

RICHARD BAXTER'S USE OF SCRIPTURE IN PASTORAL MINISTRY

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INTRODUCTION

Richard Baxter was born November 12, 1615 in Rowton, England, and was baptized into the Church of England one week later; however, he was not converted until the age of fifteen.² As a young boy, Baxter lived with his mother apart from his father, most likely due to gambling debts incurred by his father. Baxter's father was also baptized into the Church of England as a child, but was not born again until he was an adult. And it was his own father who turned out to be Baxter's best teacher. Young Baxter was particularly impacted by his father's piety in maintaining the rest and holiness of the Sabbath.³ Biographer Frederick Powicke confirmed that "his father, though no scholar, taught him so to read the Bible as to acquire a love for it, a benefit which ever afterwards he recalled with gratitude."⁴ After his mother's death and his father's remarriage, Baxter became close to his step-mother and referred to her example of fervent prayer, contempt for the world, and holiness and mortification of sin.⁵

During his childhood, Baxter contracted smallpox, chronic cold and cough, nose-bleeding and spitting of blood. His sickly nature drove him to become consumed with his own apprehension of an afterlife, and he felt called to become

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²Irvonwy Morgan, *The Nonconformity of Richard Baxter* (London: Epworth Press, 1945), 38; Goeffrey F. Nuttall, *Richard Baxter* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1965), 11.

³Morgan, 38; Nuttall, 7-8; Frederick J. Powicke, *A Life of the Reverend Richard Baxter 1615-1691* (London: Jonathan Cape, Ltd., 1924), 15.

⁴Powicke, 15-17.

⁵Ibid., 19.

a pastor and communicate the hope of the gospel to others.⁶ His desire to lead the lost from eternal damnation into eternal worship would later become a major theme in his written works.

Baxter was ordained by the Church of England at age 23, and his decision to be a preacher forced the issue of his conformity or non-conformity to the contents of the *Book of Common Prayer*. Two years later he found himself sympathetic to the nonconformist Puritans and joined their ranks.⁷ It was not the content of the *Book of Common Prayer* that influenced Baxter's decision to become a nonconformist, but instead it was his observance of how badly the Puritans were treated by Bishops for their departures from the prescribed order of worship.⁸ Baxter's main pastoral ministry took place in the town of Kidderminster where he shocked his congregations by preaching the doctrine of original sin and against infant baptism.⁹ It was there that he began catechizing families and individuals once a year, and revival followed. During the last thirty years of his life, Baxter was unable to serve as a pastor due to poor health and imprisonment.¹⁰ But during this time he wrote prolifically and finished his life with 140 published works.¹¹

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A survey of Richard Baxter's works confirms his use of Scripture in pastoral ministry and writing that emphasized inspection of oneself, pursuit of the lost with the gospel message, catechization of families and individuals, and practice of church discipline. But he utilized Scripture mostly to explain a proper motivation for pastoral ministry instead of detailing methods for doing pastoral ministry. The majority of scriptural evaluation in this paper was done for his most popular book, *The Reformed Pastor*, but some other written works that Baxter addressed to *all* Christians were also evaluated for his use of Scripture in his pastoral ministry.

⁶Morgan, 39; Nuttall, 10-11; Powicke, 20. Baxter, *Reformed*, 8.

⁷Morgan, 39; Powicke, 20.

⁸Nuttall 12-14; Powicke 20-21.

⁹Morgan, 41; William L. Lamont, *Richard Baxter and the Millenium: Protestant Imperialism and the English Revolution* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 16.

¹⁰William Orme, *The Life and Times of the Rev. Richard Baxter: With a Critical Examination of His Writing* (New York: J. Leavitt, 1831), 346-366.

¹¹Goeffrey F. Nuttall, *Richard Baxter* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1965), 114.

