

RICHARD BAXTER'S ECCLESIASTICAL PRINCIPLES

The Nonconformist Controversy

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Introduction

Richard Baxter was accused of promoting division in the established Church by an opponent during the Nonconformist controversy:

There needs no other argument to undeceive the people as to his pretences for Peace and Unity in the Church of God than his furious acting in, and arguing for, that most unnatural War against the King.¹

You see Mr. B. is armed with Prejudice and Zeal *Cap-a-péé* for a War, wherein to resist his Superiours, under a pretence of Reformation, though to that resistance the Word of God threatens Damnation.²

In pursuing church purity, did Baxter forsake church unity? Were his ecclesiastical principles for Nonconformity justified? Were the divisions caused necessary? Did he sin in causing schism in his attempt not to sin

¹ Edward Stillingfleet, *The Unreasonableness of Separation, The Second Part* (STC2; London, 1682), 14, 729:1.

² Stillingfleet, *The Unreasonableness of Separation*, 25.

by accepting the impurities of the Episcopal church government? This paper will review Baxter's ecclesiastical principles and try to deal with the above questions. First, a historical survey on the uniformity attempted from the establishment of the English Reformation to the Restoration will be given. Second, an account of the Nonconformist controversy will be made. Third, Baxter's ecclesiastical principles of Nonconformity will be examined. Fourth, a critique on his ecclesiastical principles will be made. Finally, the relationship between church purity and church unity will be suggested on the basis of the above work.

The History of Uniformity Attempted from the Establishment of the English Reformation to the Restoration

During the reign of Elizabeth I, the queen decided to include all the parties except Romanists in the Church of England. In 1559, the Parliament passed two bills, namely the Act of Supremacy and the Act of Uniformity. The deciding factor was the political concern on national unity against a foreign aggressor.³ Church unity meant one national church and one form of worship. The national Church would use an amended 1552 Book of Common Prayer. This policy had caused convulsion to the Church of England for nearly a century. Those who sought church purity from the relics of ancient superstition first received the name of Puritans. They were driven from the established Church by the requirement of swearing obedience to all the queen's injunctions in 1566.

During the reigns of James I and Charles I, there was a profound fear of Popery reviving in England. When James I allied himself to the Episcopate, he declared "No bishop, no king."⁴ This alliance of the divine right of the bishop with the divine right of the king further complicated the relationship of church and state, and the relationship between religious liberty and civil liberty.⁵ Moreover, Archbishop Laud introduced a theory that the parish church was not a church but only part of the Church; and the parish clergy was governed by the diocesan bishop. This theory denied

³ A. Harold Wood, *Church Unity without Uniformity* (London: The Epworth Press, 1963), 54. Wood comments that political considerations were integral both in the Elizabethan Settlement and the Restoration Settlement.

⁴ Edward Carey Pike, *English Nonconformity*, 3rd ed. (London: Bible Christian Bookroom, 1899), 57.

⁵ Pike, *English Nonconformity*, 57.

the authority of the local pastor over his flock. Laud also took Episcopacy as the *esse* of the Church. He exalted the bishop as the guarantor of orthodoxy and the symbol of unity.⁶ Then came the struggles between Charles I and the Parliament, the abolition of Episcopacy and the establishment of Presbytery.

In 1640, new canons with an oath came out. The clergy had to take an oath declaring that bearing arms against the king was unlawful and vowing that they would never alter the present Episcopal form of church government. The Long Parliament declared this Book of Canons null and void. However, it was finally imposed after 1660 at the restoration of Charles II. This was the very thing that triggered the Nonconformity.

During the reign of Cromwell, Presbyterianism was the established religion of the state. Comprehension or toleration were the questions raised within this period. Baxter proposed a comprehensive national church while the Independents proposed toleration. Baxter was accused of intolerance towards the Independents later by the bishops who expelled the Nonconformists in 1662. He defended his position as being against unlimited toleration and Separatism.⁷

When the Restoration followed, Episcopacy was restored. The act of uniformity was passed again. Ministers were required to vow that they would neither bear arms against the king, nor attempt any alteration of the Episcopal church government of the Church of England. As a result, 2,000 ministers resigned on Bartholomew-Day in 1662. From that day followed a long period of struggle between the Episcopal Church and the Nonconformists.

