

An Autobiographical Sketch by Ern Baxter

Lessons in Objective and Subjective Christianity

In my lifetime, I have watched many wonderful moves of the Spirit flow through the church like great, refreshing tides only to ebb again, carrying away some Christians into error and leaving others stranded in disillusionment. These moves need not have ebbed so dramatically had the people of God realized their need to hold firmly to the Word of God while maturing in the life and gifts of the Spirit. The objective counsel of the Word instructs in the proper use of the gifts and reduces subjective misuse. I have seen this principle repeatedly disregarded over the years, resulting in various distortions that have derailed the uninstructed. In writing this brief, autobiographical account I hope to share with others a perspective gained from over 50 years. I believe that the lessons I have learned have not only been useful to me but could contribute to the health and growth of others.

The Early Years

Seeing promise in my father, W. E. Baxter, as a banker, the Canadian Bank of Commerce brought him from Scotland to Canada. There he met Annie May Clark. They soon fell in love and were married. At the time, my father, a very sophisticated and proud man, was a nominal Presbyterian; my mother, a very beautiful Irish farm girl, was not even a nominal part of any church. So, shortly after I was born, in 1914, I was baptized in the Presbyterian church. My mother was soon to follow her mother and two sisters in conversion; and to my father's chagrin, she did so at a little church that sat up on a hill not far from my father's fashionable, beautifully appointed Presbyterian church.

In my father's opinion, that unpretentious little church building, when compared to the classic edifice to which he belonged, sorely lacked redeeming value. In addition, the people who attended lacked the social status my father thought useful to a budding career. He was terribly disappointed. My mother could now claim a vital experience with God through Christ, yet my father felt that somehow a very unkind trick had been played on him. He had religion aplenty in his background, but no personal knowledge of the living God. The practice of religion at a respectable church was just the socially acceptable thing to do. My mother had no interest in such religion. She wanted the Lord. My father's distress grew until, finally, he gave my mother an ultimatum one Sunday evening as she was about to leave for a service. "If you go to that meeting tonight," he stated, "I'll not be here when you return." Scotsmen do not speak lightly, and my father meant what he said.

It was a long walk to church that evening. My mother realized that she was leaving behind the one person other than God whom she most dearly loved. She knew that the turning point in the battle between him and his need for God had arrived. She would either lose him that evening or win him more completely than ever before. She heard little of what the pastor said. She remembered little of the singing and worship. She could only sit and silently pray. Immediately after the service had ended, she left for home full of apprehension, which increased as she approached the apartment and nervously unlatched the door. She entered, and the apprehension gave way to amazement when she found my father sitting on the sofa exactly as she had left him. Quietly, she went over to him and invited him to pray. He looked up at her, and without a word swung around and got down on his knees, giving his life to the Lord on the spot. Never again did he look to the right or the left, and he will always be in my eyes an outstanding example of one who faithfully walks with God throughout life.

My experience with my mother's church caused me some difficulties, I am sorry to say, because I received nothing but a steady diet of behavioral teaching that emphasized the need to be good in order to be saved and to keep my salvation. It was not difficult to see that I would never be able to live up to the high standards that I was hearing preached. I began to despair at how I was continually failing God, and my despair led me to question my faith and my salvation. It seemed an impossible situation. My only option was to sink deeper into despair, because I had no one to teach me any of the great propositional truths upon which I would later learn to base my life. To make matters

worse, my teenage body was undergoing dramatic growth and change, and I was emotionally unstable and vulnerable.

During this crisis, my parents moved into classical Pentecostalism. A servant of God had come across the prairies and had been remarkably used of the Lord in several of the prairie cities. When he came to our area, he rented an old, partially disemboweled Presbyterian church, roughly furnished with plain, backless seats; and he began to preach. God blessed those meetings with healings, signs, and wonders.

