

SOME FURTHER CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN RICHARD BAXTER AND KATHERINE GELL*

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ABSTRACT. *The puritan pastor and writer, Richard Baxter, and a member of a prominent Derbyshire family, Katherine Gell, exchanged a series of letters between 1655 and 1658. This article highlights the existence of three further items of correspondence in this exchange, located in the Derbyshire Record Office, hitherto believed not to be extant. The additional three letters are all penned by Baxter and include his replies to her first two epistles (dated 28 July 1655 and 4 September 1655) as well as a reply to a non-extant Gell letter (dated 31 July 1658). The correspondence provides valuable insights into Baxter's pastoral methods and the nature of puritan piety. The first two items draw attention to the importance of the dimension of duty within Baxter's pastoral agenda; while expressed in a context of warmth and encouragement, he believes that Gell will find a measure of resolution to her spiritual struggles by careful attention to the obligations of Christian living. The third letter, written some years later, after Baxter has discovered that Gell suffers from melancholia, is couched in a gentler tone and reveals a more reciprocal dimension to their relationship.*

The purpose of this communication is to draw attention to the contents and significance of three items of correspondence from Richard Baxter to Katherine Gell, previously thought not to be extant. Richard Baxter (1615–91) was a pastor, theologian, and prolific writer within the puritan tradition, who engaged with many of the significant religious and political movements and events that characterized seventeenth-century England.¹ During the Civil War and interregnum years, he served as a chaplain for the parliamentary forces and exercised a noteworthy pastoral ministry in Kidderminster, Worcestershire. Following the Restoration of monarchy, he was appointed a royal chaplain ordinary but soon entered the ranks of Nonconformity when he was unable to assent to the religious settlement of 1662 for reasons of conscience. Baxter was a leading figure within this movement and continued a less formal pastoral work by means of occasional preaching and extensive correspondence, writing, and publishing. Throughout his ministry, he remained a zealous advocate for ecclesiastical unity and a promoter of piety in the puritan mould.

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¹ For Baxter, see N. H. Keeble, 'Baxter, Richard (1615–1691)', in *Oxford dictionary of national biography* (ODNB) (Oxford, 2004).

Katherine Gell (*née* Packer, c. 1624–71) was raised in a godly household, the daughter of a wealthy administrator and politician. She married John Gell, later second baronet, who was from a prominent Derbyshire family sympathetic to puritan concerns.² Between the years 1655 and 1658, she exchanged a series of letters with Baxter, eleven of which form part of the manuscript collection of Baxter correspondence held in Dr Williams’s Library, London.³ On account of the insights they provide into Baxter’s pastoral methods and the nature of puritan piety, the letters have been subject to scholarly inquiry.⁴

The three additional letters that have been identified are situated amongst the ‘Papers of the Gell Family of Hopton’ in the Derbyshire Record Office (DRO). These archives, covering material from the thirteenth to the twentieth centuries, were transferred to the DRO three years after the death of Mrs Aileen E. Gell (d. 1986), widow of Lt. Col. Philip V. W. Gell (d. 1970), under the reference numbers D3287 and D3311. Prior to this transfer, Mrs Aileen Gell had begun the task of organizing the considerable volume of papers that had been located at the family property at Hopton.⁵ The DRO completed the cataloguing of this collection in 2004.⁶

The catalogue listing of the manuscript volume in which the letters are enclosed is entitled, ‘Copy letters of spiritual consolation from Richard Baxter and Robert Parker to Mrs. Katherine Gell (nee Packer) on the death of her infant son.’⁷ The copies have been made by Gell herself, and include six letters from Richard Baxter, dated 28 July 1655, 4 September 1655, 7 June 1656, 1 June 1657, 15 December 1657, and 31 July 1658.⁸ The first two of these letters, as well as the last, are not present in the collection of Baxter’s correspondence in Dr Williams’s Library. Table 1 charts the likely sequence of correspondence between Gell and Baxter and highlights the placement of the three new items in the series. It is

² William Lamont, ‘Gell, Katherine (*bap.* 1624, *d.* 1671)’, in *ODNB*.

³ The correspondence is available in microform from World Microfilms, POB 35488, St John’s Wood, London NW8 6WD (www.microworld.uk.com/microfilms.asp), entitled *The correspondence of Richard Baxter (1615–1691)*. A superb resource for the study of the correspondence is N. H. Keeble and Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Calendar of the correspondence of Richard Baxter* (2 vols., Oxford, 1991).