The Stillingfleet Controversy⁸

In 1680, Edward Stillingfleet,⁹ who had formerly written an *Irenicum*¹⁰ to propose a moderate and healing measure to reconcile the

⁶ Wood, *Church Unity without Uniformity*, 65-66.

⁷ Wood, *Church Unity without Uniformity*, 111.

⁸ William Orme, *The Life and Times of the Rev. Richard Baxter: With a Critical Examination of His Writings*, vol. 1 (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1831), 188-211.

⁹ Stillingfleet had been the "Rector of Sutton," the "Dean of St. Paul's," and the "Bishop of Worcester." See Orme, *The Life and Times of the Rev. Richard Baxter*, 201.

¹⁰ *Irenicum* was an attempt to show that there was no form of church government found in the New Testament. It was first published in 1659. Stillingfleet then repented of

Puritans, attacked the Nonconformists by giving a sermon titled "Mischief of Separation" which was published afterwards. He put all the blame of separation from the established Church on the Nonconformists. William Orme describes this as "the firing of a signal gun at the commencement of a general engagement."¹¹

Richard Baxter, Alsop, John Howe and John Owen all gave their responses to Stillingfleet's accusations. They tried to defend their principles of Nonconformity. In the following, I will focus on Baxter's responses.¹²

Baxter first wrote his *Answer to Dr. Edward Stillingfleet's Charge of Separation* (1680). In this work, he used Stillingfleet's concept from *Irenicum* that there was no divinely instituted form of church government to point out the unreasonableness of the established Church. Since there was no institution of any form of church government, the Episcopacy was of human origin and carried no absolute authority. Therefore, there was no ground to command subscription nor to forbid any alteration of it.

Stillingfleet responded with his *Unreasonableness of Separation* which was published in 1681. He gave an historical account of the separation from the Church of England, and exposed the inconsistency of some of the Nonconformists' arguments.

Baxter replied with *A Second True Defence of the Mere Nonconformists, against the Untrue Accusations, Reasonings, and History of Dr. Edward Stillingfleet* (1681). He tried to prove Nonconformity was a duty. The Nonconformists were forbidden to preach the gospel and participate in public worship, which in turn was charged as schism.

Stillingfleet did not answer this time. Others took his place. They were Dr. Sherlock, Mr. Long, and Dr. Richard Hooke. Dr. Sherlock affirmed:

writing this book for he considered his concept has yielded too much and needed reconsideration. See Orme, *The Life and Times of the Rev. Richard Baxter*, 201.

¹¹ William Orme, *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter*, vol. 1B, *Writings* (London: James Duncan, 1830), 628.

¹² William Orme comments that Richard Baxter had a longer list of publications than all the other Nonconformists in the Stillingfleet controversy. See Orme, *Writings*, 629.

Whoever separates himself from the church of England cuts himself off from the Catholic church, and puts himself out of a state of salvation. Separation from the church of England is a schism, and a schism is as damning a sin as idolatry, drunkenness, or adultery.¹³

Baxter published *A Search for English Schismatic* in 1681. It gave a comparison of the principles and practices of both the Conformists and the Nonconformists.

After the Stillingfleet controversy, Baxter continued the defense for Nonconformity with his *Treatise of Episcopacy* (1681). He showed that the divinely instituted episcopal churches in the New Testament were but single congregations, with volunteer ministers.

His next publication was *An Apology for the Nonconformists' Ministry* (1681). It added a work to the defense of the Nonconformists against Dr. Stillingfleet. Baxter proved that, even though forbidden by the state, it was the duty of ministers to preach. He also warned about the awful accountability before God awaiting those who prevented preaching.

Finally, he came to his last publication, *The English Nonconformity, As under King Charles II. and King James II.; Truly Stated and Argued* (1690). In this work, the whole Nonconformist controversy was argued in a series of dialogues between a minister and a lawyer.

Baxter obviously had carried out a long struggle to make known the reasons of their Nonconformity. What were his ecclesiastical principles in dealing with the controversy?