TAKE HEED TO YOURSELF

Richard Baxter confirmed that on December 4, 1655, a group of Protestant pastors met in Worcester, England and formally agreed to renew a practice of pastoral ministry and teach the faith to their congregations by way of catechism.¹² More specifically, these pastors met “to pray earnestly for three requests: pardon of their previous neglect; God’s special help in the work they now committed themselves to undertake; and the success of their renewed teaching with their church members.”¹³ Richard Baxter was supportive of the group’s intentions, but he was unable to attend this meeting due to ill health. Instead, he composed a lengthy correspondence to his brothers in the faith summarizing his own motivation and general approach to pastoral ministry. His letter would be published one year later as *The Reformed Pastor* and would prove to be the most popular of his 140 published works.¹⁴ Although Baxter did shed light into his own methods for organizing and carrying out pastoral ministry, *Reformed* is much more of an appeal for renewed commitment to teach congregants corporately and individually than it is an instruction manual on how to do group or one-on-one counseling.

Baxter’s works overwhelmingly begin with reminders for the ones doing ministry – whether pastor, deacon, or laity – to examine themselves with Scripture. For example, roughly the first half of *Reformed* is dedicated to developing the needs of character examination, self-oversight, and repentance for current and would-be leaders who would respond to the call of the ministry.¹⁵ Even when he seemed to be moving on in *Reformed* to a “how to” section for overseeing the flock, Baxter demonstrated the priority he placed on introspection and reverted back to emphasizing self-examination of motives for doing pastoral ministry.¹⁶ Baxter maintained that the theme of *Reformed* was contained in the words of Acts 20:28, where Paul exhorted the Ephesian elders to “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to

¹² Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor: A Pattern for Personal Growth and Ministry*, James M. Houston, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 3.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ James M. Houston, “Editor’s Note About Baxter and the Relevance of The Reformed Pastor” in *The Reformed Pastor: A Pattern for Personal Growth and Ministry*, James M. Houston, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), xi.

¹⁵ Baxter, *Reformed*, 3-62.

¹⁶ Ibid., 85-117.

care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”¹⁷ The two-fold duty that Paul communicated to elders was to take heed first to themselves and then to all their flocks.

For example, Baxter warned that ministry in general, and pastoral ministry in particular, could be hindered by sin. He stated that “unpardoned sin will never let us rest and prosper” and cited Proverbs 28:13 as an encouragement for leaders to repent of sin, publicly when appropriate.¹⁸

Baxter acknowledged the very real possibility that even preachers who had faithfully warned many others about the place of eternal torment could miss out on knowing the God who saves. To balance the vivid picture of preachers in hell, he provided the scriptural support of Daniel 12:3 as encouragement for those who turn others to repentance and faith.¹⁹ That biblical picture of God’s wise obedient servants shining eternally like stars was certainly appealing. But Baxter quickly followed up with a strong admonition for pastors to inspect themselves as to whether or not they had personally experienced the glory of the gospel that they faithfully proclaimed to others.²⁰

Again, Baxter implored pastors to “Take heed therefore, to yourselves first. See to it that *you* be the worshipper which you persuade others to *be*. Make sure first that you believe what you persuade others daily to believe. Make sure that you have heartily entertained the Christ and the Holy Spirit in your own soul before you offer him to others.”²¹ He cited Paul’s words from Romans 2:21-23 as clear and specific warning against “secret sin” in the life of a shepherd.²² Baxter consistently wrote against a church leader’s sinful tendency to preach the law of the Bible to others but willfully and secretly break it himself.

¹⁷ Baxter, *Reformed*, 10. All scriptural quotations are from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

¹⁸ Ibid., 4. Proverbs 28:13: “Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.”

¹⁹ Ibid., 27. Daniel 12:3: “And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 28.

²² Ibid., 29. Romans 2:21-23: “you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.”

Baxter directed pastors to Peter's warning in 2 Peter 2:17-19 about false prophets and teachers and reminded them that living a life of secret sin was an indication of their own eternal fate.²³ He used that passage to demonstrate how easily overcome leaders can become by the very sin they preach against. Acknowledging a corruption of authority within the pastorate, he warned "Yes, it is easier to judge sin than to overcome it."²⁴ Baxter consistently challenged his readers to yield themselves to an obedience that leads to eternal life instead of a secret rebellion that leads to eternal death.

