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# Richard Baxter's Paradigm for Pastoral Spiritual Formation

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

RICHARD BAXTER'S PARADIGM

FOR PASTORAL SPIRITUAL FORMATION

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY  
ROBERT W. HYATT, JR

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To my wife, Amy, who was always careful and conscientious enough to ask

“How’s the dissertation coming?”

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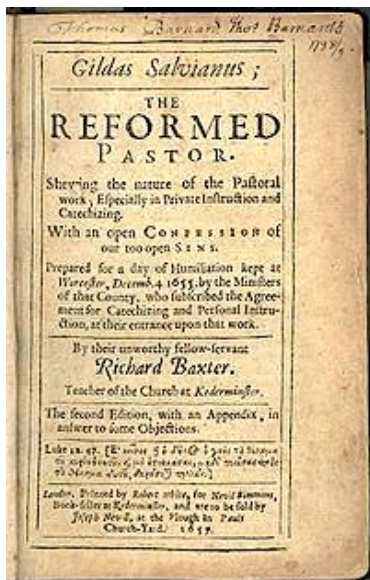
## **Abstract**

This dissertation outlines the thoughts of Puritan pastor Richard Baxter regarding the spiritual lives of clergy and applies his thoughts to those in ministry today. Though Baxter lived some 400 years ago, his passion for the spiritual formation of pastors and concern that their lives preach the same message they delivered from the pulpit is relevant to pastors in any age, not least in our own. Section 1 describes broadly the state of those in ministry today. Section 2 describes the often “business-like” approach many take to ministry and its shortcomings. Section 3 traces some of the themes of Baxter’s life we later see in his teaching to pastors and the teaching itself, along with the personal impact Baxter has had on my own spiritual formation. Sections 4 and 5 outline the specifications of a non-fiction book that uses the words of Baxter in a devotional designed to be read by pastors and other ministry leaders. The Artifact itself is the non-fiction book manuscript described in Sections 4 and 5.

## SECTION ONE: THE PROBLEM

*“To bear with the vices of the ministry is to promote the ruin of the Church; for what speedier way is there for the depraving and undoing of the people, than the depravity of their guides?”*

-Richard Baxter, Dedication to *The Reformed Pastor*<sup>1</sup>



The cover of the 1657 first edition of Richard Baxter’s *The Reformed Pastor* featured the word “reformed” in larger and bolder print than any other word. Baxter’s intention, far from being a call to Calvinistic theology<sup>2</sup> the modern reader might take it for, was simple: he wanted pastors in his day to be revived, renewed and once more full of spiritual vitality. By choosing the word “reformed” he signaled his intention that his fellow clergy be, quite literally, re-formed. “Brethren,” he wrote in the

introduction, “may I expostulate this case a little with my own heart and yours, that we may see the evil of our sin, and be reformed?”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (London, 1657), Kindle location 997

<sup>2</sup> Ever trying to find the middle way between opposing sides, Baxter developed his own hybrid of Calvinist and Arminian theology. He rejected the idea of a limited atonement found in Calvinism, instead subscribing to an unlimited atonement similar to that found in classical Arminian thought. Baxter’s theology represented a mixture of Calvinism, Arminianism and even Catholic doctrine. He viewed the atonement as penal and vicarious, though not substitutionary. He saw the Gospel as a “new law” to which all must become obedient. Repentance and faith become the good works which save us. This position, called “neonomianism” also came to be known as “Baxterianism.”

<sup>3</sup> Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (London, 1657), Kindle location 2759.

Baxter considered the churches of his day to be in a bad way, filled with drunkards and biblical illiterates.<sup>4</sup> He laid the majority of fault for this sorry situation directly in the laps of the pastors of those churches, many of whom were themselves uneducated drunkards, many of whom had bought their way into a pastoral appointment or perhaps had simply found that ministry was a wonderful place for a lazy person to hide.<sup>5</sup> Baxter's chief issue with the clergy around them was that their lives did not match their preaching, and that, he believed, was due to a lack of seriousness about personal spiritual formation. In addressing fellow pastors, he began by saying,

Take heed to yourselves, brethren, lest you should be destitute of that saving grace of God which you offer to others, and be strangers to the effectual working of that gospel which you preach; and lest, while you proclaim to the world the necessity of a Saviour, your own hearts should neglect him, and you should miss of an interest in him and his saving benefits.<sup>6</sup>

Today, we face some different problems. Study after study<sup>7</sup> has shown in the past few decades that pastoral ministry is amongst the most stressful occupations one could choose. While it is still possible for a lazy person to hide behind the pulpit, the

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<sup>4</sup> When Baxter arrived at his first parish assignment, he was distressed at what he found. "In all, the parish consisted of up to four thousand people, or eight hundred families, the vast majority of whom were formally members of the church, but maybe only one per family were serious 'professors of religion,' Baxter thought. In his view, they were an ignorant, rude, and reveling people, and many in his parish abused alcohol." Andrew Purves, *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 100.

<sup>5</sup> "We plainly manifest laziness and sloth, if not unfaithfulness, in the work of Christ. I speak from experience. It was laziness that kept me so long from this duty. It is indeed a troublesome and painful work, and such as calls for some self-denial, because it will bring upon us the displeasure of the wicked. But dare we prefer our own ease and quietness, or the love and peace of wicked men, before our service to Christ our Master? Can slothful servants expect a good reward?" Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, Kindle loc. 3170-3173. Throughout *The Reformed Pastor* Baxter takes "lazy ministers" to task 8 separate times.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Kindle loc. 1172. I will address this more fully later in this dissertation.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, see Richard Krejcir, Schaeffer Institute, *Statistics on Pastors, 2007*, or Joseph E. Arnold, *Clergy Health-- A Mixed Portrait, 2009*, or Center for Health, *2012 Annual Clergy Health Survey, 2012*.



performance expected from clergy today is so far removed from that of the clergy in Baxter's day, when the pastor he replaced at Kidderminster was somehow able to get away with preaching once a quarter, that we are tempted to think this might be a different profession altogether. In fact, it's nearly impossible, at least in the developed world, to be a pastor and be uneducated. Most pastors struggle with being overworked<sup>8</sup> in low-paying church positions while simultaneously attempting to pay down debt from expensive seminary educations where they labored for the masters level and doctorate level education that is expected of them. Many pastors today do struggle with alcoholism though<sup>9</sup>, so that, at least, has remained constant.

And far from buying their way into a ministry position, most pastors today wrestle with serious doubts about their "profession." A study by the Francis A. Schaeffer Institute of Church Leadership Development (*FASICLD*), conducted in 2005-2006, found that 89% of pastors had, at one time during their career, considered leaving ministry. Further, 57% would leave now if they could. Combining research from Focus on the Family, the Barna Group and Fuller Seminary, the *FASICLD* determined that half or more of pastors would quit their jobs and leave ministry, but for the fact that they were trained and educated to do nothing else.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In one study, conducted in 2005-2006, 90% of pastors reported feeling frequently fatigued and worn out on a weekly or even daily basis. 100% reported knowing someone who had left ministry because of burnout. 71% reported they themselves were burned out and battling depression beyond fatigue on a daily or weekly basis. Richard Krejcir, Schaeffer Institute, *Statistics on Pastors*, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Estimates range from rates equal to the general population up to two to three times the rate of the general population. See, Ines Davis Parrish, *Clergy Hide Alcoholism Until World Falls Apart*, Orlando Sentinel, 1987, or Manya A. Brachear, *Alcoholism Claims Priests Too*, Chicago Tribune, 2004, or Stephen H. Loudon and Leslie J. Francis, *Naked Parish Priest, What Priests Really Think They Are Doing* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 90.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Krejcir, Schaeffer Institute, *Statistics on Pastors*, 2007.

While the face of pastoral ministry may have changed since Baxter rose to encourage his fellow clergy, one underlying problem has remained stubbornly persistent. The same study quoted above by *FASICLD* found that a mere 26% had regular “personal devotions” or felt spiritually fed. 72% reported that they only read Scripture while preparing for a sermon.

This dissertation will not be focused on pastoral health or avoiding burnout, but rather on the same problem that Baxter diagnosed in his day: the problem of pastors who were unformed spiritually and content to remain so. The presenting symptom which he wrote to address in *The Reformed Pastor* and other works was that the clergy of his day were not teaching and catechizing their people sufficiently. He wrote:

This is our case, brethren. The work of God must be done! Souls must not perish, while you mind your worldly business or worldly pleasure, and take your ease, or quarrel with your brethren! Nor must we be silent while men are hastened by you to perdition, and the Church brought into greater danger and confusion, for fear of seeming too uncivil and unmannerly with you or displeasing your impatient souls! Would you be as impatient with your sins as with our reproofs, you would hear no more from us but we should all be agreed!<sup>11</sup>

But the underlying cause of the issues Baxter sought to address was something deeper, something spiritual. We see in his prescriptions for pastors that his main fear was that clergy were not experiencing God and being formed in the same way that they hoped (or at least ought to hope) that others would be, and that they preached by their lives the very sins they encouraged others to abandon; that they were like starving chefs, preparing food for others that they themselves never bothered to taste. He wrote,

Many a tailor goes in rags, that maketh costly clothes for others; and many a cook scarcely licks his fingers, when he hath dressed for others the most costly dishes.

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<sup>11</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 4.

Believe it, brethren, God never saved any man for being a preacher, nor because he was an able preacher; but because he was a justified, sanctified man, and consequently faithful in his Master's work. Take heed, therefore, to yourselves first, that you be that which you persuade your hearers to be, and believe that which you persuade them to believe; and heartily entertain that Saviour whom you offer to them.<sup>12</sup>

For Baxter, the prescription for the clerical ills of his day was not they work harder or somehow become better pastors, but that they be spiritually formed and somehow become more Christ-like.<sup>13</sup> He believed that if the pastors would begin to preach to themselves the same Gospel they proclaimed to their people, if they took heed to their own lives and their own relationship with Christ, they would be “reformed,” renewed and the work that needed to happen in their churches would begin to happen out of the overflow of their own spiritual formation. So he encouraged them,

We are the nurses of Christ's little ones. If we forbear taking food ourselves, we shall famish them; it will soon be visible in their leanness, and dull discharge of their several duties; if we let our love decline, we are not likely to raise theirs; if we abate our holy care and fear, it will appear in our preaching; if the matter show it not, the manner will. If we feed on unwholesome food, either errors or fruitless controversies, our hearers are likely to fare the worse for it. Whereas, if we abound in faith, and love, and zeal, how would it overflow, to the refreshing of our congregations, and how would it appear in the increase of the same graces in them!<sup>14</sup>

In my own work as a coach for pastors and church planters and in my role as the Director of Equipping and Spiritual Formation for the Ecclesia Network (ecclesianet.org) I find a similar dynamic at play. Pastors are stressed, confused as to what they ought to be doing, and need constant reassurance that their own relationship with God is primary.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., Kindle locations 1182-1186.

<sup>13</sup> “Take heed, therefore to yourselves first, that you be that which you persuade your hearers to be, and believe that which you persuade them to believe, and heartily entertain that savior whom you offer to them... He is like to be but a heartless preacher, that has not the Christ and grace that he preaches, in his heart.” Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., Kindle locations 1312-1318.

They express all too often that they are tired of preparing services and events for others that they rarely get to enter into on a deep level themselves. They feel like starving chefs. To that extent, I have found the works of Baxter, and his prescriptions for pastoral spiritual formation to be helpful, and even beyond helpful, essential in encouraging them not necessarily to work harder or even smarter, but deeper, and to attend to the inner life first and foremost.

This dissertation will outline what I believe to be Richard Baxter's paradigm for pastoral spiritual formation, and show that Baxter's wisdom for the pastors of his day remains applicable to the pastors of ours. I will outline the major suggestions Baxter made to clergy, the underlying reasons why, and the reasons I believe that if followed, his instructions will help pastors today to become and remain revived, renewed, and full of life; in short, "reformed."

## SECTION TWO: OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

To be a pastor in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is somewhat unlike having been a pastor in earlier years when the prescriptive advice of the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century seemed to focus on mining the best leadership wisdom from the business world and applying it to the life of one leading the church. Pastors were cast in the mold of the CEO and taught to run their boards and churches like a business. Seminaries filled curriculum with the latest or greatest books by business leaders and hoped that by learning leadership principles that had built strong companies, emerging pastors could build strong churches. Reading Ken Blanchard, Peter Drucker or Patrick Lencioni was perhaps thought by some to be more important than reading St. John of the Cross, Thomas a’Kempis, or Teresa of Avila; more relevant, certainly. The popularity of John Maxwell in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and into the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is perhaps indicative of this, as he, probably better than anyone, mixed and merged business wisdom with pastoral leadership advice. As I look at my bookshelves, filled with books obtained while in seminary over the last 20 years, I see titles like *Leadership and the New Science*, *The Leadership Challenge*, *Leadership by the Book*, and *Now Discover Your Strengths*, helpful books all, but all written from a perspective that holds the wisdom of the business place to be the model for leadership in the church.