Baxter's Ecclesiastical Principles

Baxter gave the Nonconformists' reasons for their fear and Nonconformity in *The English Nonconformity*.¹⁴ In the preface, he stated that: (1) The magistrates received the power from God. They should not go against God's law. (2) Man should act according to his conscience. To go against his conscience was sin. (3) If they were required to do any thing sinful in their ministry, they were obligated not to conform.

¹³ Quoted in Orme, *The Life and Times of the Rev. Richard Baxter*, 206.

¹⁴ Richard Baxter, *The English Nonconformity, As under King Charles II and King James II Truly Stated and Argued* (STC2; London: the Bible and Three Crowns, 1690), 524:16. Later references to this book will be abbreviated as *EN*.

Those who were bound by their consciences and did not conform to the sinful things that were imposed by the Act of Uniformity, 1662, were called Nonconformists.

In "An Instance of the Accusations Which Call for Our Defence,"¹⁵ he mentioned the unreasonable accusations which called for their defense: (1) Nonconformists did not conform to the established government practice in any way. (2) Although some practised occasional conformity, they also formed sects and plotted against the government. (3) Since they refused to subscribe to the oath, "That they do not hold it lawful to take up arms against the king, and that they will not endeavor any alteration of government either in church or state," they were accused of engaging themselves in some rebellious conspiracy against the king.

In the following, the author will discuss the ecclesiastical principles upon three aspects of controversy in his works.

The Relationship between Church and State

With the monarch acting as the Supreme Governor of the Church of England, how can the roles of the Church and the state be defined and played? Baxter had the following concepts which affected his principles and actions:

The Concept of Kings and Magistrates

1. Kings and magistrates were ministers of God for men's good. Their authority was from God. This carried two corollaries. First, kings should not do anything against God or His laws.¹⁶ In other words, they should be ministers but not usurpers. Second, people should obey the king and all his officers since the king was the supreme governor in matters of civil and ecclesiastical. To Baxter, this should be according to the true boundary set by the oath of supremacy.¹⁷ He realized that oaths joined the government of church and state together.¹⁸ He was very much

¹⁵ "An Instance of the Accusations Which Call for Our Defence" follows the preface in Baxter, *EN*.

¹⁶ Baxter, *EN*, the preface.

¹⁷ Baxter, *EN*, 31.

¹⁸ Baxter, *EN*, 39.

bound by the oath taken by him no matter if it was voluntary or under pressure.

2. In considering the oath of not endeavoring any alteration of church government, Baxter viewed it as a way for the king to preserve his monarchy.¹⁹ Baxter only showed his analysis of the situation; he did not go from the analysis to offer any response. I think, however, the concept that the Church should not be political can be derived from his analysis. The Church should neither join the political government nor oppose the king as a political institution, e.g. excommunicating the king and threatening to depose him, etc. In Baxter's program for reform and unity in 1659, he proposed church discipline rather than governmental penalties.²⁰ He might have been trying to free the Church from the state by purifying the Church from any appearance of political influence.

3. Chancellors who were laymen were usurpers in exercising the keys of the church, such as excommunication and absolutions.²¹

The Concept of the Church as a Community under the Leadership of a Pastor:

1. The pastor should be chosen with the consent of the flock.²² Baxter pointed out that those who were not chosen by the flock but owed their position to an oath of obedience might be conforming to things contrary to the Word of God. However, only pastors who conformed to the Word of God were lawful and could be entrusted with the care of souls.

2. The church members had the duty to obey their pastors according to the Word of God.

3. The pastor had the authority to discipline and excommunicate church members.

4. He should exercise discipline in order to reform the Church.²³ Such church discipline to be exercised was grounded on the Word of

¹⁹ Baxter, *EN*, 130-31.

²⁰ Wood, *Church Unity without Uniformity*, 116.

²¹ Baxter, *EN*, 32, 34.

²² Baxter, *EN*, 31-33.

²³ Wood, *Church Unity without Uniformity*, 22-27.