⁴ See, for example, Lamont, ‘Katherine Gell’; William L. Lamont, *Richard Baxter and the millennium* (London and Totowa, NJ, 1979), pp. 34–7, 138–9; Alison Searle, ‘“My souls anatomist”: Richard Baxter, Katherine Gell and letters of the heart’, *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 12 (2006), pp. 1–26; and John F. Brouwer, ‘Richard Baxter’s “Christian directory”: context and content’ (Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge, 2005), ch. 2.

⁵ For details of the Archival history, see <URL: http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a/records.aspx?cat=026-d3287_3&cid=0#0> (accessed 17 Apr. 2009).

⁶ See *Archives 2004: a summary list of archives made available in Derbyshire Record Office during 2004* (Derby, 2004) p. 5, <URL: http://www.derbyshire.gov.uk/Images/Archives2004_tcm9-16958.pdf> (accessed 17 Apr. 2009).

⁷ DRO, Matlock, papers of the Gell family of Hopton, D3287/47/7. The name ‘Robert Parker’ should read ‘Robert Porter’. While most of the letters in the collection from this individual are signed ‘R. P.’, the letter ending on p. 15 is attributed to ‘R. Porter’. For Porter, see Stephen Wright, ‘Porter, Robert (1623/4–1690)’, in *ODNB*.

⁸ Katherine Gell’s handwriting can be recognized from her letters located in Dr Williams’s Library, London.

Table 1 *The Baxter–Gell correspondence, 1655–8*

Gell to Baxter	Baxter to Gell
1. July 1655 (Letters, v. 216; <i>Calendar</i> no. 256)	1. 28 July 1655 (DRO D3287/47/7, pp. 155–65)
2. 29 August 1655 (Letters, v. 215; <i>Calendar</i> no. 267)	2. 4 September 1655 (DRO D3287/47/7, pp. 166–75)
3. [Not extant]	3. 7 June 1656 (Letters, v. 217; <i>Calendar</i> no. 312; also DRO D3287/47/7)
4. [Not extant]	4. 26 November 1656 (Letters, iv. 142; <i>Calendar</i> no. 334)
5. 29 April 1657 (Letters, v. 3; <i>Calendar</i> no. 370) ^a	5. 1 June 1657 (Letters, v. 11; <i>Calendar</i> no. 377; also DRO D3287/47/7)
6. 10 November 1657 (Letters, v. 28; <i>Calendar</i> no. 404)	6. 15 December 1657 (Letters, iv. 183; <i>Calendar</i> no. 412; also DRO D3287/47/7)
7. [Not extant]	7. 31 July 1658 (DRO D3287/47/7, pp. 252–56)
8. 25 August 1658 (Letters, v. 5; <i>Calendar</i> no. 489)	8. 2 September 1658 (Letters, v. 9; <i>Calendar</i> no. 490)
9. 27 December 1658 (Letters, iv. 208; <i>Calendar</i> no. 532)	9. [Not known whether or not Baxter replied to this letter]

Note: Following the date of each letter are location details, either of the volume and folio within the Baxter correspondence held in Dr Williams’s Library (Letters) as well as the letter number within Keeble and Nuttall, *Calendar I*, or of the document number of those held in DRO.

^aKeeble and Nuttall, *Calendar I*, p. 249, note incorrectly that this is a response to Baxter’s letter of 7 June 1656 (*Calendar I*, letter no. 312, pp. 214–15), received on 24 Jan. 1657, but the letter itself indicates that it is a response to his letter of 26 Nov. 1656 (*Calendar I*, letter no. 334, p. 231).

likely, therefore, that all letters from Baxter to Gell between 1655 and 1658 are now extant, and this may be even the full corpus of his correspondence with her.

I

Gell’s initial correspondence with Baxter provides the context in which the first of these additional letters can be understood. She wrote in July 1655, seeking Baxter’s spiritual counsel.⁹ The reading of his treatise on heavenly meditation, *The saints’ everlasting rest*, had left her with a stricken conscience, as she perceived

⁹ *Baxter correspondence*, v, fo. 216; Keeble and Nuttall, *Calendar*, 1, letter no. 256, pp. 185–6. The first section of this letter is missing from the microfilmed correspondence, and some quotations are taken from the *Calendar*.