And while pastors were being trained to run efficient churches, the effects of a lack of deep-rooted formation and spirituality have become evident. In his dissertation entitled *Serving and Following: Setting Aside Leadercentricity*, D. David Kessler writes,

The question must be asked, “Why, after forty years of seminars, books, models, strategies, vision statements, and leadership diets are ‘leaders’ in such bad

shape?” Witt diagnosed the problem writing, “We have neglected the fact that a pastor’s greatest leadership tool is a healthy soul.”<sup>15</sup>

The number of pastors who leave ministry<sup>16</sup> certainly gives testimony for the need for deeper foundations before ministry and increased self-care during it. In 1992, Eugene Peterson described the climate for pastors like this:

The pastoral vocation in America is embarrassingly banal. It is banal because it is pursued under the canons of job efficiency and career management. It is banal because it is reduced to the dimensions of a job description. It is banal because it is an idol— a call from God exchanged for an offer by the devil for work that can be measured and manipulated at the convenience of the worker.<sup>17</sup>

While wanting to pick up wisdom wherever we may find it, and not eschew best practices that may enhance our churches, the last few years in leadership literature in the pastoral field has answered the need to go deeper. Authors like Peterson and Ruth Haley Barton have, like Baxter before them, focused on issues of spiritual formation for pastors first and foremost. In fact, the phrase “spiritual formation” has undergone such a popularity of use that it might be close to slipping into cliché.

That being said, the desire to go back to first principles, to relationship with God and the formation of one’s soul as a leader is something I feel Baxter would have wholeheartedly agreed with and endorsed. This he called “heart work.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> D. David Kessler, "Serving and Following: Setting Aside Leadercentricity," 2015. Doctor of Ministry. Paper 101. <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/101>.

<sup>16</sup> 25-40% of pastors eventually leave the ministry altogether, most after only five years. Krejcir, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 5.

<sup>18</sup> “The religious discourse of a confirmed Christian is most about the greatest and most necessary matters. Heart work and heaven-work are the usual employment of his tongue and thoughts; unprofitable controversies and hurtful wranglings he abhorreth; and profitable controversies he manageth sparingly, seasonably, charitably, peaceably, and with caution and sobriety, as knowing that the servant of the Lord must not strive, and that strife of words perverteth the hearers, and hindereth edifying.” Richard Baxter, *Select Practical Writings of Richard Baxter*, volume 1 (London: Durie and Peck, 1835), 528.

But while the literature has changed, there remains still the constant pull of the attractional<sup>19</sup>, the big event, the bigger and better church that calls like a siren song to pastors, wooing them towards the rocks of performance. Anything to “win souls,” (which often really means simply a bigger attendance on Sundays) even if it means spending millions, adopting an entertainment culture in the church and working ourselves to death. To which Baxter replies, “If God would but reform the ministry, [by which he means pastors] and set them on their duties zealously and faithfully, the people would certainly be reformed.”<sup>20</sup>

While acknowledging no community is perfectly mature, I would contend (and believe Baxter would concur) that the reason more communities are not more spiritually mature is because their leaders are not more spiritually mature. Why aren't they? As Dallas Willard points out in *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, while we want to react as Christ would react, behave as Christ would behave, and lead as Christ would lead, we are unwilling to do the things and practice the disciplines that enabled Him to react, behave and lead as He did. “We must learn to follow His preparations, the disciplines for life in God's rule that enabled Him to receive His Father's constant and effective support while doing His will.”<sup>21</sup> Programs and teaching series will not do half as much good in a community as will the living example of pastors and other leaders who transparently live their lives and their practices before a watching community.

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<sup>19</sup> As used here, “attractional” refers to a ministry philosophy that emphasizes the Sunday service or other large events as the primary entrance point to the community, as opposed to seeing relationships with those within the community as the primary entrance point (often referred to as a “missional” orientation).

<sup>20</sup> Richard Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (London, 1696), 115.

<sup>21</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco CA: Harper, 1988), 9.

Paul's encouragement to Timothy, that he watch his own "life and doctrine" closely (I Timothy 4:16) should not be seen only in light of possible errors of belief or sins one might fall into. Rather, there's a positive formational aspect in both that needs to be attended to. How does our life, and how we live it, contribute to our formation? How can our doctrine, not just how we view various parts of Scripture, but how we view and relate to God contribute to who we are becoming, and who we are helping others to become?

Revival, for Baxter, was not hitting on the right methods and ways of doing church, but rather, devoting ourselves as leaders to the worship of God and the reform/formation of ourselves, which would bear much fruit in our churches. That was (and remains) the way.



## SECTION THREE: THESIS

*“Baxter understood rightly that before he would see a reformation in others, he must begin with himself.” – Vance Salisbury, Good Mr. Baxter<sup>22</sup>*

### Chapter One: Themes

Who was Richard Baxter? A “Puritan” pastor of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, he was a practical saint, whose impact in history is measured not in participation in great councils or turning the tide of events around him, but in his steadfast spirit, his thirst for the salvation of all those under his care and the awakened hearts, minds and souls he left everywhere he passed.

#### Historical Context

The English church world of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries was one of great turmoil. Constant disputations over forms of worship, views of communion, vestments, church authority, competing prayer books and more led to a Church at war with itself, metaphorically and and occasionally literally.

Though Henry VIII proclaimed himself head of the Church in England, his doctrine remained largely Roman Catholic. It was during the time of his son and successor Edward VI (1547-53) that the Reformation was effectively introduced in England. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, scholar Nicholas Ridley,

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<sup>22</sup> Vance Salisbury, *Good Mr. Baxter* (Nevada City, CA: Piety Hill Press, 2007), 12.

preacher Hugh Latimer, along with others from the Continent pushed for the Reform of English doctrine.

After Mary (1553-58) attempted to restore Catholicism and the authority of the Pope to Britain, Elizabeth (1558-1603) restored and permanently established Protestantism in England over the course of her long reign. During her time on the throne she replaced Catholic churchmen with Protestants, restored the church *Articles* and *Prayer Book* of Edward VI, and in an effort to calm the fears of those opposing her, took the title of Supreme Governor of the Church of England, rather than Supreme Head.

The Elizabethan Settlement, two acts of Parliament<sup>23</sup>, attempted to establish a Church of England that was different, but not overly so from Roman Catholicism. Though breaking official ties from Rome, these acts sought to find a *via media*, or “middle way,” by removing harsh penalties from Roman Catholics in England, removing abuse of the Pope from Church liturgy, and allowing for differences of opinion as to the nature of communion and vestments to be used in worship.

It was in this fractious landscape that Puritanism first took root.

## **Puritanism**

Elizabeth’s reforms were unsatisfactory to both the Roman Catholics in England who felt disenfranchised and to those who desired to see a more complete Reformation happen in England, more along the lines of Calvin’s Geneva.

Those who desired to reform the church even beyond Elizabethan reforms came to derisively be called “Puritans.” Their aim was to purify the church of Roman excess,

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<sup>23</sup> The Act of Supremacy of 1558 which re-established the Anglican church’s independence from Rome and the Act of Uniformity of 1558.

including the use of the cross in baptism, kneeling at communion, and the wearing of surplices, Roman liturgical vestments. Further, they desired to move away from the Episcopal form of church government towards the Reformed pattern of elders and synods.

Though the term “Puritan” was applied to groups ranging from clergy who objected to some of the *Prayer Book* ceremonies and phrasing, to those who practiced a serious Calvinistic piety, Puritanism as a whole was “a clergy-led movement which for more than a century was held together and given a sense of identity... by three things.”<sup>24</sup>

In the book, *The Quest for Godliness*, J.I. Packer identifies three distinctives of the Puritans. The first was a set of shared convictions regarding the Christian faith and practice as well as congregational life and the pastoral office. These tended to be biblicist and generally Calvinist. The second was a desire to rid the Church in England of the influence of Roman Catholicism, returning to what was, in their view, a New Testament pattern of worship. The third was a shared literature which was catechetical, evangelistic and devotional. Packer identifies about 100 or so “Puritan” authors, calling William Perkins the most formative and Richard Baxter the most distinguished.<sup>25</sup>

Though many see the Puritan movement in terms of a power struggle both in the church, in the state and often between the two, a deep motivation was at work.

The essential thing in understanding the Puritans was that they were preachers before they were anything else... Into whatever efforts they were led in their attempts to reform the world through the Church, and however these efforts were frustrated by the leaders of the Church, what bound them together, undergirded

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<sup>24</sup> J.I. Packer, *The Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 35-36.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

their striving, and gave them the dynamic to persist was their consciousness that they were called to preach the Gospel.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps Puritanism is best understood as both a movement of political and ecclesiastical reformation and personal revival, beginning in the Church of England, but eventually spreading far beyond.

### **Two Formative Themes in Baxter's Life**

Two major themes arise out of Baxter's early life. The first is his love of reading and both his need and desire to educate himself. The second is his poor health, something that would mark him throughout his life, as well as give rise to some of his most famous works. I believe that these two themes lie at the root of his later pastoral passions.

Born in 1615 into a moderately well-off family, Baxter was forced to spend the early years of his childhood, until somewhere around age 10, with his maternal grandfather. His father had so entangled the family estate with gambling debts that it was years before they were able to pay them off and properly care for young Richard.

During this time, however, Baxter's father had experienced a serious conversion in his life, taking up the study of Scripture and resolving to lead a holy life. When Baxter returned home, his father set him on a course of reading Scripture for himself, perhaps setting the future pastor on the road towards ministry and (Packer 1990) a life-long love of Scripture. Baxter said of this:

At first my father set me to read the historical parts of the Scripture, which suiting with nature, greatly delighted me<sup>27</sup>; and though all that time I neither understood

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<sup>26</sup> Irvonwy Morgan, *The Godly Preachers of the Elizabethan Church* (London: Epworth Press, 1965), 11.

nor relished much the doctrinal part, and mystery of redemption, yet it did me good by acquainting me with the matters of fact, and drawing me on to love the Bible, and to search by degrees into the rest.<sup>28</sup>

In those early years, Baxter struggled mightily against the temptations of youth, particularly as to joining in with others of his own age in dancing and carousing. “Many times my mind was inclined to be among them, and sometimes I broke loose from conscience, and joined with them; and the more I did it, the more I was inclined to it.”<sup>29</sup> It was during these times that Baxter first heard his father referred to as a “Puritan.” As he considered the godly ministers he heard called “Puritan, Precisian, and Hypocrite,”<sup>30</sup> and especially the lives and daily disciplines of those being so accused *vis a vis* the lives of those doing the accusing, he became convinced “that godly people were the best; and those that despised them, and lived in sin and pleasure, were a malignant, unhappy sort of people.” This, he wrote, kept him out of their company, “except now and then, when the love of sports and play enticed me.”<sup>31</sup> Possibly it was this that lead English historian Geoffrey Nuttall to describe Baxter as “an eager, sensitive, intelligent boy; lovable, but perhaps rather lonely.”<sup>32</sup>

At the age of fifteen, while reading *Bunny’s Resolutions*, he found his eyes opened and his heart turned towards concern for his own soul.

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<sup>27</sup> By saying it “suited his nature,” Baxter is most likely referring to the kinds of literature for which he had already been developing a taste. He noted elsewhere that as a boy, he had a great love of “romances, fables, and old tales.” (Baxter, *Autobiography*, 1998), 8.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>30</sup> Hugh Martin, *Puritanism and Richard Baxter* (London: SCM Press, 1954), 12.

<sup>31</sup> Baxter, *Autobiography* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 1998), 10.

<sup>32</sup> Geoffrey Nuttall, *Richard Baxter* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), 5.

In reading this book, it pleased God to awaken my soul, and show me the folly of sinning, and the misery of the wicked, and the inexpressible weight of things eternal, and the necessity of resolving a holy life, more than I was ever acquainted with before. The same things which I knew before came now in another manner, with light, and sense, and seriousness to my heart.<sup>33</sup>

He read also Richard Sibbes' *Bruised Reed*, which his father bought from a poor door-to-door peddler, as well as various works by William Perkins. "And thus, without any means but books, was God pleased to resolve me for Himself."<sup>34</sup>

The young Baxter excelled in his education, despite being largely neglected by his teachers and left to his own devices,<sup>35</sup> and though desiring to attend University was persuaded by his schoolmaster to accept an offer of Richard Wickstead, Chaplain to the Council at Ludlow, to be his tutor. This proposal was supported by his parents as it meant that their only child would remain geographically close to them.<sup>36</sup>

While a strong relationship developed between pupil and preceptor, it was again the case that Baxter's education was neglected. Wickstead, eager for social advancement, seemed to devote little to no time to actual instruction, preferring instead to allow Baxter the run of the library at Ludlow Castle, while he attempted to gain favor at court. Thus, it once again fell to Baxter to educate himself, something he would continue to do for the rest of his life<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> Baxter, *Autobiography*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>36</sup> Powicke, *The Life of the Reverend Richard Baxter*, 18.

<sup>37</sup> Hugh Martin described Baxter this way: "He was a rapid and omnivorous reader, with a wide knowledge especially of the classics, Church history and theology. The range of his references in his footnotes is extraordinary, and the quantity and range of his own writing is almost past belief." Martin, *Puritanism and Richard Baxter* (London: SCM Press, 1954), 122.