God. Through church discipline, the separation of the Church from the world was ensured. Thus it was unlawful for the Conformists to deprive the local church of this use.²⁴

The Concept of the Church and the Individual Believer

1. Every man had his personal power, or conscienceto, to judge his conduct. He should act according to his conscience. To go against his conscience was sin because it meant to go against God. He should make his own judgment in each incident that whether the king acted as a minister or an usurper, and whether he should conform or not conform to what the king had required him.²⁵

2. All believers had to obey God before obeying man. If human law contradicted God's law, it was the duty of believers not to conform.

3. If he found out that his conscience had erred, he should make correction for his disobedience to God.

4. Nonconformity did not mean to go against the king and his acts. It was only concerned not to sin against God. To Baxter, the imposition of the Prayer Book by the king was not a conincing reason to stop using it.²⁶ He himself had subscribed to the Prayer Book, and was convinced of the lawfulness of it. He only claimed the right to omit certain elements from the Prayer Book and to abridge the service.²⁷ He called this attitude passive obedience.²⁸

5. He was not against joining a church which included some faults of practice. Joining a church with some faults did not mean committing the same sin ourselves. Christians had the duty to keep peace with these churches since they were in communion with them.²⁹ These churches were still true churches.

²⁴ Baxter, *EN*, 178, 180.

²⁵ Baxter, *EN*, the preface.

²⁶ Baxter, *EN*, 11.

²⁷ Baxter, *EN*, 11; *Church Unity without Uniformity*, 39-40.

²⁸ Baxter, *EN*, 14.

²⁹ Baxter, *EN*, 14.

The Relationship between Church and State:

1. Self-government, family-government and public polity were all divinely instituted as the law of nature. However, "public polity hath no authority to abrogate self-government or family-government, but only to over rule and use them for the common good and safety."³⁰ Therefore, public polity should not cancel any other governments but make use of them. Also, public polity should not decide for individuals.

2. Each of the state and the Church had its own calling and scope of obligation. Discipline belonged to the scope of the Church should be exercised by the pastor.³¹ Baxter pointed out the inconsistency of the chancellors' exercising excommunication but he did not give the sacraments since the use of the keys of church was to judge who should be admitted to sacramental communion.³²

3. Christians should submit as far as possible to the state. In the case of the king's forbidding the Nonconformists to preach, Baxter kept silence although he knew that it was the minister's duty to preach and he should obey God. To him, this reason was insufficient since the need for the preaching ministry had not evidently arisen.³³

4. Baxter thought that it was lawful for Christians to resist the commissioner of the king for self-defense.³⁴

Ecclesiastical Principles upon the Relationship between Church and State:

The ecclesiastical principles can be summed up as: (1) The Church should submit to the authority of the king in civil and ecclesiastical matters. (2) The Church should neither join the political government, nor be a political institution opposing the king. (3) Both the Church and the state have their own scope of obligation. They should be ministers rather than usurpers. (4) Local church should be free to choose its own pastor who would minister according to the Word of God. Then the church members would have the duty to obey this pastor, while the pastor would have the authority to discipline — he should exercise it in order to reform the church. (5) Christians should exercise their conscience and keep the

³⁰ Baxter, *EN*, 6-7.

³¹ Baxter, *EN*, 13, 34.

³² Baxter, *EN*, 35.

³³ Baxter, *EN*, 16.

³⁴ Baxter, *EN*, 272.

principle of obeying God before men. If his conscience erred, he should make correction. He should stay in the impure church since it was still a true Church. (6) Christians could resist the commissioner of the king for self-defense.

The Form of Church Government

There were several forms of church government present in Baxter's time: the Episcopacy, the Presbyterians, the Independents. Which was the one divinely instituted? If one was found to be divinely instituted, what were the rest?

The Episcopacy

1. The authority of the Church was mainly in the hand of kings and magistrates who were laymen only. First, the bishops of Episcopacy were all chosen by the king. Second, their jurisdiction was usually exercised by a layman. Third, in excommunication and absolutions, the lay chancellor was the judge.³⁵ What it reflected were a kind of monarchical government and a joining of civil government with church government. The king was the head of the Church. His officers were usurpers concerning affairs of the Church which did not belong to their scope of obligation.

2. The Episcopacy turned the parish churches to parts of a diocesan Church.³⁶ Without election and consent of the flock, ministers were arranged for the parish. These ministers who should be responsible for exercising church discipline carried no such authority.