her failure to fulfil certain Christian duties meant that she was ‘not in a state of grace’. In particular, Gell believed that she was failing to promote the spiritual welfare of her household. This was not due to lack of trying; ‘I have indeavoured it very much’, she writes. But her social anxiety had crippled her good intentions: ‘a naturall foolish bashfullness that attends me in all other matters hindering me much from doing or receiving good’. Part of her difficulty was a lack of clarity as to what the faithful execution of this duty would look like. In her observations of others, she notes that ‘I can hardly instance in any that performe this duty as you stresse it’, but that is little comfort in the midst of her inner struggles. Gell’s concerns exemplify the difficulty seventeenth-century readers often experienced with much ‘guidance literature’, a genre of which the puritans were indefatigable contributors. As Brouwer has noted, this form of discourse often lacks the boundaries and markers that readily distinguish performance and non-performance of duties, leaving readers, especially those prone to self-criticism, in a quandary as to how well they are functioning in their spiritual life.¹⁰ Gell’s desires are not misdirected; she wants ‘universall obedience, to have respect to all gods commands; to long after more holines’, but finding that her ‘naughty base heart hinders performance & is a clog in every duty’, she is left wondering as to which side of the eternal divide she sits. Other pastoral advice has not helped; Gell hopes that Baxter may be able to offer her some solace, while recognizing that ‘it may be my portion to be in such troubles while I live’, troubles which ‘I never have bin free from’ for the past twelve years.¹¹

The first of the copy letters from the Gell family papers previously thought not to be extant is Baxter’s reply to this inquiry from Katherine Gell.¹² Baxter offers his counsel, although he indicates that there are probably ‘many able ministers of Christ’ more familiar with her circumstances and therefore ‘fitter’ to provide her with spiritual guidance. His first comment is one of reassurance. The desires expressed in her letter, if true, bear witness to a genuine work of grace in her life: ‘Non but his owne can truly say of *themselves* what you say of *your selfe* here ... *you have* no more cause to question *the* state of grace than to question whether *the* gospel be true.’ Then he proceeds to elucidate his understanding of what it means to fulfil Christian duties. He maintains that Gell’s assertion – that consistently failing in a known duty is evidence of gracelessness – is unsound. The faithful performance of a duty depends upon a number of factors, including actually having the knowledge that it is truly a duty, and arising from this, developing the conviction that it is a matter of real weight and significance in Christian living. Furthermore, there is a difference between never performing a duty and carrying it out ‘too seldome and sleightly’. ‘For alas’, he writes, ‘we all of us omit much

¹⁰ Brouwer, ‘Baxter’s “Christian directory”’, p. 44. Cf. Isabel Rivers, *Reason, grace & sentiment: a study of the language of religion and ethics in England, 1660–1780*, 1: *Whichcote to Wesley* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1991), p. 15.

¹¹ *Baxter correspondence*, v, fo. 216; Keeble and Nuttall, *Calendar*, 1, letter no. 256, pp. 185–6.

¹² DRO, Matlock, papers of the Gell family of Hopton, D3287/47/7, 28 July 1655, pp. 155–65.

more of *our* duty than we performe: In secret prayer at least as to the life of it, in holy meditation & holy edifying speeche, we doe *not* halfe soe much as we ought.’ Engaging with Gell at this personal level, Baxter is quick to acknowledge human failing in the execution of religious responsibilities and to dampen concern that this is a ruinous problem. In Gell’s case, there is no evidence of ‘total omission’ with regard to the requisite duty and she need not ‘trouble’ herself about it. His advice is:

Hath god opened *your* eyes to see an incumbent duty *which you saw not* before? Up & be doing: resolve to set upon it, stand *not* questioning whether *you* have grace because *you* neglected it but *presently* use the grace *you have* in it & renew *your* resolutions in the strength of grace *against* such neglect.

Baxter does not say that discharging duties does not matter; clearly he wants her earnestly to devote herself to them. But the Devil has upset her worthy intentions and beleaguered her with discouragement. She must fight his strategies, by persevering to the best of her ability and not allowing her failings to overcome her:

Review *your* omissions & spare *not* soe far as to humble *you*, & quicken *you* the better to resist impediments, & to doe *your* duty; but *not* soe as to question *your* state, & the love of god to *you* or as to hinder *you* in the way of cheerful duty ... Anything except sincere obedience the tempter will give way to ... See that *you* gratify him not either in *your* future negligence, or selfe vexations.