Baxter remained in this situation for one and a half years before being persuaded by Wickstead to consider abandoning thoughts of ministry and go instead to London and “get acquaintance at Court, and get some Office, as being the only rising way.”<sup>38</sup> Again with the encouragement of his parents, he consented to this course and went to Whitehall to live with Sir Henry Herbert, Master of the Revels. He lasted there all of one month.

When he saw a stage play instead of a sermon on Sunday, and the general moral state of those at court, he resolved to leave. It was at this very time that he received a message that his mother had fallen ill and desired for him to return home.

The end result of Baxter’s educational misadventures was that he became an autodidact, someone accustomed to teaching himself what he needed to learn. He was a voracious reader, and in lieu of a formal higher education, a self-taught theologian, whose constant encouragement to others that they “take heed to” themselves may best be seen as an outworking of his constant need to do this himself.

He did return home, and after his mother’s death he remained there for four years, working for his father and continuing his studies, even though during this time he was hindered by poor health, something he had endured since an early age.

Baxter struggled with various kinds of sickness throughout his life, and from the point of puberty onward, he believed himself on the verge of death. Smallpox at 14, chronic colds and nosebleeds, a chronic intestinal illness and pain (which he blamed on having eaten too much stolen fruit as a child)<sup>39</sup> and persistent bleeding hemorrhages in

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<sup>38</sup> Powicke, 16.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Purves, *Pastoral Theology in The Classical Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 99.

his eyes and gums are just the beginning of what he dealt with. An eye disease which almost cost him the sight in one eye, recurring kidney stones, a mass in his throat; all of these he not only struggled with, but was formed by.

For being in expectation of Death, by a violent Cough, with Spitting of Blood, &c. of two years continuance, supposed to be of a Consumption, I was yet more awakened to be serious, and solicitous about my Soul's everlasting State... and since then I have found that this method of God's very wise, and no other was so like to have tended to my good.<sup>40</sup>

Though Baxter struggled with his health, he understood how God had worked in him through it.

I humbly bless his gracious Providence, who gave me his Treasure in an earthen Vessel, and trained me up in the School of Affliction, and taught me the Cross of Christ so soon; that I might rather be Theologus Crucis, as Luther speaketh, than Theologus Gloriam; and Cross-bearer, than a Cross-maker or Imposter.<sup>41</sup>

He believed that his health issues and constant illnesses worked in him in such a way as to produce an urgency in his ministry and preaching. He put it this way: "I preached as never sure to preach again, as a dying man to dying men."<sup>42</sup> Baxter, perhaps with good reason, viewed every opportunity in the pulpit as possibly his last, and so was moved to make the most of it. One of his most famous works, *The Saint's Everlasting Rest* was written during an illness, from a bed that Baxter never thought he'd be able to leave.

And so it was in spite of, or perhaps precisely because of, his self-education and life-long struggles with his health that Baxter became one of the primary shaping forces of English Puritanism, and the English clergy themselves. Throughout his time as a

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<sup>40</sup> Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, 5.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>42</sup> In *Poetical Fragments* (London, 1681), the subtitle of which was "The Concordant Discord of a Broken Healed Heart; sorrowing, rejoicing, fearing, hoping, living, dying."



minister at Kidderminster, a Chaplain in the Parliamentary Forces, and after being ousted from his pastorate by an Act of Parliament designed to replace formerly deposed clergy, an author and occasional undercover, itinerant preacher, Baxter remained a reforming force in 17<sup>th</sup> century England. His work remains, even today, an invaluable resource to those in ministry, and those who desire that their lives be shaped for the Kingdom of God and inviting others into it.

Baxter's influences seem broad indeed. Though he lists only a specific few in his autobiography, he was reportedly one of the best read churchmen of his day. Baxter urged his fellow clergy to be readers, primarily of that which would affect their heart and lead to spiritual vitality. He said, "It is not the reading of many books which is necessary to make a man wise or good; but the well-reading of a few; could he be sure to have the best."<sup>43</sup> He compiled a list of books that ought to make up a pastoral library, prioritized by what one should buy if only a little was available all the way up to what would make up "a rich and sumptuous library"<sup>44</sup> if the funds were available. He recommended acquiring the works of as many "affectionate practical English writers" as possible, suggesting the works of Richard Allen, Gurnall, Preston, Sibbes, Bolton, Perkins, Hooker, Rogers, Rutherford and others.<sup>45</sup>

In terms of his theological influences,

Baxter's writings are a strange theological mix. He was one of a few Puritans whose doctrines of God's decrees, atonement, and justification were anything but Reformed. Though he generally structured his theology along Reformed lines of

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<sup>43</sup> Baxter, *A Christian Directory*, 731.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 732.

<sup>45</sup> Murray Caphill, *Preaching With Spiritual Vigour* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2003), 53.

thought, he frequently leaned towards Arminian thinking. He developed his own notion of universal redemption, which offended Calvinists, but retained a form of personal election, which offended Arminians. He rejected reprobation. He was greatly influenced by the Amyraldians<sup>46</sup> and incorporated much of their thinking, including hypothetical universalism, which teaches that Christ hypothetically died for all men, but his death only has real benefit to those who believe. For Baxter, Christ's death was more of a legal satisfaction of the law than a personal substitutionary death on behalf of elect sinners...

Baxter's approach to justification has been called neonomianism (that is, 'new law'); he said that God has made a new law offering forgiveness to repentant breakers of the old law. Faith and repentance – the new laws that must be obeyed – become the believer's personal, saving righteousness that is sustained by preserving grace. Baxter's soteriology, then, is Amyraldian with the addition of Arminian 'new law' teaching. Happily, these erroneous doctrines do not surface much in Baxter's devotional writings, which are geared mainly to encourage one's sanctification rather than to teach theology.<sup>47</sup>

### **Baxter's Place and Role in the Controversies of His Day**

As Baxter's ministry in Kidderminster progressed, he acquired great fame both as a preacher and a writer. He was known to be a great proponent of both ecclesiastical and civil peace.<sup>48</sup> Because of this, he was frequently consulted by both civil authorities and church leaders, often being called to London to speak on various issues. In April of 1660, he was called to London to consult on the subject of the Restoration, the return of exiled Charles II. He preached before Parliament the day before the bill ensuring the Restoration was passed, and again shortly after before the Lord Mayor and city leaders. Neither of his sermons satisfied their audiences.<sup>49</sup> There was something in Baxter's moderate views to offend everyone; some thought him guilty of sedition, some of vacillation and charged

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<sup>46</sup> A type of moderate, four-point Calvinism.

<sup>47</sup> Joel Beeke and Randall Pederson, *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 66.

<sup>48</sup> Baxter, *Autobiography*, 64.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

him with meddling in politics. In truth, Baxter, as a friend to the King, was in favor of the restoration of the monarchy, and used all his efforts to see it come to pass.<sup>50</sup>

After the Restoration, Baxter was among the ministers who were made chaplains to the King. Baxter sponsored several conferences attempting to make peace within the church, primarily between those of more Episcopal leanings and their Presbyterian opponents.

A meeting was held on the subject, in the presence of Charles, at which Baxter was the chief speaker. His address on the occasion is distinguished alike by its piety and fidelity. He was desirous of promoting and securing the religious liberties of the people, and of preventing those measures which he perceived were contemplated to remove many of the most holy and zealous preachers from their flocks.<sup>51</sup>

In this instance, as in many others throughout his life, Baxter provided a moderating, irenic presence. His desire to find the middle way, to bring opposing sides together both theologically and politically was a hallmark of his life.

While best known for his devotion to the people of Kidderminster, Baxter's greatest legacy lies arguably in his refining influence on the clergy of his day, and therefore the churches of his day as well as all those who have interacted with the pastoral exhortations in his writings since that time. With his keen mind and prolific pen he called the people of his day to put their faith in Christ<sup>52</sup>. With that same mind and pen he challenged the pastors of his day to be especially mindful in doing likewise, and to be careful of their personal faith, even as they attempted to influence the faith of others.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> For example, see his book, *A Call to the Unconverted to Turn and Repent*.

Baxter was a moderating influence in almost every area of theology and ecclesiastical politics<sup>53</sup> save one: his fiery passion that people know and embrace the Gospel of Jesus Christ. J.I. Packer described Baxter this way:

A well-read man with quick intelligence and a virtually photographic memory, an autodidact whose mental energy seemed endless, and a Puritan Christian whose God-centeredness, devotion, zeal, mastery of Scripture, and passion for holiness were truly awesome... effortlessly clearheaded, lucid in thought, and eloquent in speech, a master communicator on any subject.<sup>54</sup>

In the words of Frederick J. Powicke,

[I cannot] help setting down the conviction that in Baxter the Pastor—which includes Preacher—a modern pastor may still find the richest possible incentive to all that is best and highest in his vocation, whatever else may be the width of his difference from Baxter the Theologian.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> “His chief aim, even amid seventeenth-century controversies, was to be useful and peaceable.” Editor’s Preface, Baxter, Pederson and Packer, *The Godly Home* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 15.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>55</sup> Powicke, 9-10.

## Chapter Two: The Foundation for Formation

*“Do not spend the majority of your zeal on external things and opinion, and the smaller things of religion. Let most of your daily work be on your hearts.” – Richard Baxter, Christian Ethics<sup>56</sup>*

Though he wrote over 140 books during his life, Baxter is today best known for his instructions to the clergy of his day regarding their own spiritual formation. In *The Reformed Pastor* and other works, Baxter called on pastors to make sure they did not miss what it was they themselves were preaching and urging others toward.

See that the work of saving grace be thoroughly wrought in your own souls. Take heed to yourselves, lest you be void of that saving grace of God which you offer to others, and be strangers to the effectual working of that gospel which you preach; and lest, while you proclaim to the world the necessity of a Savior, your own hearts should neglect him, and you should miss of an interest in him and his saving benefits.<sup>57</sup>

He urged pastors to see the care of their flock bound up in the care of their own souls. He encouraged them to preach their sermons first to themselves, and then to their churches. Believing that the spiritual health of the minister greatly impacted the spiritual climate of the church, Baxter wrote, “If you did this for your own sakes, it would not be lost labor; but I am speaking to you upon the public account, that you would do it for the sake of the Church...”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 23.

<sup>57</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, Chp 1, Sec 1.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, chpt 1, sect 2.

He urged that a pastor take “special pains with his heart,” and so maintain within himself that which he was attempting to see formed in others.<sup>59</sup>

Baxter especially feared a view of ministry that allowed the pastor to view himself as a professional and his vocation as simply a utilitarian way to make a living. Though few of us would ever admit to ourselves or others that we view ministry in this way, is this not what we do when we pray that God would grow our ministries, but fail to pray that He would grow our souls or our own personal holiness? Or when we prepare a sermon without preparing our hearts? Baxter saw at the root of the problems in his day pastors who spent time preaching against the sins of others, but who rarely, if ever, took the time to consider their own. Or, most tragically in Baxter’s mind, who prepared and preached sermons, but failed to experience the very power and transformation of the Spirit of God that they were urging others toward. “None but converted men do make God their chief end, and do all or any thing heartily for His honour; others make the ministry a trade to live by.”<sup>60</sup>

But even those who do approach ministry correctly will experience periods of dryness spiritually. The question is, what do we do with them? All too often, the pastor will turn to the quick fix of a rousing conference or the latest book by a celebrity pastor.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> “But, besides this general course of watchfulness, methinks a minister should take some special pains with his heart, before he is to go to the congregation: if it be then cold, how is he likely to warm the hearts of his hearers? Therefore, go then specially to God for life: read some rousing, awakening book, or meditate on the weight of the subject of which you are to speak, and on the great necessity of your people’s souls, that you may go in the zeal of the Lord into his house. Maintain, in this manner, the life of grace in yourselves, that it may appear in all your sermons from the pulpit, – that everyone who comes cold to the assembly, may have some warmth imparted to him before he depart.” *Ibid.*, chpt 1, sect 2.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>61</sup> I speak here from personal experience as a pastor and one who coaches pastors. Some of the largest pastors conferences in America, like Catalyst (<http://catalystconference.com/>) or the C3

In Baxter's mind, the move downward into formation is key. "I know that every man must grow, as trees do, downwards and upwards both at once, and that the roots increase as the bulk and branches do."<sup>62</sup>

The structure of Baxter's primary exhortation to clergy, *The Reformed Pastor*, is itself instructive. After some introductory apologies for the dressing down he is about to give them, Baxter opens to his audience Paul's instructions to the Ephesian elders, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers..."<sup>63</sup> Following Paul's order, he proceeds to give them a litany of reasons they ought to "take heed" to themselves. In Chapter Two, he begins to instruct them on what it means to take heed to their flocks. But he begins doing so by explaining that he has chosen this order not simply because it was the order in which Paul wrote his instructions, but because "It was first necessary to take into consideration what we must be, and what we must do for our own souls, before we come to that which must be done for others."<sup>64</sup> Here Baxter is again displaying a formational view of ministry, that is, that ministry is not simply or even chiefly about what we do, but rather is first and foremost about who we are, how we are being formed by the Spirit of God into the image of the Son, and what flows from that.