Baxter referenced Romans 6:16 to further his appeal for elders to examine their own lives – specifically an honest self-examination of whom the pastor has truly submitted himself to as a slave.²⁵ He encouraged leaders to allow no room for self-interest, money, security, and respect as benefits of their ministry. Baxter cited these selfish tendencies as evidence that a pastor is serving the wrong master. His words were piercing: "Do you think someone can fight against Satan with all his might, who is the servant of Satan himself? Will he do any great harm to the kingdom of the devil when he is himself a member and subject of that kingdom? Will he be true to Christ who is in covenant with his enemy, and has not Christ in his heart?²⁶ While Baxter's primary concern was the salvation of pastors themselves, he was also quick to point out the damage that an unregenerate leader could bring upon the local church and ultimately the name of Christ.

Baxter titled the third chapter of *Reformed* "The Oversight of Ourselves," and in it he walked his readers through the collateral damage that disobedient pastors can bring on local church bodies and ultimately the name of Christ. He sought to motivate church leaders to be diligent in relying on the Lord. He utilized Paul's desperate plea in 2 Corinthians 2:16 of "Who is sufficient for these things!" as well as Peter's desire for godliness in 2 Peter 3:11.²⁷ Baxter simply acknowledged that

²³ Baxter, *Reformed*, 29. 2 Peter 2:17-19: "These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved. For speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person to that he is enslaved."

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.* Romans 6:16: "Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness."

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 30. 2 Peter 3:11: "Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people

self-confident pastors fail and ultimately bring disdain upon the holiness of Christ and His Bride.

Having clearly addressed the importance of church leaders experiencing the saving grace of God themselves in *Reformed*, Baxter emphasized a pastor's duty to study as hard to *live* correctly as he did to *preach* correctly.²⁸ He cited the words of James 1:22-25, a popular sermon passage, as foundational to a demonstrated life of holiness for pastors *outside* the pulpit.²⁹ According to Baxter, part of taking heed to one's self involved asking for and applying God-given diligence in order to avoid living a careless life before one's congregation.

Baxter frequently used negative examples of corrupt leadership in the Bible to demonstrate the damage that can be done through the scandalous behavior of God's appointed leaders. He referenced the sad story of Eli's turning a blind eye to his sons' corrupt behavior in administering the holy sacrifices of God's people. Baxter cited the words of an unnamed prophet of God to Eli in 1 Samuel 2:29 as part of God's judgement on Eli and his family.³⁰ Baxter clarified for pastors that they bore a heavier load than other men to rightly handle the honor of teaching God's truth, and this involved living above reproach themselves. He warned that "The nearer men stand before God, the greater dishonor has He by our defaults. And these inconsistencies will be attributed more by foolish men to God himself."³¹

Baxter warned that gossip and blasphemy of God's holy name resulted from the revealed sins of pastors. He effectively used the story of King David's secret sin and God's subsequent revelation and judgment of that sin through the mouth of Nathan the prophet in 2 Samuel 12:11-14.³² King David's brokenness and

ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness."

²⁸ Baxter, *Reformed*, 33.

²⁹ Ibid. James 1:22-25: "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing."

³⁰ Ibid., 38. 1 Samuel 2:29: "Why then do you scorn my sacrifices and my offerings that I commanded, and honor your sons above me by fattening yourselves on the choicest parts of every offering of my people Israel?"

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid. 2 Samuel 12:11-14: "Thus says the Lord, "Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor,

repentance notwithstanding, the disgrace of God's holy name brought on by David's sin is the central issue in the passage. Baxter further prodded his readers to examine their own commitment to the holiness and glory of the God whom they preached and asked them a series of graphic questions: "O brethren, could your hearts endure hearing men throw the dung of your own iniquities in the face of our holy God? Or in the face of the Gospel? Or in the face of those who fear the Lord? Would it not break your hearts to think that all godly Christians around you will suffer the reproach of your misdoings?"³³

Baxter's warning to pastors to take heed to themselves ultimately terminated on the well-known and often-preached warning from Jesus in Matthew 7:21-23.³⁴ His heart-felt appeal to church leaders could not have been clearer: "First of all, you have heaven to win or lose yourselves. This is your goal as well as leading souls to everlasting happiness or misery. Therefore, you should begin at home and take heed to yourself first. It is possible for preaching to succeed in the salvation of others without bringing holiness to our own hearts or lives."³⁵ Baxter's words constantly reminded readers, whether pastors or laymen, of their depraved nature and need for the mercy and grace of God in Christ Jesus.