Baxter then explains the good that may eventuate if she attends to the well-being of her household and provides suggestions of how best she may pursue this course of action. He places the fulfilment of such duties within the soteriological framework of Protestant thought:

I put *not* any of *these* good workes with a popish intent to lead *you* to trust in them or suppose them meritorious or give them the honour of *Christ* but where *Christ* dwells in the soule he confermeth it to his Image & inclineth it to doe good & delight in doing it. Its the *sweetest* life in the world to be much in doing good & to have a *Christ* to fly to for the pardon of all the imperfections of *our* indeavours. But I beseech *you* still remember that as love should be the chief spring of the gospel obedience should you doe all as to a god of love in the beseeching sense of his love.

Such activity should bring her soul ‘to a delight in god’, and to the joy and cheerfulness that ought to characterize those pursuing a life of holiness. Baxter summons Gell to eschew any ambivalence concerning the goodness of God. To continue ‘questioning & quarrelling’ is to ‘[w]rong’ God’s love toward her. Rather, she must press on in disciplined obedience: ‘Never suspect god; but watch over *your* owne house(?) & goe on resolvedly in his blessed worke, hewing *your* way through difficulties & temptations with that ioyfull resolution, as one that beleeveth that death will shortly end your labours & the hand of *your* Lord will set on the crowne.’ In parting, Baxter offers words that, if removed from the context of the rest of the letter, could only be read as a stinging rebuke: ‘Instead of drooping your selfe & disgracing the riches of grace by your overlooking them;

rather convince the ungodly world.' His final blessing that '[t]he *Lord* strengthen resolve & satisfy *you*' does little to counter the message that Gell would serve herself best by a more diligent application to her Christian responsibilities.

The pastoral advice enshrined within this letter from Baxter demonstrates a tension inherent within the species of Protestant religiosity known as puritan practical divinity: that although the Christian life is grounded and expressed only by means of the grace of God, the evidence of that grace will be apparent in a dutiful lifestyle of obedience and holiness. And because of human sinfulness, believers must test their hearts to ensure that they are not self-deceived concerning their spiritual state. This emphasis on regular self-examination within puritan piety promoted an introspectiveness that was potentially dangerous to those of tender conscience; it was often much easier to detect inadequacies than to be encouraged by small steps of progress, and thus the characteristic feature of the believer's experience might be an oppressive sense of failure. The advice offered Gell by Baxter sounds entirely reasonable. Yet a robust sense of self and a strong conscience is necessary to make the self-judgements he advocates and to pursue this path of obedience in the face of perceived failure. For one beset with the uncertainties and tentativeness that appear to plague Gell, it presents as a challenging direction. Despite the repeated encouragements and reassurances, the accent in this letter falls upon Gell's responsibility to work hard at her duties and to quash any negative thoughts that threaten her sense of spiritual security.

This letter also is of note for what it reveals of Baxter's approach to pastoral ministry on a broader scale. Like other puritans, Baxter sought further reformation of church and nation. By means of preaching, catechizing, the promotion of spiritual exercises and effective church discipline, individuals would be converted and drawn into a life of godly piety.¹³ Writing to Gell with regard to her concerns over the promotion of the spiritual wellbeing of those around her, Baxter encourages her as a woman of status and means to understand the good that might be achieved at her hands. He urges her to

goe furnished up and downe *with* a compassion to poore soules, especially *those* under *you* & related to *you*, & *with* matter prepared in *your* mind on all fit occasions, seasonably, prudently, & seriously, to be drawne forth: who knowes but *you* may save more soules by it *than* many a preacher. Especially if *you* will step now & *then* into the house of *your* poore tenants, or speake to *them* when *they* come to *you*

Furthermore, Baxter is convinced that the promulgation of Christian literature can extend his programme for spiritual advancement in the land and he seeks to enlist Gell to this cause:

because you cannot speake to many *would* mind *you* of another way to doe good to more: if *you would* buy some small moving bookes & give every family one soe *they* promise *you* to read them twice or 3 over. I put *you* on *nothing* but what I *have* proved usefull, I gave last

¹³ For details of Baxter's pastoral strategy, see J. William Black, *Reformation pastors: Richard Baxter and the ideal of the reformed pastor* (Carlisle, 2004), especially ch. 4.

month 1300 small sermons, which I purposely printed lately (one of them last judgment, & the other *against* setting light by *Christ*)¹⁴ & made every family in my parish that had them promise either to read them twice or to spend the houres of the Lords day in reading them which can be spared from other duties & I see already they spend the day better to keepe the words. There are catechisms & many small sermons of great use for such a purpose: who knows what eye god may direct them for their good.