Baxter was nothing if not blunt in his writings. One author described his directness this way, "He takes his hearers almost by the throat. He addresses them as

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(<http://c3conference.com/>) feel like a cross between a rock concert and a pep rally (with a bit of circus thrown in).

<sup>62</sup> Baxter, *Autobiography*, 150.

<sup>63</sup> Acts 20:28.

<sup>64</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 27.

'you', he speaks to their innermost thoughts, he searches their hearts and he exposes them to themselves. That surely is one of the greatest gifts as a preacher that he had.”<sup>65</sup>

The problem, Baxter believed, was that too many pastors were attempting to offer something to others that they themselves were not experiencing. And more than being simply problematic, Baxter saw that as tragic, both for themselves and everyone in their pastoral care.

### **Like Starving Chefs**

One of Baxter’s primary metaphors in urging pastors onward in spiritual growth and formation was that of the starving chef. “Take heed to yourselves, lest you perish, while you call upon others to take heed of perishing; and lest you famish yourselves while you prepare food for them.”<sup>66</sup>

I remember well the moment as a young pastor, sitting at my desk in front of an open Bible, finally wrestling with the question I should have been asking all along. “Would I be reading this if I wasn’t afraid that someone would inquire about my ‘devotional life’?” The sad conclusion I came to that day was “No... probably not.” I was in the Bible multiple times per week, preparing lessons and sermons for others. But when it came to reading God’s Word for my own soul, for my own *enjoyment*? Never. No wonder I felt like I was trying to draw water out of a dry and dusty well. I was often driven to Scripture out of need. Unfortunately, it wasn’t the needs of my own heart and soul that drove me.

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<sup>65</sup> Maurice Roberts, *Banner of Truth Magazine*, no. 339 (December 1991).

<sup>66</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 9.



In Baxter's mind, pastors are all too often like starving chefs, working diligently to prepare the best meals they can for others while their own souls run the risk of withering away. Why? Because they too rarely approach the table simply to eat, to enjoy, to *feast* on what God has prepared for us. Too many people in ministry fail to come to Scripture with their own hearts in mind. "Oh what aggravated misery is this, to perish in the midst of plenty! To famish with the bread of life in our hands, while we offer it to others, and urge it on them."<sup>67</sup>

Worse, the way pastors often approach the place of Scripture in their lives is in direct contradiction to the Gospel of grace they preach. We can feel driven by duty or a sense that God will only bless our lives and our ministries if we are diligent in prayer and in the Scriptures. And so, like those trying to earn the favor of a capricious god, we reluctantly open the Bible, read our daily passage, and then get on with our day, feeling as though we have checked off one more box required of us. We have done our duty.

One of Baxter's more effective approaches was to urge pastors to consider the effects of their own spiritual vitality or dryness on those around them, particularly on those in their church communities.

If we forbear taking food ourselves, we shall famish them; it will soon be visible in their leanness, and dull discharge of their several duties. If we let our love decline, we are not like to raise up theirs. If we abate our holy care and fear, it will appear in our preaching: if the matter show it not, the manner will. If we feed on unwholesome food, either errors or fruitless controversies, our hearers are like to fare the worse for it. Whereas, if we abound in faith, and love, and zeal, how would it overflow to the refreshing of our congregations, and how would it appear in the increase of the same graces in them<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 13.

In this, he urged pastors toward a view of spiritual formation *for the sake of others*. Yes, we ought to be formed, but as ministers we do so in line with the vocational call on our own life. As Christians, we do so as a response to the great commandment to love God and to love our neighbors. We see formation not as an end to itself, that we might simply be better Christians, but rather, as an act of love for others and an integral part of our calling to minister to them. “He cannot succeed in healing the wounds of others who is himself unhealed by reason of neglecting himself.”<sup>69</sup>

Further, as we seek to excel in our ministerial work and skills, we must continue this formational view. We see formational first things not simply as those things we do at first, as we are learning to be Christians, or starting off in ministry, but rather as the things which have primary place in our lives, for the rest of our lives, for the length and breadth of our ministries. “O therefore, brethren, lose no time! Study, and pray, and confer, and practice; for in these four ways your abilities must be increased.”<sup>70</sup>

Baxter believed that finding ourselves at a place of contentment, or perhaps better, *complacency* about our own spiritual health and well-being was something that ought to be avoided at all costs. “Content not yourselves with being in a state of grace, but also be careful that your graces are kept in vigorous and lively exercise.”<sup>71</sup>

The way in which this happens in our lives, was for Baxter, a constant “taking heed” or ourselves.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 61.

## Self-Knowledge and Taking Heed of Yourself

Baxter's continual refrain throughout *The Reformed Pastor* is "take heed to yourselves."

See that the work of saving grace be thoroughly wrought in your own souls. Take heed to yourselves, lest you be void of the saving grace of God which you offer to others, and be strangers to the effectual working of that gospel which you preach; and lest, while you proclaim to the world the necessity of a Saviour, your own hearts should neglect him, and you should miss of an interest in him and his saving benefits.<sup>72</sup>

Similar to the advice inscribed on the wall outside the temple of Apollo where the Oracle at Delphi dwelt that one "Know Thyself," Baxter is urging that pastors would have a keen understanding of who they are and a constant attention to the state of their souls, their passions, their motivations and their desires. For him, that encompassed both the positive and the negative; that is, their desire for God and for right-intentioned ministry, and also their desires for the things which would hinder them in that ministry.

One of the common things I hear when speaking to husbands or wives who have committed adultery is "I don't know how I got here." We know it's not the case that one day we simply wake up to find ourselves in an adulterous relationship or other sin, or spiritual deadness, or loss of faith, but rather that when we find ourselves in those places, we do so because of a long string of choices made and opportunities to turn around missed. We do so, because unaware of the state of our hearts and souls we wander off the path of discipline, onto easier paths of self-indulgence, self-centeredness, self-abandon; everything but self-awareness.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 53.

Baxter, following Paul, who also told Timothy to “watch [his] life and doctrine closely,”<sup>73</sup> urged those in ministry to keep their eyes open on their own hearts and lives. This is where formation begins, as we understand how unlike the character of Christ is our own, in what areas we need attention and growth, and begin to understand how God wants to work formation in us. “For your people’s sakes, therefore, look to your hearts.”<sup>74</sup>

### **Humility and Teachability**

Pastors can lose many things— their integrity, the trust of their people, their reputations in the Christian community and the world, and still recover. But the one thing that pastors can never lose if they hope to be restored, or even if they hope to never fall from grace in the first place is a humble teachability. Lose that, and one way or another, eventually everything else will fall. As John Wooden, coach of UCLA men’s basketball from 1948 -1975, was known to have said constantly to his players, “If I am through learning, I am through.” For Baxter, a life-long learner, this was a necessity, and one that he urged on others.

We must carry ourselves meekly and condescendingly to all; and so teach others, as to be as ready to learn of any that can teach us, and so both teach and learn at once; not proudly venting our own conceits, and disdaining all that any way contradict them, as if we had attained to the height of knowledge.<sup>75</sup>

In a time when learning is often measured more by degrees than by wisdom, this is a word pastors need to hear. We see in the Proverbs the warnings that pride goes before

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<sup>73</sup> 1 Timothy 4:16.

<sup>74</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, Kindle Loc. 1321.

<sup>75</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 41.

a fall,<sup>76</sup> and that the wise receive teaching and grow wiser still<sup>77</sup>, and yet, often as pastors, our minds go to people we think need to hear this, rather than allowing this wisdom to work teachability in our own hearts.

Particularly vexing for Baxter was an attitude he discerned in the clergy around him that would allow them to speak plainly and severely to “drunkards, worldlings, or ignorant unconverted persons” and expect them to “not only bear all patiently, but take all thankfully,” while at the same time demanding that if others would seek to correct the ministers themselves, “if we do not honor and reverence them, and speak as smoothly as we are able to speak, yes, if we mix not commendations with reproofs... they take it as almost an insufferable injury.”<sup>78</sup>

For Baxter, the attitudes of teachability and humility among the clergy were not just a prerequisite to being in ministry, but even more, were an essential part of the Christian life. “Humility is not a mere ornament of a Christian, but an essential part of the new creature. It is a contradiction in terms, to be a Christian, and not be humble.”<sup>79</sup> Towards the end of his life, as Baxter was taking stock and giving a report of the ways God had changed and shaped him over the years, he wrote, “Heretofore I knew much less than now, and yet was not half so much acquainted with my ignorance.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Proverbs 16:18.

<sup>77</sup> Proverbs 9:9.

<sup>78</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 54.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Baxter, *Autobiography*, 155.

## A Deep Relationship with Scripture

Baxter persistently exhorted his people and other ministers to love, reverence, read, study, obey and stick close to Scripture. That this goes so far beyond a daily “quiet time” wherein a chapter or two of Scripture is quickly glossed and forgotten hardly needs to be said. Baxter’s encouragement is really that we might ground our lives in Scripture, nourish our souls with it, feed daily on it and cling to it as a drowning person might cling to a life vest.

He viewed with dismay the relationship that most in his day had to the Scriptures;

They know the Scripture is the law of God, by which they must be acquitted or condemned in the judgment; and that “the man is blessed who delights in the law of the Lord, and in his law doth meditate day and night;” yet will they not be at the pains to read a chapter once a day. If they carry a Bible to church, and neglect it all the week, this is the most use they make of it.<sup>81</sup>

For modern clergy, the temptation may not be that we would never read anything of value, spiritually, but rather that we might never get around to actually reading Scripture. The explosion in the Christian book world over the last few decades means that there is a perennial stack of books on our bedside tables and desks which we feel we *must*, at some point get around to reading. And while reading those books may enhance our understanding of ministry, our lives and our world, they will never and could never have the same impact on us as that of inspired Scripture. Thus, Baxter warns, “Let

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<sup>81</sup> Baxter, *The Saints’ Everlasting Rest*, Kindle locations 1430-1432.

Scripture be first and most in your hearts and hands, and other books be used as subservient to it.”<sup>82</sup>

The further temptation we face when we do take the time to come to Scripture is that we have trained our minds, as clergy, to make note of things which may later prove helpful to us in preaching or teaching, in pastoral counseling or in writing. And with this, we come to Scripture and see laid out in front of us so many things that others would benefit from hearing, and often completely miss what it is that God is trying to say to us. Baxter urges, “Before and after you read the Scripture, pray earnestly that the Spirit which did indite (sic) it, may expound to you, and lead you into the truth.”<sup>83</sup> And again, “You have therefore need to be careful in reading it. And as Christ saith, ‘Take heed how you hear;’ so I say, Take heed how you read.”<sup>84</sup>

Baxter encourages us that we come to Scripture “with humility, as a learner or disciple,”<sup>85</sup> which, in reality we clergy actually are, and would do well to recognize. We may have the role of teaching others, of explaining and expounding Scripture to others, but we should never cease being learners, as we will certainly never grow out of the role of “disciple.” “Therefore, come not to it (Scripture) as a judge.”<sup>86</sup> If we’re honest with ourselves, we might find in our hearts a bit of what Baxter warns us against here-- coming to Scripture as though we are somehow “over” it rather than our rightful place as

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 732.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 478.

<sup>84</sup> Baxter, *A Christian Directory*, vol. 3 (London, 1830), 263.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

being “under” it, something that is all too easy to do as the advanced degrees behind our names multiply.

In all, Baxter points toward a particular heart attitude when coming to Scripture; one of hunger and thirst, one of submission and reverence, one of joy and “great delight,”<sup>87</sup> but most of all with love for the one who has given us the gift of His Word. “Read it not, therefore, as a common book, with a common and unreverent heart; but in dread and love of God the author.”<sup>88</sup>

## **Prayer**

Again, Baxter had much to say to pastors as to their own prayers, and again, he draws us toward thinking how what we do, or fail to do, will impact those we are attempting to point towards Christ.

When your minds are in a holy, heavenly frame, your people are likely to partake of the fruits of it. Your prayers, and praises, and doctrine, will be sweet and heavenly to them. They will likely feel when you have been much with God: that which is most on your hearts, is likely to be most in their ears.<sup>89</sup>

We become people of prayer, as clergy, not merely for the sake of our souls, but as a means of ministering to those we love and shepherd. It’s all too easy to feel that our prayer life, our personal relationship with Scripture, or what we do in privacy is between God and ourselves alone. Baxter points out that how we are formed in secret is how we

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, Kindle loc. 1307-1309



will minister in public. Therefore, when we are tempted by the busyness of ministry to lay aside time in prayer, we ought to remember that time in prayer *is* ministry.

Baxter urged pastors to see the care of their flock bound up in the care of their own souls. Believing that the spiritual health of the minister greatly impacted the spiritual climate of the church, he wrote, “If you did this for your own sakes, it would not be lost labor; but I am speaking to you upon the public account, that you would do it for the sake of the Church...”<sup>90</sup> He urged that a pastor take “special pains with his heart,” and so maintain within himself that which he was attempting to see formed in others.<sup>91</sup>

But beyond simply seeing our own prayers as setting the stage for formation in the people in our churches, Baxter saw in prayer a duty that we owed them. “Prayer must carry on our work as well as preaching: he preacheth not heartily to his people, that prayeth not earnestly for them.”<sup>92</sup> Baxter’s call cuts deep. For many pastors, we are tempted to see our time in sermon preparation as the ultimate contribution to the spiritual health and formation of our people. Baxter, in one of his better aphorisms, lays low the idea that preaching to them is enough. If we are not also in prayer for them, we cannot expect much fruit from our ministry.