3. Altered from the primitive practice of the ancient Church, the Episcopacy was a corrupted form of church government.³⁷ The Episcopacy was unlawful to Baxter.³⁸ It was sinful in modeling church government after the state.³⁹ It was not divinely instituted.⁴⁰ Its form

³⁵ Richard Baxter, *A Treatise of Episcopacy*, vol. I (STC2: London, 1681), 6-8, 270:2.

³⁶ Baxter, *EN*, 36.

³⁷ Baxter, *EN*, 32; *The Treatise of Episcopacy*, vol. I, 39. Baxter took Episcopacy as a new order created sinful.

³⁸ Baxter, *EN*, 36.

³⁹ Baxter, *The Treatise of Episcopacy*, vol. I, 120.

⁴⁰ Baxter, *The Treatise of Episcopacy*, vol. II, 83. The Brownists considered the Episcopal Church not a "true" Church because it was not divinely instituted.

should not be absolutized. Nevertheless, just like the impure church still remained the true Church, the Episcopacy remained the order of the Church, but belonged to the lowest species.⁴¹ Church unity could be achieved by going back to the primitive Episcopacy with simplicity which was received by the ancient Church.⁴²

4. In a national church, the Christian king and magistrates should be responsible to preserve the orthodoxy and order of the Church. Baxter, in *The Treatise of Episcopacy*, stated that the work of a Christian magistrate was both civil and ecclesiastical. Apart from their responsibility of executing the laws of nature of God, they also had to promote instituted doctrine of Christ, worship and discipline.⁴³ Baxter was subordinating the Church to the state. He believed that the law of nature had become part of Christ's law. It could be used as the instrument of His government. Not only for the common good and order of the redeemed world, but also the special good and order of His Church.⁴⁴

The Presbyterians

1. It was the divinely instituted form of church government.⁴⁵ They differed from the Episcopacy by including more orders: archpresbyters (Episcopacy: bishop), presbyters, and deacons.⁴⁶

2. Baxter disagreed with the rights of presbyteries to control individual pastors and their congregations. He advocated that the congregations should choose their own pastors. Though the congregations might include both the ignorant and the wise, it was important for them to get involved and give consent according to their consciences.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Baxter, EN, 12; *The Treatise of Episcopacy*, vol. I, 69. Baxter said, "Bishops and Presbyters differ not as two orders, but in degree."

⁴² Baxter, EN, 5; *Church Unity without Uniformity*, 130-33. Baxter proposed Archbishop Usher's plan of modified Episcopacy (the form of synodical government received in the ancient church) in 1662 in order to attain union of Presbyterians and Independents.

⁴³ Baxter, *The Treatise of Episcopacy*, vol. I, 29.

⁴⁴ Baxter, *The Treatise of Episcopacy*, vol. I, 29.

⁴⁵ Baxter, *The Treatise of Episcopacy*, vol. II, 101.

⁴⁶ Baxter, EN, 28; *The Treatise of Episcopacy*, vol. II, 111.

⁴⁷ Baxter, *The Treatise of Episcopacy*, vol. II, 123-24.

The Independents

The Independents freed themselves from the parish system. They gathered to form their own churches. Baxter also would welcome the authority of ministers over their flock in the parish churches. His disagreement with the Independents was on the issue of separation from the national Church. Baxter would accept the Independents to minister in the parish churches on independent principles without separation.⁴⁸

Ecclesiastical Principles upon the Form of Church Government

The ecclesiastical principles were: (1) Although the Presbyterian was the divinely instituted form of government, the Episcopacy, though corrupted, remained a true Church. The church members should remain in the national Church. (2) Any other forms of church government which were not divinely instituted should not be absolutized. (3) Church unity could be achieved by going back to the primitive practice of the ancient Church. (4) A comprehensive national church was ideal with the support of the civil power. (5) The Church could be understood as one Catholic Church, and also many particular churches. (6) A good quality minister could serve as a means of the reformation of the Church through the ministry of Word and discipline.

The Form of Worship

The impurities of the form of worship that Baxter pointed out were those which did not exist in the Scripture. He considered them as contrary to God's Word. What was his response towards these impurities?