Baxter's own spiritual awakening and growth was in no small part due to exposure to certain devotional works, and what proved to be of such personal benefit became a key feature of his pastoral methodology and advice to others, whether they were laity with an interest in things spiritual or those entrusted with the cure of souls.¹⁵ This letter provides additional evidence that he actively sought a widespread distribution of such material.

II

The second letter from Baxter located in the Gell family papers is a reply to Katherine Gell's second piece of correspondence to him.¹⁶ Within a month of receiving Baxter's reply to her initial entreaty, Gell writes again, thanking him for his advice and a book he had sent, and seeking further assistance. Baxter's guidance has not resolved her questioning of her spiritual condition. Her 'great feare' is 'self deceit'; that her heart, which 'is soe deceitful', might assure her she was in a state of grace when this was not in fact the case. She recounts the spiritual extremes that accompanied the death of her seventeen-week-old child the previous year. Despite the tragic circumstances, she was convinced of the hand of God in the matter and experienced joy and assurance and a confidence regarding the child's spiritual status. But '3 day after I had as strong temptations to the contrary suggested thus that God had taken him away in anger throwne him into hell & I should shortly follow & soe into a sad condition I fell.' While her own sense of assurance had strengthened since those dark days, she remained 'unsatisfied as to the salvation of that sweete child' and asks Baxter 'if you could give me any hopes by your thoughts'.¹⁷

In his reply, Baxter once again encourages Gell to seek counsel from a pastor who knows her personally. With her letter, Gell had enclosed some correspondence between herself and another minister,¹⁸ and Baxter adjudged that advice to

¹⁴ These works by Baxter are *A sermon of judgment* (1655) and *Making light of Christ and salvation* (1655).

¹⁵ See Baxter's autobiography, *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (1696), 1, pp. 3–6, and Richard Baxter, *A Christian directory*, in *The practical works of Richard Baxter* (4 vols., Morgan, PA, 1996), 1, pp. 15, 478–9, 730–1. See also N. H. Keeble, *Richard Baxter: puritan man of letters* (Oxford, 1982), ch. 2.

¹⁶ DRO, Matlock, papers of the Gell family of Hopton, D3287/47/7, 4 Sept. 1655, pp. 166–75.

¹⁷ *Baxter correspondence*, v, fo. 215; see also Keeble and Nuttall, *Calendar*, 1, letter no. 267, pp. 190–1. In a letter from her husband, John Gell, penned 19 Mar. 1658, the loss of this child is described as 'that which was your great trouble'. DRO, Matlock, papers of the Gell family of Hopton, D3287/60/14.

¹⁸ Keeble and Nuttall, *Calendar*, 1, letter no. 267, p. 190, maintain that the correspondence is with John Billingsley, a clergyman at Chesterfield, Derbyshire. Gell makes reference to a sermon she heard from Billingsley, but the letter does not state explicitly that the correspondence was with him. Baxter's

be ‘very good’, and recommends that, ‘if he live neere *you*’, she pursue this avenue for guidance in future. In terms of his own suggestions for Gell, Baxter reiterates the assurances he made in his previous piece. The tenor of her letters indicate that she is indeed a recipient of ‘speciall grace’ and she should not ‘vilifye or deny’ God’s work within her soul. He encourages her to take to heart this truth concerning her spiritual estate and to pursue with diligence the lifestyle of faithful Christian service:

I would earnestly advise *you therefore* for the time to come to delight *your soule* in the love that hath imbraced *you* & to presse on toward the marke where *you* have *lifted* up *your* hopes & to study the art of doing good & improving all *your* talents to the utmost in a cheerful course of faith & obedience to waite for the desired end of *your* labours & patience.

Moreover, he urges contentment with the level of grace that God has bestowed upon her. While it is ‘the absolute duty of every *Christian* to desire *perfection* ... *they* must know that god will not give it in this life, nor hath he tyed himself to adde iust this or *that* measure while *you* are here’. Gell should not ‘grudge at god if he give *you* noe more’. Another tension within Baxter’s approach to piety is apparent here: while Gell is instructed to be content with the divine apportionment of grace that is her lot, she is told, ‘*you* may not soe far be content with small grace as not to desire and labor after more’. The practitioner of this approach to Christian living walks something of a tightrope, unclear whether or not his or her desires are aligned accurately with the divine will. How does one gauge whether anxious preoccupations in relation to the conduct of the sanctified life are due to over-scrupulousness or due to inadequate performance? How does one assess whether a peaceful state of mind concerning the practice of Christian duties is due to faithfully fulfilling the requirements or due to complacency of mind? The tone of uncertainty that marks Gell’s judgements and self-perceptions within her letters suggest that she may have struggled to attain a robust state of mind in response to Baxter’s advice.