While my parents attended the meetings, I would babysit my younger sister, which meant that I would sleep downstairs in my parents' room until they returned. Then I would sleepily crawl upstairs to my own room, with barely an eye open to guide me. One night when I heard them come in, I got up to find my father trying to help my mother, who looked like she was drunk! Both my eyes popped open in astonishment. The word alcohol was as unwelcome in our house as the word divorce. My parents were totally opposed to any form of alcohol. Yet my mother was drunk! I stood wide-eyed, unable to move as I stared at the sight that had startled me fully awake. My father looked at me helplessly and told me to go on up to bed, reassuring me that he would explain in the morning. The next morning, I learned that my mother had been the first one in those meetings to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Rebellion

As I began to attend those meetings, I was impressed by the supernatural manifestations, yet I received little encouragement from the preaching to help me in attaining to the kind of behavior that I believed would make me acceptable to God. The virtual absence of objective propositional truth left me without the true ground for faith. I kept falling in and out of grace, or so was my youthful understanding of my predicament, and this concept was not easy to live with.

Finally, I had had enough and one Sunday decided that I would no longer be a Christian. My mother needed to stay home and tend to one of my sisters, who was ill, so my father and I set out alone for the church meeting. It was a long, quiet walk. I sat somberly at his side during the meeting, and when the communion plate came by, I just shook my head. When we were walking home after the meeting, my father gruffly observed that I had not taken communion. I acknowledged my refusal, and his response was simple: "Lost your salvation again?"

Strangely, my decision gave me great relief. I had endured incredible boyish trauma in repeatedly finding and losing my salvation. I had suffered the personal humiliation of continued self-doubt. My frustration and shame at my inability to measure up had finally driven me to quit trying to attain to that impossible standard of holy living. I was certain that I had lost my salvation for good this time, and further, I felt that God did not care.

From that point on, I made as radical a turn toward evil as a newly converted Christian makes toward righteousness. I plunged myself into every kind of rebellious indulgence that came my way and soon became sick with pneumonia, a serious problem in those days due to a lack of miracle drugs that we now take for granted. As I began to recover, the doctor advised me to keep out of the evening air for six months, but this advice contradicted what my newly discovered rebellion told me to do. I immediately ventured out again and suffered a serious relapse. The doctor then suggested that I might possibly require a lengthy stay in a sanitarium in order to recover. In those days people went to sanitariums to die. Few recovered. I was startled. Yet weak as I was, my rebellion remained strong, and I refused to consider surrendering. I remained threateningly ill.

The Turnaround

My parents had in the meantime become involved with a small church in which the sovereign grace of God was being taught, and a young man from this church requested to visit me. He received permission but was cautioned that I was totally rebellious and might not receive him. Indeed, I treated him rudely, stubbornly trying to maintain a tough façade, even though by now I was beginning to realize that things were turning out badly for me. I had been fighting a losing battle

against God, a God I really did not know. From what I had heard preached, I had developed a mental image of God that was little more than a caricature: He seemed to be a big bully sitting on His throne ready to beat my brains out every time I blundered.

Although I have little recollection of what my visitor said, I do recall the one statement that turned me around: "Ern, being a Christian is not what you do for God; it's what God in Christ Jesus has done and will do for you." I lit up inside. I had not heard that before. It may have been said, but I had not heard it. My idea of being a Christian was to produce more good deeds than bad ones, and so maintain a meritorious balance in my favor, in that way gaining God's saving approval. It was the old salvation-by-works theory that seems so reasonable to fallen, yet religious, man. My problem was that I ran a chronic overdraft.

I persevered in my tough exterior so that the young man would not know that he had "reached" me, but after he left I looked up and told God that I was His boy. I was a moral, spiritual, physical wreck, but I was His if He would have me. In that moment, in my need, God met me.

I determined to tell no one of this experience. I had ventured out on a similar course many times before, and this time I wanted to make sure it was right. If someone was going to know, it would have to be because the change in me was evident. Within a couple of days, my mother told me that she could see that something had happened and wanted to know what it was. I confessed what she already knew, and amid much family jubilation, I began to get involved with the church.