If we prevail not with God to give them faith and repentance, we shall never prevail with them to believe and repent. When our own hearts are so far out of

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., chpt 1, sect 2.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., chpt 1, sect 2. “But, besides this general course of watchfulness, methinks a minister should take some special pains with his heart, before he is to go to the congregation: if it be then cold, how is he likely to warm the hearts of his hearers? Therefore, go then specially to God for life: read some rousing, awakening book, or meditate on the weight of the subject of which you are to speak, and on the great necessity of your people’s souls, that you may go in the zeal of the Lord into his house. Maintain, in this manner, the life of grace in yourselves, that it may appear in all your sermons from the pulpit, – that everyone who comes cold to the assembly, may have some warmth imparted to him before he depart.”

<sup>92</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 122.

order, and theirs so far out of order, if we prevail not with God to mend and help them, we are like to make but unsuccessful work.<sup>93</sup>

But beyond seeing prayer as something we ought to do for the sake of others, of course Baxter believed we ought to pray for our own sake as well. In fact, he took a rather dim view of those who would not. “They are not Christ’s followers that do not care for being alone; that cannot enjoy themselves in solitude, when they have none else to converse with, none else to enjoy but God and their own hearts.”<sup>94</sup>

It is all too easy to see prayer as something we do (and so can put off doing), rather than an essential part of who we are as followers of Jesus, and as those who are urging others to follow Him. And so, Baxter says, “Above all, be much in secret prayer and meditation.”<sup>95</sup>

### **Meditating on God**

It is confessed to be a duty by all, but practically denied by most. Many that make conscience of other duties, easily neglect this; they are troubled if they omit a sermon, a fast, or a prayer in public or private; yet were never troubled that they had omitted meditation perhaps all their life-time.<sup>96</sup>

For Baxter, dependence on God and seeing Christ as supremely desirable were the most formative things one could do, and so growth happened not just by developing positive habits but rather through meditating on certain things in such a way that the heart and mind was drawn upward in love of and devotion to God.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Baxter, *Converse with God in Solitude*, Kindle Loc. 16.

<sup>95</sup> Baxter, *The Saints’ Everlasting Rest*, 120.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 62.

Ask your hearts seriously whether God in Christ be enough for them, or not? If they say, no, they renounce him and all their hope of heaven; for no man takes God for his God that takes him not for his portion, and as enough for him: if they say, yea, then you have enough to stop the mouth of your fleshly desires, while your hearts confess that they have enough in God. Should that soul that hath a filial interest in God, and an inheritance in eternal life, be eager for any conveniences and contentments to the flesh? If God be not enough for you, you will never have enough. Turn to him more, and know him better, if you would have a satisfied mind.”<sup>97</sup>

In this and other parts of Baxter’s theology it may be that we find some of the roots of modern-day writers and Reformed theologians as John Piper and Tim Keller. Long before anyone had thought of the phrase “Christian Hedonism,” Baxter wrote, “Remember still that God would give you more pleasure, and not less...”<sup>98</sup>

Formation happens, according to Baxter, not through denying our desires and avoiding pleasure, but rather through understanding our desires and turning them in the correct, God-focused direction. His advice was to use our reason when it came to our desires, and so

...take an account, whatever the appetite would have, of the ends and reasons of the thing, and to what it doth conduce. Take nothing and do nothing merely because the sense or appetite would have it; but because you have reason so to do, and to gratify the appetite.<sup>99</sup>

Like John Eldredge and C.S Lewis would centuries later, Baxter is urging us to understand our appetites, look for the “ends and reasons,” that is, the place where God dwells behind our desires drawing us to Him, and by meditating on that, allow our desires to do their right work. When I am lonely, it is not enough to seek company, but I ought

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<sup>97</sup> Baxter, Directions Against Sinful Desires and Discontent, *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter* (London, 1830).

<sup>98</sup> Baxter, *The Sinfulness of Flesh Pleasing*, Christian Ethics (London, 1830) part I, chapter 4.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

also to see behind my desire to be with others the God-given need for relationship and how that need is fulfilled ultimately in Him. Then, I can seek out human company in a right frame of mind, not looking for it to meet the ultimate need of my soul.

Remember still that God would give you more pleasure, and not less, and that he will give you as much of the delights of sense as is truly good for you, so you will take them in their place, in subordination to your heavenly delights. And is not this to increase and multiply your pleasure? Are not health, and friends, and food, and convenient habitation, much sweeter as the fruit of the love of God, and the foretastes of everlasting mercies, and as our helps to heaven, and as the means to spiritual comfort, than of themselves alone? All your mercies are from God: he would take none from you, but sanctify them, and give you more.<sup>100</sup>

“Frequency in heavenly contemplation is particularly important to prevent a shyness between God and thy soul.”<sup>101</sup> Here, I feel as if Baxter is peering into my very soul. Often, when I know I ought to be spending time with God, I will excuse myself on the basis of all the work I have to do, or worse, all the fun or relaxation I need to enjoy. But in my more lucid moments, I have seen that the real problem was what Baxter described as a “shyness” between God and myself. I have often felt the shame of a week of missed time with God leading me to miss more. I have noticed that when I allow my heart to grow cold, I am more apt to strive to be comfortable in that condition rather than take my heart to the One who can warm it. For Baxter, the cure to this condition is frequent meditation on the person of God, His character and His love. Will the one pictured with arms outstretched receiving back the prodigal not also welcome me back in the same way, ever and always? “But that every doubting, or self-accusing soul may not find a pretense for flying from God, let such know and consider, that God does not cease to be Father, whenever a fearful soul is drawn to question or deny it.”

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 343-344.

Far from the Eastern view of meditation, which many see as emptying our minds,<sup>102</sup> for Baxter, mediation consisted of filling it with the goodness of God, and the knowledge of His love for us. In this way, when we are in despair, we are reminded of the transitory nature of our troubles, when we are tempted, we focus not on the thing we are trying to avoid, but rather on the thing we are running to, God Himself.

Let your joyful part of religion be most of your meditations: the infinite goodness of God, who is love; the wonder of man's redemption; the freeness and fullness of the promise; and the certainty and glory of our future state: these are the chief part of our religion, and of chiefest use; which must resolve us, fix us, quicken us, and help us live in thankfulness and joy.<sup>103</sup>

Meditation of this kind can have a profoundly forming effect. Our very identities are changed and solidified when we think about the love God has for us. Rather than allowing our opinions of ourselves to be formed by our performance as clergy, meditation allows how we see ourselves to be formed by God Himself. "Do this in thy heavenly contemplation; explain to thyself the things on which thou dost meditate; confirm thy faith in them by Scripture; and then apply them to thyself according to their nature and thy own necessity."<sup>104</sup>

Thus meditation on God forms us into the kinds of pastors we would like to be, more than any conference or book, because in meditation on God, we are communing with God Himself.

Christians who are much in secret prayer, and in meditation and contemplation, rather than they who are more in hearing, reading and conference, are men of

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<sup>102</sup> "Eastern meditation is an attempt to empty the mind; Christian meditation is an attempt to fill the mind. The two ideas are quite different." Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 20.

<sup>103</sup> Baxter, "Funeral Sermon of Mr. Henry Stubbs" in *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter*, 974.

<sup>104</sup> Baxter, *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*, Kindle Locations 3614-3615.

greatest life and joy, because they are nearer the source of the fountain, and have all more immediately from God Himself.<sup>105</sup>

### **Godly Friendships and Conversation**

One of the sad truths about pastors today, that many, especially in their churches, are unaware of, is that few pastors have friends. According to one of the studies cited earlier, Krejcir, 70% of pastors report that they have no one in their lives they would consider a close friend. Baxter, even in his day, recognized the need for friends that clergy have.

Another help to this heavenly life is to talk seriously of it a good deal, especially with those who can speak from their hearts, and are seasoned themselves with a heavenly nature...I think we should meet together on purpose to warm our spirits with talking about our rest.<sup>106</sup>

While we continually preach of the need for community, the truth is, few pastors experience it; and that, to our detriment. Having someone to talk about our spiritual lives with, especially someone who will talk with us frankly, or as Baxter says, “from the heart,” is a necessity. “And your familiar companions have great advantage to help or hinder your salvation, as well as your teachers.”<sup>107</sup> I often hear pastors speak about what they have learned from a particularly wise professor, or a particularly good book. Less often do I hear pastors speak about the impact of particularly close friends.

The matter is not so great, whom you meet by the way, or travel with, or trade and buy and sell with, as whom you make your intimate or familiar friends. For such have both the advantage of their interest in your affections, and also the advantage of their nearness and familiarity; and, if they have but also the advantage of higher abilities than you, they may be powerful instruments of your good or hurt. If you have a familiar friend, that will defend you from error, and help you against

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., Kindle loc. 581.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., Kindle loc. 3090.

<sup>107</sup> Baxter, *A Christian Directory* (Volume 1 of 4) Christian Ethics, Kindle Locations 3124-3125

temptations, and lovingly reprove your sin, and feelingly speak of God, and the life to come, inditing (sic) his discourse from the inward power of faith, and love, and holy experience; the benefit of such a friend may be more to you, than of the learnedest or greatest in the world.<sup>108</sup>

Clearly, Baxter thought highly of the value of friends. He saw friendship as an integral part of our formation, and an aid to living the kind of Christ-honoring congruent life we ought to live as pastors.

### **Congruence**

Perhaps the most important thing Baxter urged on his fellow clergy was that they seek to see ever more congruence between their inner life and outer life, between their relationship to God and their relationship to people. “It is a palpable error of some ministers, who make such a disproportion between their preaching and their living; who study hard to preach exactly, and study little or not at all to live exactly.”<sup>109</sup>

Every time I read of yet another pastor who has resigned due to moral failing, I think of this issue. Recognizing that we are duty-bound to live the way we preach, each minister has a responsibility to take a fearless moral self-inventory regularly, recognize those areas where his or her life is falling short, and begin rigorously to deal with them. While I know that none of us will ever achieve complete congruence of Christ-like living, the challenge is to live in such a way that people who know us, up close and personal, have reason to be more confident in the life-changing power of the Gospel, not less. “Take heed, therefore, to yourselves first, that you be that which you persuade your

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 63-64.

hearers to be, and believe that which you persuade them to believe; and heartily entertain that Saviour whom you offer to them.”<sup>110</sup>

Baxter recognized that this is hard, but necessary work. His encouragements often took issue with the amount of work we do in study and preparation to fulfill ministerial duties, as opposed to the amount of work many of us do in simply learning how to be more like Jesus.

Certainly, brethren, we have very great cause to take heed what we do, as well as what we say: if we will be the servants of Christ indeed, we must not be tongue servants only, but must serve Him with our deeds... We must study as hard how to live well, as how to preach well. We must think and think again, how to compose our lives...<sup>111</sup>

While we may never preach a sermon on a subject concerning the Christian life that we have 100% mastery of, the challenge is to strive just as hard to live like Christ as we do to preach or point others towards Him. That our own personal formation would be as important in our minds as the issues of ministry we face daily was Baxter’s concern. “If it not be your daily business to study your own hearts, and to subdue corruption, and to walk with God- if you make not this a work to which you constantly attend, all will go wrong, and you will starve your hearers.”<sup>112</sup>

...[Baxter’s] concern for absolute integrity in the entirety of one’s life and ministry is profoundly challenging. Baxter believed passionately in preaching, but he did not depend on preaching to do it all. He knew that preaching was most usually impotent if it was not the overflow of a heart that loved God and was truly devoted to spiritual things. In the most convicting terms he challenged the ministers of his day to greater personal spirituality.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., Kindle Locations 1185-1186.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>112</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 62.

<sup>113</sup> Caphill, *Preaching With Spiritual Vigour*, 37.



## Preaching to Yourself

In a letter to his bishop, Baxter described his life this way: he spent his time “preaching Christ crucified unto myself and Country people.” By “preaching...unto myself,” Baxter meant exactly that. Beyond meditating on the truth of Christ and His Gospel, Baxter suggested that we actually preach the very messages we preach to others to ourselves.

Preach to yourself the sermons which you study, before you preach them to others... When your minds are in a holy, heavenly frame, your people are likely to partake of the fruits of it... They will feel likely feel when you have been much with God: that which is most on your hearts, is like to be most in their ears.<sup>114</sup>

But for Baxter, this was more than simply reading aloud, or meditating on the personal applications of the sermons we preach and the messages we give to our people. For him, it was actually a matter of entering into a debate with oneself, arguing with our own inclinations to sin, or despair. We must take the initiative to encourage our own hearts and minds with the truth of God’s love for us and His Good News.