His Attitude towards the Prayer Book

Baxter at his ordination had subscribed to the Prayer Book. He claimed the right to omit a few features or to abridge the service. He did not oppose the whole book, but some sinful features of the book.⁴⁹

Enforced uniformity carried out by the state did not make the Church of England into the church of the whole nation, but only an established sect. Baxter was against toleration towards the separating churches. To him, only a comprehensive national church could withstand the inroads of Popery. Furthermore, Baxter proposed comprehension within Christian

⁴⁸ Baxter, *A Treatise of Episcopacy*, vol. II, 95.

⁴⁹ Baxter, *EN*, 10-16.

subjects and no toleration towards other religions. He only tolerated those he considered belonging to the true Church. The fundamentals he considered for Christian subjects included the Scripture, the Creed, the two sacraments, the Lord's Prayer, and Decalogue.⁵⁰ He believed that it was false to take the faulty church or the dissenters as not the true Church. The Church was not all pure, it could exist with some faults.⁵¹ He could keep peace and unity within the Church by not accusing others of doing something unlawful,⁵² but he himself reserved the freedom of not doing it. This was what he called passive obedience.

Since he advocated a comprehensive national church, he did not take the ceremonies and liturgies as the essentials of a church. He allowed variations. He recognized the Scripture as a general rule. He said, "We never held that the Scripture is a particular rule, commanding every accident and circumstance about God's Worship, but only a general rule in those circumstances which must be some way determined."⁵³ He allowed human determination on those not particularly divinely determined. On one hand, Baxter pointed out the impurities; on the other hand, he advocated a comprehensive national church and allowed human determination. He might need to spell out in his writings that human determination should not go beyond the boundary set by the general rule, the Scripture.

Impurities Found in the Prayer Book ⁵⁴

Of Ministers

A minister serving in a particular church should not administer sinful things to his congregation, or else his ministry would be unlawful since it was contrary to the Word of God. Baxter felt conforming to the whole practice enjoined by the Prayer Book would include the following impure practices:

⁵⁰ Baxter, *A Treatise of Episcopacy*, vol. II, 87.

⁵¹ Baxter, *EN*, 116-17.

⁵² Baxter, *EN*, 11. The Nonconformists "never denied the lawfulness of a Form of Prayer or a liturgy."

⁵³ Baxter, *EN*, 13.

⁵⁴ Baxter, *EN*, 17-207. Baxter first gave a summary of the matters concerning Nonconformity in chapter 4. Then he discussed those concerning ministers in chapters 5 to 43, and those concerning the laity in chapters 44 to 55.

1. Concerning subscribing to an oath, he was asked to swear not to take arms against those commissioned by the king, not to endeavor any alteration of church government. If there were many things contrary to the Word of God in the Prayer Book, he could not take the oath.

2. Those ministers ordained under the Presbytery were required to be re-ordained. However, the previous ordination should be acknowledged even though the ministers served under a different form of church government.

3. Ordained ministers who did not conform to the Prayer Book were forbidden to preach, even though preaching was the duty of ministers according to the Word of God.

4. Concerning infant baptism: (1) Of infidels: The Canon commanded ministers to baptize all infants assuming that they would be saved if they died before committing any actual sin. To Baxter, the issue was whether the parent of the infant was a believer. He believed that "all infants that are baptized that neither believe, nor are the seeds of believers shall be saved" is a new gospel.⁵⁵ It was sinful to baptize all and say that all baptized dying infants were undoubtedly saved. (2) With Godfathers at baptism: Godfathers were sponsors for Christians' children in that they covenanted for their future education. Baxter struggled here because: (a) Parents were more appropriate to make this covenant. (b) A Godfather could not gain any right for the child of infidel parents. (3) Symbol of crossing: It was an added sacrament of man. (4) Of refusing baptism to those without Godfathers; and to those who denied baptism to those refused to make the symbol of crossing: It was in fact sinful to make Godfathers and symbol of crossing essential to baptism. (5) Forcing ministers to baptize all children: It was unlawful since some children were the children of the infidels. How could one guarantee the salvation for them?

