made them kings and priests unto God. Herein he hath a sweet foretaste of the everlasting pleasures which, though it be but a little, as Jonathan's honey on the end of his rod, or as the clusters of grapes which were brought from Canaan into the wilderness; yet they are more excellent than all the delights of sinners.

References

1. Richard Baxter. *The glorious kingdom of Christ, described and clearly vindicated.* 1691.
2. Ibid., p. 7.
3. Ibid., p. 8.
4. Ibid. p. 9.
5. Daniel Whitby, *Paraphrase and Commentary on the New Testament, With a Treatise on the True Millennium.* London : William Tegg and Co. 1899.
6. Richard Baxter. Op. Cit. p. 9.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., pp. 9-10.
9. Ibid., p. 11.
10. John Hamilton Davies. *The life of Richard Baxter, of Kidderminster: preacher and prisoner .* 1887. pp. 35-36.