...thou must in thy meditation quicken thy own heart. Enter into a serious debate with it. Plead with it in the most moving and affecting language, and urge it with the most powerful and weighty arguments. It is what holy men of God have practiced in all ages. Thus David: ‘Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God; for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God.’ And again; ‘Bless the Lord, O my soul! and forget not all his benefits!’ This soliloquy is to be made use of according to the several affections of the soul, and according to its several necessities. It is a preaching to one's self; for as every good master or father of a family is a good preacher to his own family, so every good Christian is a good preacher to his own soul.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>115</sup> Baxter, *Saints Everlasting Rest*, 312.

Baxter recommended we do this not only when we are preparing to preach a sermon, but all the time. He even suggested we do so in the voice of our favorite preachers!

Therefore the very same method which a minister should use in his preaching to others, every Christian should endeavor after in speaking to himself. Observe the matter and manner of the most heart affecting minister; let him be a pattern for your imitation; and the same way that he takes with the hearts of his people, do thou also take with thy own heart.<sup>116</sup>

In my own life, this has proved to be invaluable advice. I have been endeavoring over the last few years to develop the habit of speaking truth to myself, at the times when it is most needed. This may take the form of longer wrestling, as Baxter suggests, or short and simple statements to myself that help to turn around quickly a souring mood or a panicky heart.

Preach to yourselves first, before you preach to the people, and with greater zeal. O Lord, save thy church from worldly pastors, that study and learn the art of Christianity, and ministry; but never had the Christian, divine nature, nor the vital principle which must difference them and their service from the dead... nothing doth make you good preachers, than that which doth most to make you good Christians.<sup>117</sup>

One short example of this. A few years back I realized that I was experiencing increasing frustration in traffic and “road rage,” when I hit traffic, particularly on my way to work appointments. It dawned on me, one day, as I sat not so quietly simmering while starting at the brake lights ahead, that the reason why this impacted me so much was an image and identity issue. I didn’t want to be seen as the guy who was always late to every

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., Kindle Locations 3611-3614.

<sup>117</sup> Baxter, *A Sermon Preached at the Funeral of Mr. Henry Stubbs* (1678), in *Practical Works*, (1830), 4:974.

appointment. I cared what others thought of me, perhaps too much, and it made me angry when my false self-image as one who was punctual was threatened. As I sat there, I simply said to myself, speaking of those whose opinion seemed to mean so much to me, “Well, it’s a good thing they are not my Savior, and Jesus is.” It was like a weight lifted off of my shoulders. I have been much more relaxed in traffic, though I need to preach that message to myself often still.

### Chapter Three: What to Avoid

*“If it be not your daily business to study your own hearts, and to subdue corruption, and to walk with God—if you make not this a work to which you constantly attend, all will go wrong and you will starve your hearers...”*—Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*<sup>118</sup>

Baxter’s concerns for his fellow clergy extended not just to what they should or must do for the sake of their own formation and the sakes of those to whom they minister, but also to what they must avoid. In his writings, Baxter often dealt first with positive formation as the foundation of the spiritual life, and then with avoiding sin. In his mind, the forming effects of the disciplines outlined above could be easily undone by the malforming effects of sin, and so having looked at Baxter’s positive recommendations for the Christian life, we turn now to his recommendations as to what to avoid.

Baxter believed that much temptation can be tied to the stage of life in which we find ourselves and gave specific instructions as to how to deal with temptation in each stage.

The devil fitteth his temptations to the sinner's age. The same bait is not suitable to all. Children he tempteth to excess of playfulness, lying, disobedience, unwillingness to learn the things that belong to their salvation, and a senselessness of the great concernment of their souls. He tempteth youth to wantonness, rudeness, gulosity, [excessive appetite, greediness] unruliness, and foolish inconsiderateness. In the beginning of manhood he tempteth to lust, voluptuousness, and luxury; or if these take not, to designs of worldliness and ambition. The aged he tempteth to covetousness, and unmovableness in their error, and unteachableness and obstinacy in their ignorance and sin. Thus every age hath its peculiar snare. Direct. I. The remedy against this is, 1. To be distinctly acquainted with the temptations of your own age; and watch against them with a special heedfulness and fear. 2. To know the special duties and advantages of

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<sup>118</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 14.

your own age, and turn your thoughts wholly unto those. Scripture hath various precepts for the various ages; study your own part. The young have more time to learn their duty, and less care and business to divert them; let them therefore be taken up in obedient learning. The middle age hath most vigour of body and mind; and therefore should do their Master's work with the greatest vigour, activity, and zeal. The aged should have most judgment, and experience, and acquaintedness with death and heaven; and therefore should teach the younger, both by word and holy life.<sup>119</sup>

And, as in all things, Baxter urged us to be knowledgeable of our own hearts, and the temptations we were likely to face.

Be thoroughly acquainted with your temptations and the things that may corrupt you - and watch against them all day long. You should watch especially the most dangerous of the things that corrupt, and those temptations that either your company or business will unavoidably lay before you.<sup>120</sup>

He recognized that while the specifics of temptations each pastor faced might be different, there are certain temptations that are universal. Before we look towards Baxter's specific warnings against specific temptations, we'll look at a very helpful concept he develops in *The Reformed Pastor*.

### **The Fishbowl Effect**

As a young pastor I absolutely hated the “fishbowl effect” of ministry: that everyone was watching me closely and my mistakes appeared to count for so much more than others'. It seemed profoundly unfair to my young mind that personal shortcomings which would never be an issue in terms of most people's employment could easily lose me my job, my reputation, and my community. Never mind that maybe the reason it bothered me so much was that I had such a surplus of those shortcomings.

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<sup>119</sup> Baxter, *A Christian Directory*, vol. 1, Christian Ethics, Kindle Locations 5150-5159.

<sup>120</sup> Baxter, “How To Spend The Day With God.”

Pastors today live before a live audience. The rise and fall of celebrity pastors, the Catholic priest scandals involving children, high-profile pastors who have misused church funds—all of these mean that our friends and neighbors, and sometimes even our own congregants, no longer tend to give a pastor the benefit of the doubt. And worse, the advent of social media gives not just our critics the ability to publish any criticism, unfounded or not, against us, but it also gives us the ability to publish our own shortcomings loudly. What we do and say, even when we are out of sorts, has the ability to reach nearly everyone in our church almost instantaneously.<sup>121</sup> All those watching eyes are enough to make a pastor despair of those moments when he or she is just being human.

But through years of living in the unfailing eye of critics and cranks,<sup>122</sup> and because of the influence of Richard Baxter, I've come to see the fishbowl in a slightly different light. Baxter spoke of this pastoral life this way:

While you are as lights set upon a hill, think not to lie hid. Take heed therefore to yourselves, and do your work as those that remember that the world looks on them, and that with the quick-sighted eye of malice, ready to make the worst of all, to find the smallest fault where it is, to aggravate it where they find it, to divulge it and to take advantage of it to their own designs, and to make faults

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<sup>121</sup> Recently, I posted a link to an article on Facebook I later discovered was authored by a well-known conservative blogger known as something of a bomb-thrower. I was unaware of his reputation, and though I recognized some of his language was somewhat incendiary, I thought he was making a good point about Bruce Jenner's transition to a woman *vis a vis* feminism and the messages we give to women and girls in the media. The comments began to roll in quite quickly from members of my church who felt by posting this article I was critiquing transgender people as a class, making it known that our church was not a safe place for their transgender friends, and generally being a jerk. Emails followed, clarifications were made, apologies were offered. The whole episode reminded me that while I try to speak (and post) circumspectly, I cannot always rely on my position as a pastor to give me the benefit of the doubt in the minds of people in my community. I'm judged by a different standard and seen to be a representative of my community as a whole. My words are parsed at a level that others' are not. What they can say or do online, I cannot.

<sup>122</sup> Along with cheerleaders and encouragers!

where they cannot find them. How cautiously, then, should we walk before so many ill-minded observers!<sup>123</sup>

Baxter understood that those who call others to live like Jesus would necessarily be faulted when failing to live so themselves. And so he encouraged those of us in ministry, and even Christians in general to live as though the world was watching-- because they are. There are those in our lives ready to shout “hypocrite” at the slightest provocation, to call us out for human failings which they themselves share and even, as Baxter says, to “make faults where they cannot find them.”

But Baxter took it further. He said we ought to be *glad* for this.

As you take yourselves for the lights of the churches, you may expect that men's eyes will be upon you. If other men may sin without observation, so cannot you. And you should thankfully consider how great a mercy this is, that you have so many eyes to watch over you, and so many ready to tell you of your faults; and thus have greater helps than others, at least for restraining you from sin. Though they may do it with a malicious mind, yet you have the advantage of it.<sup>124</sup>

The fact that pastors have more eyes on them, more people examining how they live means (to Baxter’s way of thinking) that they have greater helps in living right and avoiding sin than others. What others may mean for evil, God means for good. Practically speaking, the fishbowl contributes to our formation by pushing us to do what we know we ought to do. It keeps us from so often falling into things we might fall into were we not being watched so closely. Let’s be clear though- it’s not enough. What Baxter urged for pastors and what we know we need is internal, character, *heart* change. But the structure provided by knowing we are living out loud, before a watching world, can help us form the habits and rhythms of holiness we so desire.

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<sup>123</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, Kindle Location 1551.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

As we walk through life, trying to find the life of Christ and His character formed ever more within us, we have the advantage of knowing that there are many eyes around us to “encourage” us to keep to the straight and narrow. My sense is that those who embrace this find that over time, what starts as external becomes more and more internal—that slowly, what we choose to do or not do because we are aware of others watching becomes, through habit, a matter of true character. Because I know others are watching, I think twice about what I say on Facebook, what I look at in the checkout line of the supermarket, how I speak to my kids out on the street in front of my neighbors, and more and more, those choices, once made because others are watching, become a part of who I am, especially when I choose to see those moments of choice as *kairos* moments, that is, moments when God is breaking in, using my awareness of a watching world to communicate to me about the character He wants to see formed in me, the choices He would like me to make.

But what if we fail to embrace this? What of those who are shipwrecked in ministry by moral failure, character deficiencies, private sin made public? Those who chafe at Baxter’s warning that “there are many eyes upon you, and consequently there will be many to observe your falls,”<sup>125</sup> often find themselves living one way in public and another in private. It’s as though their anger at the fishbowl of their lives leads them to a divided life, one where they are willing to play by the rules in public, but insist on their own rules in private. Their frustration with the audience around them, so eager to find fault leads them to ignore the true Audience of One before whom they live. And as we know from watching so many ministers flame out in spectacular crash-and-burns, the

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., Kindle Location 1545.



impact is often horrendous. Families, churches and the reputation of the Church as a whole are damaged.

Baxter urges us to make peace with the fishbowl. It will be there whether you accept it or not. But by embracing it, you might find yourself spurred on to the kind of love and good deeds you aspire to, and avoiding the kinds of sins which have brought down so many in ministry and the Christian life before you. “You should thankfully consider how great a mercy this is, that you have so many eyes to watch over you.”<sup>126</sup>

### **Pastors are No Different**

Baxter continually emphasized to pastors that though they may have a different calling from others, they are no different than anyone else when it came to sin and temptation.

We have the same sins to mortify, and the same graces to be quickened and strengthened, as our people have: we have greater works to do than they have, and greater difficulties to overcome, and therefore we have need to be warned and awaked, if not to be instructed, as well as they.<sup>127</sup>

It never fails to amaze me when pastors are caught in a scandal and their sin revealed. I understand the self-deception involved, and the all-too human fallibility that every pastor brings into ministry, and yet, when the personal stakes are so high, I often wonder how they thought it would end in any other way? Baxter encourages us, in a sense, to see ourselves as on equal footing to our communities when it comes to sin. We preach the dangers of temptation, strategies to avoid sin, and yet run the risk of losing all

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 9.

when we fail to practice what we preach. “Take heed to yourselves, for you have a depraved nature, and sinful inclination, as well as others.”<sup>128</sup>

### **Well, Different in Two Respects, At Least**

And though we are no different than anyone else when it comes to our susceptibility to temptation and sin, Baxter believed we are different in both the amount of temptation we will face and the cost to us and others should we succumb.

“Take heed to yourselves because the tempter will more ply you with his temptations than other men.”<sup>129</sup> Baxter saw Satan as one who had an eye to tempting pastors in particular, as a primary way of bringing the Gospel into disrepute.

Take heed, therefore, brethren, for the enemy hath a special eye upon you. You shall have his most subtle insinuations, and incessant solicitations, and violent assaults... You shall see neither hook nor line, much less the subtle angler himself, while he is offering you his bait. And his bait shall be so fitted to your temper and disposition, that he will be sure to find advantages within you, and make your own principles and inclinations betray you: and whenever he ruineth you, he will make you the instruments of ruin to others. O what a conquest will he think he hath got, if he can make a minister lazy and unfaithful, —if he can tempt a minister into covetousness or scandal! He will glory against the church, and say, 'These are your holy preachers! you see what their preciseness is, and whither it brings them.' He will glory against Jesus Christ himself, and say, 'These are thy champions! I can make thy chief servants abuse thee! I can make the stewards of thy house unfaithful.'<sup>130</sup>

While subject to the same temptations, Baxter believed we clergy face them to a greater degree because of the position of authority and responsibility we hold. He likens Satan’s strategy to a military one. Why take out a foot soldier when taking out a

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., Kindle Locations 1534-1535.

commander will do exponentially greater damage? In this light, how we view temptation ought to be different. No longer can we see sin as a momentary failing, or a brief dalliance which we convince ourselves is really nothing in the larger scheme of things. It's exactly the larger scheme of things that every sin a pastor commits concerns.