PURSUE THE LOST WITH THE GOSPEL

Driven by a life-long sense of his own imminent death, Richard Baxter consistently preached and wrote about the gospel call of man to repentance. In "Directions to Unconverted, Graceless Sinners, for the Attainment of Saving Grace," Baxter first reviewed man's lost moral capacity to please God on his own as well as man's ability to understand and freely choose good or evil. Then Baxter appealed to 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 as God's directive to all believers, particularly

and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before Israel and before the sun." David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan said to David, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child who is born to you shall die."

³³ Baxter, *Reformed*, 38.

³⁴ Ibid., 33-34. Matthew 7:21-23: "Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then will I declare to them "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."

³⁵ Ibid.

pastors, to take seriously the ministry of reconciliation that had been entrusted to them.³⁶ Baxter's burden for the lost was made clear as he described God's charge to His people: "To procure their consent to this gracious covenant, he hath "committed" to his ministers the "word of reconciliation;" commanding us "to beseech men, as in the stead of Christ, and as though God himself did beseech them by us, to be reconciled unto God; and to shew them first their sin and misery, and proclaim and offer the true remedy."³⁷

In his introduction to pastors and lay leaders in *Reformed*, Baxter's first main point was "the unquestionable duty of all ministers of the Church to catechize and to teach personally all who are submitted to their care."³⁸ He then listed six components of catechizing, the first four of which explicitly connected personal instruction with evangelization. Baxter's first and second claims, respectively, were "People must be taught the principles of religion and matters essential to salvation" and "They must be taught these principles in the most edifying and beneficial way possible."³⁹

After establishing the need for church leaders to take heed of themselves, repent of sin in their own lives, and approach the Lord's work with humility, Baxter charged pastors to pursue the lost with the gospel. He cited the Lord Jesus's own words in Luke 15:4 as an example of humble but confident pursuit of lost sheep.⁴⁰ Baxter saw this work as two-fold in nature. He maintained that elders must first teach men the ultimate good of knowing their Creator by "open[ing] up the treasures of His goodness for them and tell[ing] them of the glory that is in His presence, a glory which all His chosen people shall enjoy."⁴¹ Lost men must first

³⁶ Richard Baxter, "Directions to Unconverted, Graceless Sinners, for the Attainment of Saving Grace," in *A Christian Directory, or A Body of Practical Divinity and Cases of Conscience, Volume 1: Christian Ethics* (London: Richard Edwards, 1825), 1-2. 2 Corinthians 5:18-20: "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Baxter, *Reformed*, 5.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 71-72. Luke 15:4: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?"

⁴¹ Ibid., 70.

see the beauty of God and the treasure of worshipping Him for eternity. Baxter maintained that once lost men affix their hearts on God and heaven, “All the rest will follow naturally.”⁴² Once lost men were shown their correct purpose of worshipping their holy Creator, they must then be shown the right means of attaining this salvation. This was Baxter’s second step. Lost people need to be shown their own need of redemption. On this point, Baxter cited the prophet Ezekiel’s example as a watchman of individuals and his warning to the wicked in Ezekiel 33:14-15.⁴³ Baxter was sensitive to the presence of lost sheep in each pastor’s congregation, and he encouraged pastors that “as long as there is a strong probability that there are several in our congregation who are in this category, we should labor with all our might on their behalf.”⁴⁴

In chapter seven of *The Cure of Depression and Excessive Sorrow*, titled “Depression and Sin for Christians,” Baxter warned that many who claim to be Christians are simply ignorant of the gospel and the true meaning of grace.⁴⁵ He rebuffed the antinomian claim that a Christian need not examine his own faith and repentance, but should instead question the righteousness of Christ Himself.⁴⁶ This was worldly thinking that had crept into local churches, and in response it was a pastor’s duty to clearly explain the truths of the gospel and the hope that sincerely repentant Christians have in the person and work of Christ. Citing Paul’s example in Philippians 3:8, Baxter challenged any depressed believer’s claim to have truly severed ties with the fleshly love of the things of the world.⁴⁷ No matter what circumstances a born-again believer found himself in, any earthly loss was “dung” for someone who had forsaken everything for Christ.⁴⁸

Baxter appealed to Paul’s example of teaching both publicly and house to

⁴² Baxter, *Reformed*, 70.

