

A Most Unlikely Wedding

He was a most unlikely groom in a most unlikely wedding. For years Richard had waxed eloquent on his conviction that a pastor who was doing his job correctly would have no time for a family. He followed his own advice and was a confirmed bachelor until the age of 47, and yet, here he was, waiting for his soon-to-be bride—a woman only half his age—to come down the aisle.

Richard Baxter served as the curate (assistant to the local vicar or priest) in the church at Kidderminster, a village of poor handloom weavers near Birmingham, England. It was a wicked place when he arrived in 1641, but by the time he left in 1660 the combination of his powerful preaching ministry and constant pastoral visitation, blessed by the Holy Spirit, had brought revival to the village. Baxter said, “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 past one family in the side of a street that did not so. . .”



Mary Hanmer, a wealthy widow, moved to Kidderminster in 1655 specifically to place herself and her 16 year-old daughter Margaret, under Baxter’s preaching. Margaret was a shallow and frivolous girl who cared more for her clothing than for her soul. She hated the dreary life in Kidderminster and rebelled against her mother by dressing as ostentatiously as possible in contrast to the poor of the city. She was a flirt, worldly, vain and apparently shallow. But more was going on in Margaret’s life than met the eye.

Under Baxter’s preaching, Margaret slowly became awakened to her own sins of selfishness and pride. She entered a time of rigorous self-examination and prayer, and began corresponding with Baxter for spiritual counsel. By 1659, she was certain that she had come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ.

Baxter left Kidderminster in 1660 to help Charles II plan the restoration of the Church of England. Despite his objections, Margaret and her mother followed Baxter to London. In January 1661 Mary Hanmer died, leaving Margaret alone in the world. Baxter preached the funeral service.

While Margaret grieved for her mother, Baxter faced a crisis of his own. It was becoming more and more clear that the national church would not include non-conformists—Puritans like Baxter—in their ranks. That meant that he could be fined or imprisoned for preaching the Gospel and that it would be impossible for him to have another pastorate like the one in Kidderminster. He was dejected. He was a preacher without a pulpit; his calling and livelihood were officially taken away in one act of Parliament in May 1662.

And so, with the self-imposed barrier of the demands of the pastorate removed, Baxter found himself free to marry in September 1662. There is some question as to how the marriage came about—one account claims Margaret proposed to Richard and another speculates that Mary Hanmer had a role in the match with a death-bed plea—but there is no doubt that Margaret and Richard were a great consolation to each other. This is not to say that either of them were perfect. Richard tended to be humorless, tactless and grumpy. Margaret was high-strung, a perfectionist, bossy and demanding. Their marriage tempered their weaknesses. It also allowed each of them to use their strengths to help the other.

After the wedding, Margaret shouldered most of the practical and domestic duties of the household, freeing Richard to write an astounding 128 books in addition to his articles and letters. Margaret found emotional security in her relationship with Richard and was overwhelmingly happy, which freed her to new levels of ministry. She gave away hundreds of books to any who would read them, began a school for poor children and arranged for opportunities for her husband to surreptitiously preach and teach.

Margaret died in 1681 after 19 years of happy marriage. Richard plunged himself into writing to assuage his grief, and immortalized her “cheerful, wise, and very useful life” in his book, *Breviate of the Life of Mrs. Margaret Baxter*. Richard knew that Margaret, like every good gift, was a blessing from the Father.

The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away: and He hath taken away but that upon my desert, which He had given me undeservedly near nineteen years. Blessed be the name of the Lord. I am waiting to be next. The door is open. Death will quickly draw the veil, and make us see how near we were to God and one another, and did not sufficiently know it. Farewell vain world, and welcome true and everlasting life.

Despite severe persecution by the state church and imprisonment, Baxter continued to preach and write until his death in 1691. His work has endured. Today, *The Saint’s Everlasting Rest*, *Christian Directory* and *The Reformed Pastor* are still widely read and valued for their practical wisdom nearly 350 years after they were written.

Bibliography:

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