With regard to Gell’s question concerning the fate of her deceased child, Baxter chooses not to proffer an opinion. At this time, he appears to be somewhat bruised from criticism he has received: ‘Now this being a point controverted among divines & my iudgment being soe commonly knowne to be weake & *therefore* to be suspected I shall not *presume* to offer *you* any of my owne thoughts for the determining of the controversy.’ She would be better served by seeking the judgement of another minister. After that Baxter makes the statement,

reply letter includes the statement, ‘Mr ch: addeth another of *your* doubts whether *you* may pray absolutely for grace for *your* children’, which is perhaps the correspondent in question. This may be Samuel Charles, vicar of Mickleover, Derbyshire from 29 July 1657 until his ejection in 1662, who, according to Edmund Calamy’s account, was at this time ‘in Sir *John Gell*’s Family at *Hopton*’. Richard Baxter, *An abridgement of Mr. Baxter’s history of his life and times. With an account of the ministers, &c. who were ejected after the restauration, of King Charles II ... The second edition: in two volumes: ... By Edmund Calamy, D. D.* (2 vols., London, 1713), II, p. 182. See also Keeble and Nuttall, *Calendar*, I, letter no. 370, p. 249. For Billingsley, see Stuart B. Jennings, ‘Billingsley, John (1625–1683)’, in *ODNB*.

‘Mr ch: addeth another of *your* doubts whether *you* may pray absolutely for grace for *your* children.’ This is most likely a reference to a comment within the additional correspondence enclosed within Gell’s letter.¹⁹ Baxter notes the ambiguity of the terms ‘absolutly’ and ‘conditionally’, then advises

You must pray earnestly for it but *you cannot* groundedly beleve that god will certainly give saving grace to all of *them* at age ... *you* may I thinke absolutely desire it & *therefore* absolutely aske it, but *cannot* absolutely beleve *the* grant of it.

Baxter then confesses that he has ‘forgotten *which* bookes I last commended to *you* to give to the ignorant for *the* worke of conversion’, and proceeds to list nine treatises as well as some of his own that may be of use to her.²⁰ The final comment before closing off the letter is that he is unwilling to accede to Gell’s suggestion that he publish an account of his ‘experiences’. He states, ‘I dare *not* doe it least I dishonor god more in *the* offending of *those* bretheren who will iudge it a matter of ostentation & vanity, than in *the* silencing of his mercies.’²¹

In sum, in this letter Baxter’s advice to Gell echoes his earlier counsel. The most appropriate way to manage her spiritual troubles is to pay little attention to wayward thoughts and to persevere in the diligent exercise of her Christian duties.

III

The final item of correspondence from Baxter to Katherine Gell, located amongst the Gell family papers and previously thought not to be extant, is a letter dated 31 July 1658.²² Thus it was written nearly three years after the last letter that has been examined, and in the intervening period Baxter corresponded with Gell on at least four occasions. While some items from Gell’s pen in this ongoing communication are not extant, the record of their exchange that does exist reveals that Gell is suffering from melancholy. The illness has enervated her affections and her vigour in Christian duties, and although she has found benefit from Baxter’s pastoral labours, her qualms over her spiritual condition continue.²³

Baxter’s letter of July 1658 responds to a non-extant letter from Gell. The second sentence in the letter states, ‘I marvell *you should* conclude from the

¹⁹ See the previous footnote.

²⁰ The works listed are: William Whately, *The new birth: or, A treatise of regeneration*; William Whately, *The redemption of time*; William Pinke, *The tryall of a Christians sincere love unto Christ*; William Fenner, *Wilfull impienicy the grossest self-murder*; John Rogers, *The doctrine of faith wherein are practically handled twelve principall points*; Thomas Hooker, *The soules preparation for Christ being a treatise of contrition*; Thomas Shepard, *The sincere convert*; Thomas Shepard, *The sound beleever a treatise of evangelical conversion*; Samuel Smith, *The great assize*. Baxter also includes his own *True Christianity, or, Christs absolute dominion* (1655) and *A sermon of judgment* (1655).