⁴³ Ibid., 72. Ezekiel 33:14-15: “Again, though I say to the wicked, “You shall surely die,” yet if he turns from his sin and does what is just and right, if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, not doing injustice, he shall surely live; he shall not die.”

⁴⁴ Ibid., 73.

⁴⁵ Richard Baxter, *The Cure of Depression and Excessive Sorrow* (Apollo, PA: Ichthus Publications, 2015), 41.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid. Philippians 3:8: “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.”

⁴⁸ Ibid.

house, and he focused on the aspect of *warning* in Paul's teaching in Colossians 1:28-29.⁴⁹ This passage also supported Baxter's contention that pastors must depend on God and humbly submit to Him to empower their pursuit of the lost. Baxter issued his own personal challenge to pastors to focus on their pursuit of the lost: "It seems to me that he who will let a sinner go to hell simply by not speaking to him gives less place to hell than the Redeemer of souls does. So whoever you pass over, do not forget the unsaved. I say it again. Focus on the great work of evangelism, whatever else you do or leave alone."⁵⁰

A component of Baxter's emphasis on pursuing the lost with the gospel was *ignorance*. Baxter contended that there were the lost who did not understand what the gospel was and the lost who did not recognize that the need for the gospel applied to them.⁵¹ As an example of the first ignorance – that of not understanding – Baxter appealed to the uneducated men of his day with 2 Corinthians 4:3-4 to consider their neglect of God's holiness and His purpose for their lives.⁵² Baxter was clear to point out the satanic nature of the blinding of their minds, and he appealed directly to nonbelievers to not resign themselves to an ignorance of the gospel based on their own literary, educational, or social status shortcomings. Baxter consistently taught that God made provision for all men to be saved, but this still required that faithful pastors preach the gospel to the lost.⁵³

In addressing the second type of ignorance – that of not recognizing one's need – Baxter referred to the example of Nicodemus in John 3:3-5 as one who was highly educated in the Scriptures, but did not understand how those words applied to his own need for the gospel.⁵⁴ Baxter maintained that those bound by this type of ignorance, such as Nicodemus, had a more difficult time submitting to Christ as Lord:

⁴⁹ Baxter, *Reformed*, 72. Colossians 1:28-29: "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me."

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵¹ Baxter, "Directions," 14-15.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 14. 2 Corinthians 4:3-4: "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 15. John 3:3-5: "Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus is a lively instance in this case: a ruler in Israel, and a Pharisee, and yet he knew not what it was to be born again. And the pride of these gallants maketh their ignorance much harder to be cured, than other men's; because it hindereth them from knowing and confessing it. If any one would convince them of it, they say with scorn, as the Pharisees to Christ, "Are we blind also?"⁵⁵

Baxter cited Hebrews 13:17, a verse commonly used as a proof text for justifying church membership and submission to church leaders, in his exhortation of pastors to provide oversight to their flocks.⁵⁶ But instead of affirming pastoral authority, he approached the passage from the perspective of the main thing church leaders – true shepherds – would give an account for to the Lord: the watch care of the souls in their congregation. By way of biblical reference, Baxter gave notice to pastors that while they cannot be held accountable for each soul's decision to accept or reject salvation in Christ, they were responsible for providing each person in their congregations with a clear explanation of the gospel message. And they must do this consistently as a first priority. Including himself with the pastors he wrote to in *Reformed*, Baxter stated that "The work of conversion is the first and most vital part of our ministry."⁵⁷

Baxter gave personal testimony of his own desire for the lost around him to come to saving faith in Christ. "Ah, me! The misery of the unconverted is so great that it calls for our utmost compassion. They are in the grip of bitterness, and as yet have no part nor fellowship in the pardon of their sins nor in the hope of glory."⁵⁸ Baxter drew analogy between his and the Apostle Paul's own burden for the lost, as well as God's purpose of preaching the gospel, by referring to Paul's testimony to Agrippa in Acts 26:15-18.⁵⁹ In *Reformed*, Baxter even confessed to

⁵⁵ Baxter, "Directions," 15-6."