The Trossachs Experience

Not long thereafter, a man [M V Brown] who was to have a lifelong influence on me came into our city. He was a well-to-do farmer who had sold all of his possessions and had begun pouring the proceeds into the gospel by traveling around and planting churches. I had become deeply involved in music, and my father embarrassed me one night by suggesting that I play the piano and sing for this man. Such a request was uncharacteristic of my father, yet God used it to begin a new phase in my life. When the minister heard my little performance, he invited me to travel with him in his ministry. Having already dedicated myself to the Lord's service, I found the decision easy to make. I left with him immediately.

We soon arrived in western Canada at Trossachs, a small country town named after a beautiful area in Scotland. Every year a large Bible conference was held near Trossachs, and this conference had become a vital place of ministry. Here, at 3:40 in the morning on July 2, 1932, I received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. While I did not initially understand this experience doctrinally, I did know that it was real, like nothing that I had ever before experienced.

The conference was a unique combination of excellent classical Bible teaching and the fulness of the Holy Spirit. The people who attended had received the baptism of the Holy Spirit and sang with enthusiastic joy. They were indeed pentecostal, but not in the denominational or doctrinal sense. At the same time, they were devoted to the Word. This emphasis on the Word balanced with an emphasis on the charismatic experience was a rare combination in those days.

The Dilemma

My desire to walk in this balance put me in a dilemma. I was eager to embrace both sound Bible teaching and the gift and gifts of the Holy Spirit. However, the doctrinal side of me was unacceptable to the Pentecostals, and the pentecostal side of me was unacceptable to the Evangelicals. Most churches were segregated from one another according to emphasis, and this segregation was dramatic and complete, a divorce that allowed for no toleration of one by the other. To try and embrace both emphases was to forfeit one's acceptance by either. In retrospect, I realize that many good men involved in maintaining this tension faced the same dilemma. Consequently, some chose to play down their pentecostal experiences in order to be acceptable to evangelical Christianity, and some who made this choice became prominent in evangelical circles.

As I was experiencing the ministry of the Holy Spirit, my call to serve God became very clear. I “knew” God wanted me to preach, and considering my providential circumstances—my exposure to two emphases that were mutually exclusive for much of the body of Christ—the working out of this call was to prove difficult. Unlike those who were yielding to the pressure to choose one or the other, I found myself compelled by conviction to embrace what I saw to be the whole counsel of God.

For a time, I was able to move in a relatively small circle of like-minded men who disciplined me in the Scriptures and the Spirit. All was well. But as my abilities in God’s service developed, it became apparent that I was being called to a larger sphere of activity. Some Pentecostal leaders approached me about ministering among them, and I candidly shared my doctrinal convictions, affirming that these might hinder my usefulness and could eventually precipitate problems. The leaders felt certain that my views would not hinder me, but that on the contrary, my contribution would be a blessing. I would also be able to broaden my sphere of usefulness. I relented, accepting their offer and becoming the pastor of a country church. Indeed, I did experience blessing, and the church grew; however, my original protestations proved prophetic. An unpleasant confrontation developed, and my associations with the Pentecostal denomination were severed.

At that time, God put in my heart the Scripture that says, “If thou wilt walk in My ways, and if thou wilt keep My charge... I will give thee places to walk among these that stand by” (Zechariah 3:7, KJV). This assurance helped me to handle the pain of what I felt to be a severe and unfair handling of my life and service for God by the Pentecostal leaders. (Since then, I have had fruitful and pleasant relationships with many “official” Pentecostals.)