²¹ DRO, Matlock, papers of the Gell family of Hopton, D3287/47/7, 4 Sept. 1655, pp. 166–175.

²² DRO, Matlock, papers of the Gell family of Hopton, D3287/47/7, 31 July 1658, pp. 252–6.

²³ The relevant letters are *Baxter correspondence*, v, fo. 217, iv, fo. 142, v, fo. 3, v, fo. 11, v, fo. 28, iv, fo. 183 (Keeble and Nuttall, *Calendar*, 1, letter nos. 312, 334, 370, 377, 404, 412).

distemper of your letter that I forget you in my prayers.’ The implication appears to be that because Gell continues in her spiritual tussles, he must not be praying for her, since the pleadings of someone of his spiritual stature should meet with divine acquiescence. Baxter proceeds to provide an apologetic concerning answered and un-answered prayer. He confesses his own failures in liveliness in prayer but notes that the spiritual state of the petitioner is not the key factor in determining whether or not God will answer favourably:

They are answered more according to the interest that the person has in god thats prayed for than according to his interest that prayeth. The prayer of a dull distracted sinner may sooner prevaile for a holy soule than the prayer of the holiest Saint for a undisposed sinner or at least the blessing will be easier obtained.

Furthermore, God will bring about his purposes in response to human requests in accordance with his own sense of timing: ‘I take *not* my prayer to be lost when I feele *not* any present returne ... prayer is *not* to hasten the mercy before its time, but to secure it & procure it in its season.’

Baxter then makes reference to Gell’s recent visit to him at Kidderminster. He reproaches her for thinking that she wasted his time:

Time is precious with me but do you thinke I take that for lost which is so imployed as with you or that I have not one houre or 2 for conference with the servants of Christ & to yet some good to my owne soule by the communciation of the experiences? I hope you have somewhat awakened me to a more accurate watch. And for your great love in your iourney & visitation & otherwise manifested I must remaine your debtor.

For his part, he wishes he could have offered greater assistance, and uses his own sense of inadequacy to direct her to the sufficiency of God:

I intreat you to pardon me & beg of god that he would pardon me for being so unprofitable to you when you were here, but it will teach you hereafter to cease expecting too much from man. Keepe close to god & trust him, who will never faile you ... You are sowing in faith, prayers, teares, watchfulness, but you shall ... reap in joy: beleeve it & rejoyce in hope if all the Devills in hell would discourage you.²⁴

More so than previous letters, Baxter exhorts Gell to focus more on God than on the ministry of himself and other pastors, who will never be able to provide the level of spiritual succour for which she longs. This letter also reveals the reciprocal nature of their pastoral relationship; while Baxter has been fulfilling a role of spiritual mentor to the aggrieved Gell, he also has found consolation and encouragement in his discourse with her.

IV

The record of correspondence between Richard Baxter and Katherine Gell reveals something both of Baxter’s pastoral expertise and of the nature of puritan

²⁴ DRO, Matlock, papers of the Gell family of Hopton, D3287/47/7, 31 July 1658, pp. 252–6.

practical divinity. When the full corpus of the literary exchange between them is examined, Baxter's skill is evident. The warmth, encouragement, and flexibility in his responses to Gell's issues are all noteworthy. Depending upon the specific issue and context, he responds with gentleness or firmness and targets both her patterns of thinking and her aberrant affections. He is prepared to lessen the stipulations that he believes normally apply in the life of the sanctified for one such as Gell who is beset with melancholy. For example, he counsels that she 'be not much in secrett meditation'; it is 'no duty for you'.²⁵ Yet, while his counsel brought her some benefit (she did continue the correspondence over a number of years, suggesting that she found solace in his advice rather than being crushed by it), the evidence available in the extant letters indicates that the presenting difficulties reached no final resolution.