⁵⁶ Baxter, *Reformed*, 72. Hebrews 13:17: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you."

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* Acts 28:15-18: "And I said, "Who are you, Lord?" And the Lord said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand on your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles – to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who

his readers that he frequently neglected his own work associated with edifying believers in his congregation in favor of seeking the lost sheep in his congregation. And Baxter maintained that this was right; pursuing the lost was the primary task in a pastor's ministry.

TEACH FAMILIES AND INDIVIDUALS

Richard Baxter used Scripture to impress upon pastors their duty to teach and care for individuals and families. As an example of the tender love required of church leaders for their people, Baxter referenced the apostle Paul's example of parental love from Galatians 4:19.⁶⁰ As spiritual parents, elders should demonstrate to their "spiritual children" that they value nothing – worldly gain or comfort – above the salvation and obedience of those under their care. But according to Baxter, the size of "the family" was a factor in the effectiveness of this parental approach to pastoral ministry. In order to establish the proper relationships required for teaching individuals, Baxter believed that pastors should not attempt to pastor too big of a flock. If an elder could not "*personally* supervise, so that they may 'take heed to all the flock,'" then Baxter considered the congregation was too big.⁶¹

Another use of Scripture by Baxter was the example of Moses in Exodus 32:31-32 as a sacrificial leader willing to have his own name stricken from the book of life in return for the sake of the lives of the rebellious Hebrews that he led.⁶² Baxter challenged pastors to first love their flocks and "When the people see, then, that you love them unfeignedly, they will hear what you say – they will bear whatever you ask – and they will follow you the more readily. And when a wound is given in love, it will be more readily accepted than when one issues a foul word that is merely given in malice or anger."⁶³ Baxter was a proponent of establishing foundational individual relationships with church members, and

are sanctified by faith in me."

⁶⁰ Baxter, *Reformed*, 22. Galatians 4:19: "my little children, for whom I again am in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!"

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 22. Exodus 32:31-32: "So Moses returned to the Lord and said, "Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin – but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written."

⁶³ *Ibid.*

his time commitment and systematic approach to family and individual teaching during his ministry, particularly during his pastorate in Kidderminster, is eye-opening and humbling to anyone considering the duties of a pastor.

Insight into the part of Baxter's ministry for which he became most famous – teaching individuals and families – is found in four consecutive paragraphs of his own introduction to *The Reformed Pastor*.⁶⁴ This is, perhaps, the most prescriptive “how to” section of the book, but the actual content that he used for instruction is not described in *Reformed*.

Baxter began this brief section of *Reformed* with an exhortation for ministers to faithfully, immediately, and effectually carry out a personal and family ministry of teaching followed by Baxter's assurance that reform and revival would follow in the churches.⁶⁵ Then he confessed his regret for neglecting his own pastoral duty in this area. “I was long convinced of its value, but was apprehensive of its difficulties. I did not see clearly enough how important it really was. I imagined people would scorn being involved in it, and that very few would want it. Moreover, I did not think I was capable of doing it, having so many other burdens upon me.”⁶⁶ Baxter gave account of his personal repentance before the Lord for shirking this pastoral responsibility of personally teaching his congregants, and then he took to the road and began catechizing his flock – family by family, and person by person. And the Lord blessed his efforts. “When I did try out personal catechizing and teaching those in my care, I found the difficulties scarcely existed about which I had thought – other than my bodily conditions of ill health. Instead, I found the benefits and comfort of the work to be such that I would not now forgo doing it for all the riches in the world.”⁶⁷ Baxter then moved into a structural and logistical description of how he organized and effected family and individual catechizing of his flock.