The Choice

Coincident with this traumatic rejection by the Pentecostal leaders, I received a telegram from a friend inviting me to come and help him in northern Canada for a season. I gratefully accepted. There, in the north woods, with the hardships of a very rough frontier life, I realized that God was challenging me to make a choice. Since the Pentecostals no longer desired my service, I could suppress my charismatic experience as others had done and go into other denominations, or I could stay true to my convictions and trust God for the outcome. I came close to yielding to the temptation to hide my charismatic light under a bushel and going into the denominations where I would find “respectability” and “security.” Yet the challenge persisted: Could I trust God and embrace His whole counsel? I considered the possible isolation and loneliness such a course could produce. However, it quickly became clear that such possibilities were no argument for evading the will of God. Loneliness and isolation were a small price to pay for a clear conscience.

The whole counsel of God, as I saw it, was like a whole pie cut into sections. One section was water baptism, one the baptism of the Holy Spirit, one the authority of the Word, one the deity of Christ, and so on. Unfortunately, the body of Christ was so divided that Christians were forced to choose certain pieces of the pie and, by default, to lose the rest of the pie in the process. I did not want to be forced into taking just a piece and missing all the other good things. I therefore decided to trust God and to preach to whomever would have me. I chose the whole counsel of God.

Shortly after making this decision, I received a call from a church in Vancouver, B.C., which was the fruit of a Methodist minister. He had been succeeded by several other fine ministers, and now the church needed yet another. I arrived to find a congregation of about 60 people who met in a rented facility that included 100 straight-backed chairs. I began to preach the whole counsel of God, and the people and the church began to grow. Soon, by God’s grace, the place was packed, so we relocated to a rollerskating rink, which we refurbished. Subsequent growth required larger facilities, and we finally purchased a former Presbyterian church building.

The Healing Movement

Almost from the beginning of my stay in Vancouver, I began to receive invitations to travel; and it was during these travels, in 1947, that I picked up a copy of a news magazine while on a plane and read about a man named William Branham. He had a unique supernatural gift of healing and was

attracting large audiences throughout the U.S. and Canada (and eventually abroad). He was to become the focal point of the great healing movement of that time, and it was at his meetings that many would receive their call into the healing ministry. As it turned out, Mr. Branham happened to be ministering in the city to which I was flying. As I got off the plane, I was immediately asked by my friends if I would be interested in hearing him.

We went that evening. We could approach no closer than half a block from the church because the building was filled to capacity, and the overflow had gathered outside around loudspeakers that were relaying the service. My host asked if I wanted to meet with Mr. Branham. I declined. I felt God impressing me that if such a meeting were His will, He would arrange it with no striving from me. I later left for Vancouver.

Upon my arrival in Vancouver I discovered that Mr. Branham's fame had preceded me. My congregation was excited. Some planned to travel over the mountains to Calgary where he was to minister next, and I decided to accompany them. The meeting was dynamic, and we returned home excited. Later, a group of Vancouver ministers decided to bring him to the city. It was during his visit that I met him and we became friends.

Not long after he had returned home to Jeffersonville, Indiana, he phoned me to say that while he was at his prayer place down by the Ohio River an angel of the Lord had spoken to him, telling him that he should invite Ern Baxter to be his traveling companion in ministry. Shortly thereafter, I began to travel with him.

The Latter Rain

At that time, another significant move of the Spirit called the Latter Rain was occurring. It had begun in my home town of Saskatoon, in Saskatchewan, Canada, among men who had seen the Pentecostal Movement lose much of its power, and who were hungry anew for God and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. As they had fasted and prayed, God had sovereignly visited them. I attended their second convention in Edmonton, Canada, and witnessed a concentration of the power of God such as I had not seen before. During my involvement with this movement and with the Branham ministry, I saw not only a tremendous manifestation of God's power, but also unbelievably huge crowds of as many as 200,000 people responding to God. What a remarkable time it was!

Why The Ebb?