Worse, while others may have failings, most will go unnoticed or uncared about by the larger public. Not so with pastors. "Take heed to yourselves, because there are many eyes upon you, and there will be many to observe your falls. You cannot miscarry but the world will ring of it."<sup>131</sup>

Baxter believed pastors should view their own sins and temptations to sin in much harsher light than we view those of others. We ought to see as a part of our formation becoming intimately acquainted with the way we in particular are tempted and the strategies we need to overcome those temptations. "Take heed to yourselves, lest you cry down sin, and yet do not overcome it; lest, while you seek to bring it down in others, you bow to it, and become its slaves yourselves."<sup>132</sup>

One way to do this, Baxter suggested, was to think of sin this way: Don't do anything you wouldn't want to be caught dead doing. Should I be overcome with a heart attack while in the midst of this thing I am contemplating, would I be ashamed to find myself found out?

Spend your time in nothing which you know must be repented of; in nothing on which you might not pray for the blessing of God; in nothing which you could not review with a quiet conscience on your dying bed; in nothing which you might not safely and properly be found doing if death should surprise you in the act.

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 17.

Beyond that, Baxter had words of wisdom for pastors regarding some very specific temptations we will face. “Be acquainted with the range of sensual desires, and pay attention to them, and watch them in all their extravagances. Otherwise, while you are stopping one gap, they will be running out at many more.”<sup>133</sup>

## **Pride**

Baxter considered pride as “one of our most heinous and palpable sins.”<sup>134</sup> And here, again, he urges us to consider the cost to others in our hubris; the way we might lead them astray by allowing pride to distort what we teach.

For your people's sakes, therefore, look to your hearts. If a pang of spiritual pride should overtake you, and you should fall into any dangerous error, and vent your own inventions to draw away disciples after you, what a wound may this prove to the church of which you have the oversight ! and you may become a plague to them instead, of a blessing, and they may wish they had never seen your faces. O, therefore, take heed to your own judgments and affections ! Vanity and error will slily insinuate, and seldom come without fair pretences: great distempers and apostacies have usually small beginnings. The prince of darkness doth frequently personate an angel of light, to draw the children of light again into darkness. How easily also will distempers creep in upon our affections, and our first love, and fear, and care abate! Watch, therefore, for the sake of yourselves and others.<sup>135</sup>

Baxter especially warned of how pride had the ability to shape our preaching and our desires for positive feedback.

And when pride hath made the sermon, it goes with us into the pulpit—it formeth our tone—it animateth us in the delivery—it takes us off from that which may be displeasing, how necessary soever, and setteth us in pursuit of vain applause. In short, the sum of all is this, it maketh men, both in studying, and preaching, to seek themselves, and deny God, when they should seek God's glory, and deny

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<sup>133</sup> Richard Baxter, “The Sinfulness of Flesh Pleasing,” *Christian Ethics* (London, 1830) part I, chapter 4.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>135</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, Kindle Locations 1322-1329.

themselves. When they should inquire, What shall I say, and how shall I say it, to please God best, and do most good?—it makes them ask. What shall I say, and how shall I deliver it, to be thought a learned, able preacher, and to be applauded by all that hear me? When the sermon is done, pride goeth home with them, and maketh them more eager to know whether they were applauded, than whether they did prevail for the saving of souls. Were it not for shame, they could find in their hearts to ask people how they liked them, and to draw out their commendations. If they perceive that they are highly thought of, they rejoice as having attained their end; but if they see that they are considered but weak or common men, they are displeased, as having missed the prize they had in view.<sup>136</sup>

I call this “preaching for the nod”—that tendency we all have as pastors to say the things we know will get us the feedback we want. Whether we’re in more conservative or more progressive congregations, we all know the things that people are longing to hear us say about their particular pet issues. How easy it is, Baxter reminds us, to say the things we know will get heads nodding in agreement. The problem is, we have at that very moment ceased to speak prophetically and begun to speak pridefully. And “Pride is a vice that ill beseems them that must lead men in such an humble way to heaven: let us, therefore, take heed, lest, when we have brought others thither, the gate should prove too strait for ourselves.”<sup>137</sup>

## **Hypocrisy**

Hypocrisy is a human condition, in that we all fail in some way or another to live up to our own standards, not to mention what we believe to be God’s standards. But pastors must recognize the severe costs of living incongruently. Further, hypocrisy is

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., Kindle Locations 2685-2686.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., Kindle Locations 2318-2320.

highlighted in our lives by the amount of time we spend talking about issues of sin and of right living.

Your sins have more hypocrisy in them than other men's, by how much the more you have spoken against them. O what a heinous thing is it in us, to Study how to disgrace sin to the utmost, and make it as odious in the eyes of our people as we can, and when we have done, to live in it, and secretly cherish that which we publicly disgrace! What vile hypocrisy is it, to make it our daily work to cry it down, and yet to keep to it,—to call it publicly all naught, and privately to make it our bed-fellow and companion,—to bind heavy burdens on others, and not to touch them ourselves with a finger!<sup>138</sup>

Baxter here displays a rare pastoral, yet blunt approach. While outside the church the opinion of pastors may be slipping, inside, there is a tendency to give those in ministry the benefit of the doubt that they are living what they are preaching. Baxter is under no such illusion, and with characteristic fervor, seeks to draw the eyes of pastors back to their own lives. It's not enough to preach against sin, we must live against it as well.

Take heed to yourselves, lest you live in those sins which you preach against in others, and lest you be guilty of that which daily you condemn... If sin be evil, why do you live in it? If it be not, why do you dissuade men from it? If it be dangerous, how dare you venture on it? If it be not, why do you tell men so?<sup>139</sup>

And, as always, that stakes for failure in this regard go beyond the merely personal. Our sin, as clergy, has a force-magnifying effect that can lead to the very thing we are fighting against. "Take heed to yourselves, lest your example contradict your doctrine... lest you unsay with your lives, what you say with your tongues; and be the greatest hinderers of the success of your own labours."<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., Kindle Locations 1565-1569.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 63.

## **Meditating on the Wrong Things**

Of particular danger to pastors today, in an age when we desire to be “culturally relevant” is the temptation to read, watch, or listen to that which has a mal-forming influence on our hearts and minds, simply because it is a popular work of culture which people are talking about. We fear being “out of touch” and so can easily find ourselves being undiscerning consumers of the latest media our culture has to offer, regardless of how it impacts our thought lives, our hearts or our souls.

Though Baxter never dealt with a congregation that wanted to discuss with him the latest episode of “Game of Thrones,” he did live in a world in which theater, popular books, and revelry were a constant distraction. His advice? “Make careful choice of the books which you read. Let the holy Scriptures ever have pre-eminence; and next them, the solid, lively, heavenly treatises, which best expound and apply the Scriptures.”<sup>141</sup>

He saw the danger inherent in allowing ourselves and our time to be consumed by that which did nothing for us, spiritually. “Take heed of a delight in romances, playbooks, feigned stories, useless news, which corrupt the mind, and waste your time.”<sup>142</sup>

In my own life, I have come to realize the dangers Baxter is warning of. I have found that obsession with the news, reading too much fiction, playing too many games on my phone or iPad leads to being less connected with my family and less in touch with God. Though I try to stay away from anything overtly harmful, it’s the creeping, time-wasting nature of social media and “fun” reading that I know I need to be wary of. For

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<sup>141</sup> Baxter, *Christian Ethics* (London:1830), Kindle loc. 3157.

<sup>142</sup> Baxter, “The Sinfulness of Flesh Pleasing,” *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter* (London, 1830).

the sake of my own formation, I have instituted occasional Facebook fasts and a rule that fiction is read at night, before bed, and not during the day. If I have time to read during the day, I want it to be something that will inform my mind and form my soul.

## **Lusts**

“Live as in a constant war against all fleshly lusts, and love not the world as it cherishes those lusts. Take heed of the love of money, as the root of manifold evils. Think of riches with more fear than desire.”<sup>143</sup> All pastors struggle with lust. Not all pastors struggle with the same lusts, but Baxter is careful not to confine lust to the sexual kinds alone.

Nevertheless, the temptations of lust prove the undoing of many pastors. To this, Baxter says;

Let your strictest watch be upon the sins of your temperature. Far greater diligence and resolution is here necessary, than against other sins. And withdraw the fuel, and strive against the bodily distempers themselves. Fasting and labour will do much against lust, which idleness and fulness continually feed.<sup>144</sup>

This is a dynamic I have seen play out in my own life. Temptations seem to be at their strongest when we are bored (idle), and focused on our own bodily comforts. Baxter believed staying busy and using fasting as a way to tamp down our bodily appetites a good way to avoid falling into the snare of lust.

He gives us a timely word also about the love of money, something pastors need to hear. Too often we think that because we aren't paid much, our lives must be free from

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<sup>143</sup> From Richard Baxter's Farewell Sermon.

<sup>144</sup> Baxter, *A Christian Directory*, vol. 1, Christian Ethics, Kindle Locations 5168-5170.



greed and avarice. Not so. I know in my own life, money is a constant thought and the temptation to look in envy at the homes, cars, and luxuries of the people in my community is constant.

Baxter urges that we pastors might see our handling of money as a means of preaching:

O what abundance of good might ministers do, if they would but live in contempt of the world, and the riches and glory thereof, and expend all they have in their Master's service, and pinch their flesh, that they may have wherewith to do good! This would unlock more hearts to the reception of their doctrine, than all their oratory: and, without this, singularity in religion will seem but hypocrisy; and it is likely that it is so.<sup>145</sup>

In all of this, we must be careful, as Baxter reminds us continually, to avoid preaching against the very things we nurture in our own hearts.

And though many of these men may seem excellent preachers, and may cry down sin as loudly as others, yet it is all but an affected fervency, and too commonly but a mere useless bawling; for he who cherisheth sin in his own heart, doth never fall upon it in good earnest in others. I know, indeed, that a wicked man may be more willing of the reformation of others than of his own, and hence may show a kind of earnestness, in dissuading them from their evil ways; because he can preach against sin at an easier rate than he can forsake it, and another man's reformation may stand with his own enjoyment of his lusts.<sup>146</sup>

### **The Costs of Our Sin to Ourselves**

“When you pen your sermons, little do you think that you are drawing up indictments against your own souls!”<sup>147</sup>

Following the words of James, Baxter reminds those of us who are in ministry that we will be judged more strictly. Worse, it may be our own words, preached to others,

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<sup>145</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, Kindle Locations 1409-1412.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., Kindle Locations 1678-1681.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 10.

that serve as the basis for judgment. The worst kind of preacher, in Baxter's mind, was the self-deluded one. Those of us who think that participation in ministry is itself what commends us before God, those of us who preach against sin while harboring it in hearts, however small or insignificant we might believe it to be, are worse off than those who at least sin openly and boldly.

O miserable life! that a man should study and preach against himself, and spend his days in a course of self-condemning! A graceless, inexperienced preacher, is one of the most unhappy creatures upon earth: and yet he is ordinarily very insensible of his unhappiness; for he hath so many counterfeits that seem like the gold of saving grace, and so many splendid stones that resemble Christian's Jewels, that he is seldom troubled with the thoughts of his poverty, but thinks he is 'rich, and increased in goods, and stands in need of nothing; when he is poor, and miserable, and blind, and naked.' He is acquainted with the Holy Scriptures, he is exercised in holy duties, he liveth not in open disgraceful sin, he serveth at God's altar, he reproveth other men's faults, and preacheth up holiness both of heart and life; and how can this man but be holy! O what aggravated misery is this, to perish in the midst of plenty!<sup>148</sup>

While we will never fully root out sin in our hearts and lives, our task is to live in such a way that we do not condemn ourselves by our own words by actively holding on to that which we are encouraging others to do away with in their lives. The Pentecostal TV preacher and evangelist Jimmy Swaggart preached and wrote against pornography, and all the while he was an avid consumer of it. When he was found out, his fall highlighted not just the danger of sin to pastors, as he lost the vast majority of his church and ministry, but also a challenge played out in the lives of countless numbers of pastors. We know, often better than others, the deleterious effects of sin, and we want to warn others, but too often, we do so when not having dealt with it sufficiently to have the credibility to do so.

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., Kindle Locations 1199-1202.

Baxter's warning that our own words against sin will make up the content of our judgment when we stand before God ought to have a profound impact on how we view our sin and serve to strengthen our resolve to rid our lives of the things we "cry down" in the lives of others.