The particular significance of the recently identified letters from the Gell family papers is that they demonstrate how important the dimension of duty was within Baxter's pastoral agenda. His first two replies to her entreaties, when she was effectively a stranger to him, accent this facet of her spiritual walk; more careful application to the requisite obligations of a woman in her social context would be a means to assuage her doubts and bring peace of mind. While the tone of these letters is not harsh and offers reassurance and encouragement, this is where the emphasis lies. As Baxter's insight into her spiritual condition and emotional maladies grows, however, his focus on the fulfilment of duties recedes and his guidance moves in a less demanding direction. This concern for genuine belief to be manifested in assiduous attention to the obligations of Christian living is also a dominant theme within many of his published practical writings.²⁶

Katherine Gell, however, had a difficulty with the concept of 'duty'. Her husband, John Gell, identified the same problem: 'you can not come to that height you desire in duty'.²⁷ She longed faithfully to walk the path of Christian discipleship, but her attempts to fulfil the duties prescribed for that journey left her feeling inadequate and unfulfilled. It would seem that the language in which Baxter and other puritans couched their expectations of authentic Christian living carried a rhetorical force that a person such as Katherine Gell found debilitating. While her letters provide sufficient information to imply that she suffered from depression and anxiety problems, and the cognitive and emotional concomitants of such would have had a significant impact upon her perception of the effectiveness of her own spiritual walk, there is evidence that other believers also struggled under the weight of these expectations.²⁸ And, if Gell's experience is not

²⁵ *Baxter correspondence*, IV, fo. 142. See also Keeble and Nuttall, *Calendar*, 1, letter no. 334, p. 231.

²⁶ See, for example, *The right method for a settled peace of conscience and spiritual comfort* (1653), *Directions for weak, distempered Christians* (1669), and *A Christian directory* (1673).

²⁷ Letter from John Gell to his wife, Katherine Gell, DRO, Matlock, papers of the Gell family of Hopton, D3287/60/14.

²⁸ For discussions of the perceived severity of puritan piety, see Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The precisianist strain: disciplinary religion & antinomian backlash in puritanism to 1638* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004); David R. Como, *Blown by the Spirit: puritanism and the emergence of an antinomian underground in pre-Civil-War*

unique, perhaps a significant number of people suffered in this way. For there is evidence that Katherine Gell appeared to the detached observer to be a model of piety, being a patron of godly clergy and a promoter of spiritual exercises within her household.²⁹ Even her attendance to her own religious duties was remembered as being exemplary. As the Presbyterian minister, William Bagshaw, noted

The Lord only knew, (though his Servants guessed at it) how sweet and satiating the Communion was, which she had with the Lord in secret, where the choicest Books were read, and meditated on. Might she not say, she was never less alone, than when alone?³⁰

These comments are far removed from the truth revealed in her correspondence with Baxter, and it appears that very few had access to the honest workings of her soul.³¹ How many other believers amongst the godly might have presented the same façade?

The broad pastoral context within which Baxter was ministering may provide some explanation for why he placed such stress on the human response in the life of sanctification. He was convinced that many within the church and community were unregenerate or immature in faith. Perhaps he feared that these types might easily succumb to a lesser degree of godliness unless vigorously pushed to pay close attention to fulfilling the duties that both promoted and gave expression to a lively faith. Yet his latter correspondence with Katherine Gell, including the third of the recently identified letters within the Gell family papers, indicate that Baxter's pastoral method was much more flexible when interacting with individuals. As Searle has noted, 'it is Baxter's sensitivity to the subtle nuances that distinguish each individual human situation, which caused him to adopt and utilise the epistolary genre with such alacrity'.³²

England (Stanford, CA, 2004); and John Stachniewski, *The persecutory imagination: English puritanism and the literature of religious despair* (Oxford, 1991).

²⁹ William Bagshaw, *De spiritualibus peccis* (London, 1702), pp. 58–9. See also Lamont, 'Katherine Gell'. For Bagshaw, see Stuart B. Jennings, 'Bagshawe, William (1628–1702)', in *ODNB*.

³⁰ Bagshaw, *De spiritualibus peccis*, pp. 58–9.

³¹ Perhaps, as well as Baxter, only her husband (note his comment to his wife: 'It hath pleased God to exercise you with variety of dispensations, sometimes you are full of feares, & in a manner hopeless, then to revive those dying hopes, the lord vouchsafes mercy', DRO, Matlock, papers of the Gell family of Hopton, D3287/60/14) and the Derbyshire clergyman, Robert Porter. See *Baxter correspondence*, v, fo. 5; Keeble and Nuttall, *Calendar*, 1, letter no. 489, p. 337: 'Her own spiritual state and anxiety are things which she imparts "but to you & Mr. <Robert> Porter"'. Note also that in her first letter Gell wrote 'I desire concealment', wishing her concerns to remain private (see *Baxter correspondence*, v, fo. 216). See also n. 7.

³² Searle, '“Souls anatomiste”', p. 24.