5. Concerning kneeling at communion, Baxter took kneeling at communion as an added sacrament which should not be treated as essential. To reject all those who did not kneel from communion, all who did not agree with Episcopal confirmation, and the Nonconformists, from communion were an inappropriate penalty. The reasons were: (1) Refusing to conform to the liturgies did not make them non-believers,

⁵⁵ Baxter, *EN*, 54.

so why should they be rejected from communion? (2) Threatening with excommunication only furthered divisions. Those who did not intend to become schismatics would be forced into separation. Thus it was the Episcopates who actively separated the Nonconformists from themselves.

6. Concerning reading the Apocrypha which was not God's Word and using the Septuagint translation of Psalms which was mistranslated, the Nonconformists would not conform to such things in the Prayer Book.

7. Concerning church membership, the Episcopates rejected the Nonconformists and excommunicated men who went for baptism and communion under the dissenting ministers.

8. Other sinful things imposed in the Prayer Book that Nonconformists did not approve of were: pronouncing all saved that were buried in churchyards, having ornaments in the church, requiring the wearing of surplice, and forbidding unlicensed fasts and prayer.

Of the Laity

Impurities affecting the laity were similar to those affecting the ministers. The difference was that the laity were the ones to receive the ceremonies and rites, not the one who administered them. There were two things particular to them. First, concerning the right to choose the pastor, how could this right be denied since it concerned their souls? Second, church discipline should not be avoided since the church members should be discouraged from committing sin and encouraged to practise godliness in order to get separated from the world.

Ecclesiastical Principles upon the Form of Worship

Baxter did not intend to separate from the Church for the impurities of the Prayer Book. What he emphasized was the liberty of conscience.

First, man had to make judgment on everything and had to act according to his conscience. To go against one's conscience was sin. As a minister, if he went against his conscience and ministered something sinful to his flock as commanded, he was made accountable for it. As a layman, if he went against his conscience and conformed to sinful things, he was made accountable for it. If ministers or laymen knew that they were required to do something sinful, it was their duty to refuse.

Concerning church unity, we can understand Baxter more by reading Baxter's proposal in 1659. In it, he said, "We are certain leaving these unnecessary things at liberty...is the way to unity."⁵⁶ As the external ceremonies and rites were not essential to the nature of the Church, they could be left to liberty. Christians could just take them as optional according to their own conscience.

Second, Baxter adopted an attitude of passive obedience. He concerned more about the liberty of conscience regarding sinful things than uniformity in external ceremonies and rites. However, when the Nonconformists were excommunicated and excluded from the communion, Baxter was forced to separation.

Even schismatics belong to the true Church, it should not be excluded from the communion.⁵⁷

A Critique

My critique of Baxter's ecclesiastical principles is as follows:

Emphasizing the Individual rather than Community

The Christian individual acts according to his conscience rather than following the king or the community. We have to look at the things from both sides. If the individual has conscience, the king and others within the community have their own conscience too; why do not they consider others? Since conscience can err, why do not they doubt their judgment, and conform to the judgment of majority? Conscience must be grounded in the knowledge of the Scripture. Without evidence from the Word of God, it would be void. To emphasize an individual's liberty of conscience without mentioning first the individual's responsibility of knowing the Scripture, is also a kind of reduction of the authority of the Bible. He might put human reason before the Scripture and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

⁵⁶ Wood, *Church Unity without Uniformity*, 116.

⁵⁷ Baxter, *EN*, 176.

Neglecting the Sin Committed with Ignorance

Baxter failed to consider seriously the objective character of sin. No matter whether one is committing sin with his awareness or not, he is still sinning against God and people. When a Christian, though according to his conscience, does not follow the whole community in doing something required for the benefit of the whole community, he may sin against the whole community. Or when a Christian, according to his conscience, acts with false righteousness, he is sinning against people, hurting people with his unreasonable manner. Besides any judgment, we need to think of the consequences too.

Oversimplification of the Justification of Separation

Who are the Separatists? Who are sinful in schism? The Episcopates or the Nonconformists? To choose to stay within the Church of England or to separate from it is not so simple and easy.