Believe it, brethren, God never saved any man for being a preacher, nor because he was an able preacher; but because he was a justified, sanctified man, and consequently faithful in his Master's work. Take heed, therefore, to yourselves first, that you be that which you persuade your hearers to be, and believe that which you persuade them to believe; and heartily entertain that Saviour whom you offer to them. He that bade you love your neighbours as yourselves, did imply that you should love yourselves, and not hate and destroy yourselves and them.<sup>149</sup>

### **The Costs of Our Sin to Others**

You shall see neither hook nor line, much less the subtle angler himself, while he is offering you his bait. And his bait shall be so fitted to your temper and disposition, that he will be sure to find advantages within you, and make your own principles and inclinations betray you; and whenever he ruineth you, he will make you the instrument of ruin to others.<sup>150</sup>

One of the worst ways that a pastor may ruin others is by the example of their temperament and character. Our daily actions preach a louder message than our Sunday sermons. We may tell people to avoid this or that sin, but if it is something that is obviously present in our lives, it will eventually be formed in the lives of those we are leading. "All that a minister does is a kind of preaching; and if you live a covetous or a careless life, you preach these sins to your people by your practice."<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., Kindle Locations 1183-1187.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 25.

While the Apostle Paul encouraged others to follow him as he followed Christ, our challenge is to realize that people are likely to follow us in whatever we do. A cranky, self-righteous pastor is likely to find him or herself pastoring a cranky, self-righteous church. A pastor obsessed with money and material possessions will find, over time, that the people around him become more and more so themselves.

When we entered ministry, we certainly never did so thinking that we would ruin others. And yet, that's exactly what Baxter warns us may happen, should we fail to "take heed" to ourselves. We may get them to assent to believing in Jesus, but without living a "reformed" life, we will never see "reformed" people coming out of our ministry. Baxter soberly reminds us that we tend to reproduce ourselves in ministry, for good or ill.

## Chapter Four: Summary, A Baxterian Paradigm for Spiritual Formation

*“Content not yourselves with being in a state of grace, but be careful that your graces are kept in vigorous and lively exercise.”<sup>152</sup>*

When I think of how one might summarize Baxter’s paradigm for spiritual formation as regards pastors the first word that comes to my mind is “serious.” Baxter took seriously his own role in formation, and so should we, especially as pastors. Seminary educates, ministry refines us, but only the interplay of our own hearts and minds with the Spirit of God will truly form us. Therefore, it is imperative that we take a forward-leaning role in our own formation, and not simply hope that what we have learned in seminary or through books, and what we are doing under the auspices of “ministry” will be enough.

Though rigorous is his view of daily disciplines, it was not simply about outward actions for Baxter. Inward heart and mind attitudes played a large role in formation. In fact, as one reads Baxter, it is easy to be struck by the sheer number of times one is encouraged to “consider,” to “think,” to “know,” to “look,” and to “remember.”

Baxter’s instructions centered mainly on spiritual formation through rigorous practice of the disciplines. In his “How to Spent the Day with God,” he outlines a schedule that begins with the discipline of early rising and immediately sets oneself Godward. “Let God have your first awaking thoughts; lift up your hearts to Him reverently and thankfully for the rest enjoyed the night before and cast yourself upon Him for the

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<sup>152</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, Kindle Locations 1301-1303.

day which follows.”<sup>153</sup> While making room for private prayer and family worship, Baxter also advised those under his care to practice the discipline of self-knowledge. He advised that they know themselves so well that they would know their weaknesses and the places where they would most likely be tempted.

Baxter urged that we approach our daily work conscientiously, careful of how we use our time, what and how much we eat and drink, and how we allow our thoughts to wander as we go about our business. His words seem especially appropriate to us today, in our celebrity-saturated, internet-captivated society: “Take heed of a delight in romances, playbooks, feigned stories, useless news, which corrupt the mind, and waste your time.”<sup>154</sup> At the close of the day, Baxter encouraged that we would review the actions and mercies of that day, “so that you may be thankful for all the special mercies and humbled for all your sins.”<sup>155</sup>

A truly “Baxterian” view of spiritual formation will take seriously both the means and the ends of formation. With that in mind, over the last few years of studying Baxter, I’ve developed the following definition of spiritual formation. **“Spiritual formation is the process by which we are formed into the image of Christ for the sake of others.”** A quick Google search tells me I am not the only one to have come to this conclusion and to have defined formation in this way, but for me, it has been primarily the work of Richard Baxter which has brought me to this view.

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<sup>153</sup> Baxter, *How to Spend The Day With God*, The Practical Works of Richard Baxter (London, 1830).

<sup>154</sup> Baxter, *The Sinfulness of Flesh Pleasing*, The Practical Works of Richard Baxter.

<sup>155</sup> Baxter, *How to Spend The Day With God*, The Practical Works of Richard Baxter, 1.

For Baxter, as pastors, we seek to refine our character, grow in grace, and become more Christ-like because it is an essential part of our ministry to others. Without it, we are “not smoking what we are selling,” and worse, not likely to influence anyone else to be spiritually formed either. Worst of all, we are likely to do nothing but mal-form them.

So it begins with the end in mind. Out of love for others and gratitude to God, we decide we will take seriously our own spiritual vitality and become “reformed” pastors. From there, we begin to clear the decks, laying aside the busyness that so easily entangles us as modern ministry practitioners and make the space for God that we encourage so many others to make, and yet so often fail to make ourselves.

Within that space, we begin to develop a rigorous self-awareness. We “take heed” to ourselves with frequent self-inventories and bold self-questioning. “How is it with my soul?” “Do I love God and my people more now than I did this time last year or even last month?” “What, in my life, if others became aware of it would allow them to discredit Jesus and His saving grace?” Grateful for those who are watching my life, even those who criticize me, I ask, “Am I teachable? Sufficiently humble or still in need of humiliation?”<sup>156</sup>

Baxterian formation means constantly doing business with God and my own heart; a running dialogue in my mind that consistently pushes me to listen to God and respond appropriately, to preach to myself the Good News of Jesus just as much as I preach it to others, and to even argue with myself about my own recalcitrance and laziness in all things spiritual.

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<sup>156</sup> “I have prayed for years for one good humiliation a day, and then, I must watch my reaction to it.” Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 128.

Other practical disciplines a Baxterian formation would engage with are a deep relationship with Scripture that views it as the main course, and all other books as side-dishes—tasty, but not sufficient for good nutrition. As well, a view of prayer that sees it not just as a means of self-soothing and comfort, but an essential part of my relationship with God and with the people to whom I am ministering, as well as an essential means of actually ministering to them.

Meditation on God, His grace and mercy to me, His character and His love become essential, not just in quiet moments of contemplation and solitude, but also in the hectic times in life, and especially when my mind begins to veer off path towards unhealthy places. Focusing my thoughts back on God becomes a positive act that replaces simply not trying to think about some things.

I both begin and end my day focusing on and praying to God. I see this as an essential part of my daily rhythms, just as important as putting on clothes before leaving the house or taking them off before crawling into bed.

As I become more serious about my own formation, I become more serious about those things which would hinder it-- my own temptations and sins. I see pride, lust, wasting my time, a love of many, indeed any sin I might be tempted to not merely as a private matter, but also as something likely to greatly affect those I love and minister to, and so deal with it ruthlessly, lest the very words I preach against them be heard in my own judgment. In all things, for my own sake and for the sake of others I seek a congruence between what I live and what I preach and believe to be God's will for human flourishing.



And in all of this, I do everything knowing that ultimately, it is the Spirit of God who moves me forward, sustaining me and forming me. He gets the credit for my advances, I take the blame for my failures, and in both, I give Him gratitude and glory for His saving grace.

To the praise of divine grace be it spoken, we have some among us, who are eminent for humility and meekness, and who, in these respects, are exemplary to their flocks and to their brethren. It is their glory, and shall be their glory; and maketh them truly honourable and lovely in the eyes of God and of all good men, and even in the eyes of the ungodly themselves. O that the rest of us were but such!<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, Kindle Locations 2755-2758.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

*“Our whole work must be carried on under a deep sense of our own insufficiency, and of our entire dependence on Christ. We must go for light, and life, and strength to him who sends us on the work.”<sup>158</sup>*

When I was a senior in college, during one of my ministry courses, I received the assignment to interview a pastor. I chose one of my professors who also pastored nearby. My first question to him was “What do you think is the secret to success in ministry?” He thought for a moment and then replied, “The secret to success in ministry is success in your personal relationship with God.” Though I’ve frequently failed to live up to them, I’ve never forgotten those words.

I believe Baxter would have said much the same thing if asked a similar question. For him, everything started and ended with the pastor being shaped from the inside out by the transforming power of the Spirit at work in his life.

My spiritual director asked me not long ago what effect studying Baxter was having on my heart and soul. I gave him a short answer that centered mainly on spiritual growth through a more rigorous approach to the disciplines, but on reflection I realize there’s much more.

The beauty of Baxter and his words is that he combines an uncanny knowledge of the human heart with a courageous bluntness in speaking to that heart. His spiritual depth was hard won, in a sense, through struggle with disease and ill health. He spoke openly of

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<sup>158</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, Kindle location 2149.

his doubts and fears, and just as openly of how he submitted them to God and dealt with them in light of what he knew Christ had done for him. Baxter somehow managed to meld what many think of as “beginner’s disciplines” with the deeper things of the Christian life, and therein lies his genius, and his chief help to us today.

In Baxter I have found both a “going back to the beginning” and a call to deeper formation that I have found in few others. My reading and study of his works and his life has worked in me a deeper commitment to prayer, to Scripture, to guarding my heart and mind through meditating on Christ. His exhortation to preach to myself has been a life-saver, in that during dark moments, I have been drawn to tell myself exactly what I needed to hear, rather than continue to stew in my own despair. I’m inspired by the faith of a man, who, though deserving much better from those around him, including fellow believers, gladly put up with being imprisoned for his convictions, with the betrayal of his own body in sickness and weakness, who stayed put even when the call to bigger and better things was heard, all for the sake of the formation of his soul and for the Gospel.

I’ve come to realize that no one can be long in ministry or in leading others before finding themselves saying “I don’t know if I can do this. I’m not sure I have what it takes.” Baxter would say it’s at that point, when we finally reach the end of ourselves, that we can begin to be truly effective in ministry.

Ministry, in Baxter’s mind, can be done either in dependence on Christ or on ourselves. There is no middle ground where I do all that I can and Christ comes in to make up the difference. No, we begin and end in complete and utter dependence on Him. It’s often said, “God will not give you any more than you can handle.” This is wrong. God will quite often give you more than you can handle. What He will never do is give

you more than Christ can handle. And in that, as I pursue ministry to others and formation in myself, I take heart.

The ministerial work must be carried on under a deep sense of our own insufficiency, and of our entire dependence upon Christ. We must go for light, and life, and strength, to Him who sends us on the work. And when we feel our own faith weak, and our hearts dull, and unsuitable to so great a work as we have to do, we must have recourse to Him, and say, 'Lord, wilt thou send me with such an unbelieving heart to persuade others to believe? Must I daily plead with sinners about everlasting life and everlasting death, and have no more feeling of these weighty things myself? O send me not naked and unprovided to the work! but, as thou commandest me to do it, furnish me with a spirit suitable thereto.'<sup>159</sup>

### **Formation Questions Baxter Leaves Us With**

As I have engaged with Baxter over these last few years, here are some of the questions I am left with. These and others will form part of my artifact project *A Month with Richard Baxter*.

1. Do I take seriously Baxter's warning to "take heed" to myself, and concern over the need for my own conversion? Do I agree with Baxter in seeing the Spirit's work in my life as a prerequisite to the Spirit working through me in the lives of others?
2. If I am honest with myself, would I leave ministry if I could make an equal or better living elsewhere? If so, how much of that desire might vanish were my spiritual life more fully vital, refreshed and "reformed?"
3. How committed am I to doing what needs to be done to grow spiritually and cooperate with the Spirit in my own formation? Where do I see the evidence of this commitment?

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<sup>159</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, Kindle Locations 2422-2426.

4. Do I share Baxter's urgency over the state of the souls of all I come into contact with- those in my church as well as those in my neighborhood?
5. How is it with my soul? Do I love God and my people more now than I did this time last year or even last month?
6. What, in my life, if others became aware of it would allow them to discredit Jesus and His saving grace?
7. Do I practice the disciplines I encourage others to practice?
8. Am I teachable? How would I know? What would others say if I asked them question?
9. Richard Rohr has said "I have prayed for years for one good humiliation a day, and then, I must watch my reaction to it." How am I doing on being humble? Do I need to pray Rohr's prayer—and am I courageous enough to do so?
10. What is my relationship with Scripture, and how does it compare to my relationship with other media of questionable value, or even other "spiritual" books?
11. Do I do ministry out of self-reliance, or dependence on my education and credentials or on the Holy Spirit and the grace of God? How do I know?

*“A holy love, like that in heaven, must be studiously fetched from heaven, and be kindled by the foresight of what is there, and what shall be there forever. Faith must ascend and look within the vail. Thou, my soul, must not live a stranger to thy home and hopes, to thy God and Savior. The fire that must warm thee is in heaven, and thou must come near it, and open thyself to its influence, if thou wilt feel its powerful efficacy.”- Richard Baxter,*

*Dying Thoughts*

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