At the height of the excitement, a couple of questions became the whispered fear of many who had joyfully experienced the Pentecostal Movement. Why did there seem to be a decline in the charismatic activity of the Holy Spirit in the Pentecostal Movement? Would the same happen in the healing and the Latter Rain movements? Many people hungering for more of the pie wanted to keep this piece. No one who has known such moves of God wants to lose the exciting times when God manifests His presence in such a vivid manner.

My own fears were realized as I saw both of these movements begin to experience problems. In my view, they had not become grounded in the great, objective principles of the Bible and were falling prey to the error of those who practice subjective Christianity that is not disciplined by the Word. My concern led me to challenge one leader to get the movement back under the disciplines of the Word before the movement became dissipated by error. He indulged me my comments but obviously considered them an intrusion. Who could think that God would insist on Biblical disciplines when He was visiting His people with such magnificent signs and wonders? Certainly these disciplines were important, but not all that important. What mattered was that God was moving, and His moving was an obvious endorsement of the way things were. Doctrines could be worried about later.

Two years later, as I lunched with the same leader, he lamented that both movements had skyrocketed and were now plummeting. A variety of behavioral and operational irregularities was surfacing; and when those involved were confronted, the following attitude appeared: "who could question men whom God had so anointed?" It is sad to see the ebb of a movement of God, but I believe that until we learn the lessons that God is teaching us, and has taught us, through past

moves of the Spirit, we will continue to grieve the Holy Spirit and see movements suffer the same fate. The gifts of the Spirit must not be divorced from the Word of the Spirit!

The healing movement quieted down, and I left the Branham ministry in disillusionment, questioning everything to do with the supernatural. Undoubtedly, I had seen the supernatural, and it was real; but I had at the same time seen uncorrected sin, corruption, and unsound doctrine. It seemed like a modern replay of Corinthianism, which like other errors perennially plagues the church. The existence together of spiritual gifts and sin can cause great disillusionment for the naive in Christ. I had seen numerous supernatural manifestations, not the maudlin push-em-down-if-they-don't-fall-under-the-Spirit ones, but real manifestations that I was convinced were absolutely authentic. However, I had also seen gross irregularities in the midst of these impressive charismatic events.

The Charismatic Movement

I returned to Vancouver and began teaching and preaching again at my church, with a reduced emphasis in the area of supernatural manifestations. Then one day I picked up a magazine and read about an Episcopalian priest named Dennis Bennett who had started speaking in tongues. Even some of his curates were doing so. My first thought was "here we go again." Later, I learned that he had been sent off to a city in the northwest to minister at a small church where, I was sure, he was meant to be forgotten. I discovered, though, that I myself could not forget about him, because his small church happened to be just two blocks from a Bible college at which I regularly taught. We soon met.

As it turned out, God blessed his church with health and growth, and Dennis himself developed a fine and growing ministry. He was full of vision and became a voice in the Charismatic Movement, which had now begun. It was to be another exciting time of the visitation of the Holy Spirit. Ministers were coming together and hugging the necks of men to whom they had not spoken in years. Lutherans, Catholics, Presbyterians, Baptists all were on the same platform rejoicing in the "unity of the Spirit."

Then, as had happened too many times before, the movement began to experience the problems that arise when the Spirit and the Word are not held in proper tension. The gifts of praise and worship seemed to become like parlor games that people enjoyed, while sound doctrine seemed a drudgery that people avoided.

The Early 1970s — A Time to Grow Up

In the early 1970s when the Charismatic Renewal was in the midst of its birth-celebration period, a number of God's servants who had callings to teach, became concerned about the need to begin considering the next step — maturing. Some of these people simultaneously began to teach on growth, discipleship, shepherding, order, relationship, covenant, and other themes related to the whole process of growing up.

I began to express within my sphere of activity my concern for this growth process. In the church with which I was associated in western Canada, I began to develop a series of teachings designed to encourage growth and development, both personal and corporate. I also shared these teachings in my travels. I began publishing a monthly magazine called *New Covenant Times*, which featured my particular teaching concerns.