Baxter did not take active part in promoting divisions. What he intended was to stay within the Church of England. He paid high respect to the king as the accidental head of the Church of England. Unfortunately, the king enforced uniformity in the external ceremonies which Baxter himself considered less important. With political enforcement, separation was enforced too. The separation was even commanded by the king because he ejected the Nonconformists from communion. The king excommunicated them and separated them from the Church of England. In view of this, Baxter was innocent in causing divisions.

However, if we look at Baxter's passive obedience, we cannot say that Baxter was completely free from the accusation. Is unity without uniformity possible? Although the Nonconformists did not censure the other church members for their practice, their standing aside had already spoken against them. Their conscientious action had already accused the Conformists for doing what the Nonconformists would not do. How could the Conformists stand against this silent accusation? Therefore, disunity within the community still existed. Furthermore, can we call such a situation, everyone doing things according to their conscience, unity without uniformity? Baxter in his passive obedience still caused disunity in the Church.

Conclusion: From Church Purity to Church Unity

To Baxter, religion is a matter of personal faith rather than public ceremony.⁵⁸ Baxter most cared about personal faith and the individual Christian's life of godliness. His emphases on the exercising of Christian's conscience and the quality of ministers in particular churches implies that he desired a reformation to take place right in the heart of individual Christian. What is the use of maintaining a pure external ceremony without the real faith and practice of Christians? To him a good quality minister can act as a good teacher to educate the conscience of Christians with the knowledge of the Bible. True unity can only start from education and purification of one's heart with the Word of God.

However, Baxter was not free from the accusation of causing disunity in the established Church. Both passive obedience and active separation would affect one's relationship with the other church members. He wrote:

We never separated from any tolerable Parish Ministers or Churches, as if they were no true Ministers or Churches, nor persuaded any so to do, nor to take the Communion of such Churches for unlawful to us, either occasionally or constantly, when we can have no better without more hurt than benefit to ourselves and others.⁵⁹

Baxter determined to stay in the established Church as long as it remained a true Church. However, his practice of passive obedience took away his duty of preaching so that he no longer had the chance of promoting church purity. Also, within the national Church, he still hurt the Church and brought it to disunity. Moreover, his intolerance of the Separatists was so recapitulated by the Episcopates towards his group that eventually they were forced into separation.

Whether his ecclesiastical principles were justified or whether he sinned in causing schism depends on two considerations: whether it was unavoidable for him to hurt the national Church, and whether he had exercised his Christian conscience correctly. First, Baxter would choose to exercise one's conscience and obey God. Thus the hurt induced by the passive obedience was unavoidable. Second, Baxter would recommend

⁵⁸ Michael Watts, *Dissent in England 17th-18th Centuries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978; reprinted, 1985), 75.

⁵⁹ Baxter, *EN*, 14.

church unity without uniformity and correction when in error. However, in view of Baxter's forsaking his duty of preaching in peaceable silence, the author would add to it continuous dialogues between church members of different opinions, and between church members and the Word of God, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. One cannot guarantee faultless Christian consciences but only submit them to the guardianship of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit.

ABSTRACT

This paper studies Richard Baxter's ecclesiastical principles upon three aspects of controversy in his works written during the Nonconformist controversy. The three aspects of controversy were the relationship between church and state, the form of church government, and the form of worship. The Church of England had become an impure church since it violated some of these church principles. For example, it adopted a system of Episcopal government and included some faults of practice in public worship. Baxter was true to his conviction that Christians should exercise their conscience and keep the principle of obeying God before men. However, they should stay in the impure church since it was still a true church. In practicing the ideal of church unity without uniformity in a national church, Baxter unavoidably caused hurt to the national Church which expected uniformity.

撮 要

本文研究巴克斯特在不從國教爭議中有關政教關係、教會行政組織和崇拜禮儀三方面所持的教會原則。英國教會因所作的違背了這些原則而成為不純潔的教會，如採用主教制度及仍將一些錯謬的做法保留在公共崇拜中。巴克斯特忠於所信，認為信徒須憑著良心順從神不順從人，但在實踐這原則時仍應留在不純潔的真教會內。巴克斯特在實踐沒有一致表現的教會合一時，無可避免地對要求一致的國家教會造成傷害。