The "growth" emphasis led to a number of hopeful developments, one of which was the first shepherds' conference in Leesburg, Florida. I was out of the country and unable to join the approximately 500 men who attended; but I did accept an invitation to address the more than 1,700 men who attended the second conference held in Montreat, North Carolina, in 1974. While at this conference, I became associated with a group of brothers who were involved with "Christian Growth Ministries and *New Wine Magazine*. As the name "Christian Growth" implies, we were concerned about the maturation of God's people.

My need for a relationship that was more brotherly than ministerial drew me to these brothers. I had been involved with ministerial relationships for years, but they had an unwritten definition of boundaries which shut out the candor and brotherly confrontation, the therapeutic openness, that allow the exercise of healing love and support.

I was also drawn to the emphasis on shepherding. As a pastor of a sizable congregation, I had for years realized my inadequacy to care for so many people in the manner that the word “shepherd” indicated. The new emphasis on quality pastoral care struck an immediate note of response in my spirit.

Judging from the shepherds’ conferences and subsequent developments, it seemed that a real need was being met in charismatic circles, bringing a widespread enthusiastic response. However, there also developed an opposition which was to become painful and divisive. I have no desire in this writing to attempt an account of the confrontation, other than to say that the whole matter, like other similar matters considered historically, could have been handled much more Christianly than it was.

I continue to see as Biblically true the principles that I came to understand in the 1970s, principles that in the context of “the Faith” need to be taught. Despite the opposition, I must continue to teach them. Any truth is liable to abuse, and those truths associated with growth, discipleship, submission, order, authority, and the like are no exception. The abuse of a truth, however, does not excuse us from embracing it and obeying it as it stands free of abuses. No truth held dear by sound-minded Christians has completely escaped distortion and misrepresentation that at times have made it unattractive, if not repulsive.

Crisis or Process Joy

There seems to be a historic pattern that points up the necessary relationship between times of visitation and times of consolidation. The day of Pentecost must have been the beginning of a time of great excitement filled with charismatic activity and sheer sanctified human joy. Birthdays are exciting times of celebration. But when the excitement has subsided, the business of growing up must be addressed. The God-intoxicated people of Pentecost became those who “were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). The crisis joy became process joy.

Childhood, as enjoyable and carefree as it is, must inevitably give way to growth and responsible maturity. Arrested growth in children is often the result of a deliberate refusal to grow up, usually attributed to parental failure.

The Corinthian church stands as a Biblical example of growth arrested due to a disregard of the means of maturation. Greatly blessed with charismatic gifts, the Corinthians remained “babes.” Given the time elapsed since their conversion, they should have grown up. Their delayed growth became the breeding ground for a number of behavioral and conceptual irregularities.

My intention here has been to help the people of God. We need to learn that no leader or individual can handle the supernatural without the balance of the Word. The result of such an attempt is Corinthianism, in which the gifts are functioning while the gifted are living carnally. On the other hand, we must understand that the Word of God without the supernatural becomes pedantic and lifeless. God never intended Christianity to be an either-or situation. The Spirit and the Word belong together. Each is tied to the other. It was that way at the creation — the Spirit moved in concert with the spoken Word and it remains that way today.

I am sharing this personal account in the hope that Christians will understand that what we have taught is not a package of ideas whimsically thrown together. The distinctives attributed to the so-called “Shepherding Movement” were developed from the Word over time in response to needs arising out of real-life situations. Understanding how these distinctives came to light is a key to understanding the distinctives themselves. Christians need practical pastoral relationships that will help them to grow up in God. Such practical relationships will enable them to walk in the disciplines

of the Word as they grow in the gifts of the Spirit. Thus they will develop godly character as they grow in spiritual charisma.

(Taken from Ern Baxter, The Chief Shepherd and His Sheep, pub. 1987)

Note: Ern Baxter was born 22nd June 1914 and died 9th July 1993.