When Richard Baxter wrote *The Reformed Pastor* in 1655 during his second pastorate in Kidderminster, his congregation was made up of about eight hundred families.⁶⁸ Baxter humbly divulged to his readers his own method of structuring

⁶⁴ Baxter, *Reformed*, 6.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 5-6.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

and carrying out the teaching of families and individuals in his church:

I do not presume to prescribe rules or forms for you, or to encourage the use of the same catechism or exhortations we use. But let me tell you what I do in my parish. We spend Mondays and Tuesdays from morning to about nightfall, taking some fifteen or sixteen families each week in this work of catechism. With two assistants, we make our way through all of the congregation – about eight hundred families – and teach each family during the year. I have not been refused by a single family when I have asked them to come visit me. And I find more outward signs of success with those who come than in all my public preaching. I am forced by the numbers to take a whole family at once, for an hour each. The clerk of the church goes ahead a week beforehand to arrange the schedules of the timetable. I also keep notes of what each family member has learned so I can continue to systematically teach him or her.⁶⁹

Baxter's own account is both sobering and humbling. It shows an obvious commitment on his part as pastor to edify the local body entrusted to his care, but it also provides evidence of the congregation's willingness to receive the truths of the Word rightly taught. It is staggering that such detailed preparation and execution of a ministry could be accomplished in the seventeenth century environment of limited transportation and communication by today's standards.

Baxter held firmly that it was God's very design for the family – individual households – to be a place of worship.⁷⁰ He spoke against any effort to make parents feel incapable of leading worship in the home: "I never yet read or heard any knowing Christian once affirm that God had forbidden families solemnly to worship him, and therefore I think it needless to prove a negative, when no man is known to hold the affirmative."⁷¹ He applied the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30 and the parable of the wicked tenants in Luke 20:9-16 to the

⁶⁹ Baxter, *Reformed*, 6.

⁷⁰ Richard Baxter, "A Disputation, or Arguments to prove the Necessity of Family Worship and Holiness, or Directions against the Cavils of the Profane, and some Sectaries, who deny it to be a Thing required by God," in *A Christian Directory, or A Body of Practical Divinity and Cases of Conscience, Volume 3: Christian Economics* (London: Richard Edwards, 1825), 53.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

unique “advantages and opportunities” provided to parents by God himself, to whom they would give account one day.⁷² Baxter viewed God’s design for family worship as a literal “talent”: “The aforesaid advantages and opportunities are talents given by God, which they that receive, are obliged faithfully to improve for God; therefore families having such advantages and opportunities for God’s solemn worship, are bound to improve them faithfully for God, in the solemn worshipping of him.”⁷³

But Baxter’s approach to pastoral ministry as described in *Reformed* was certainly not the norm of his day. It was received as quite a challenge by even his like-minded contemporaries. Baxter even received formal objections to his first edition of *Reformed*, to which he responded in an appendix to his later editions.⁷⁴ Reflecting a firm conviction for teaching both individuals and families, Baxter summarized his own purpose for writing *Reformed*: “As you know, it has been the whole vision of this book, and behind that the program of our own parish, to teach the catechism – or basic tenets of the faith – to every family within the parish.”⁷⁵

PRACTICE CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Richard Baxter used Scripture to motivate church leaders and congregants to practice church discipline. He began with a call for pastors and congregations to repent for their lack of church discipline. Baxter pled, “If only it were understood how much of pastoral ministry and work really consists of church guidance. Then there would be so much less prejudice against the proper exercise of discipline. For to be against discipline is to be against the pastoral ministry; and to be against the pastoral ministry is to be against the Church; and to be against the Church is to be against Christ.”⁷⁶ Baxter even maintained that a pastor’s neglect to practice church discipline was a work of the enemy that was on par with neglecting to practice preaching.⁷⁷

⁷² Baxter, “A Disputation,” 53.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Baxter, *Reformed*, Appendixes, III. “Objections to Baxter’s *Reformed Pastor*,” 147-151.

⁷⁵ Baxter, *Reformed*, 124.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 84.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Baxter acknowledged the effectiveness of discipline as a progression from private reproof to public reproof that utilized rebuke, repentance, prayer, restoration, or exclusion from the congregation, when necessary.⁷⁸ He cited Paul's instruction to the younger elder Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:20, along with Titus 2:15, to publicly rebuke persistent sinners so that others may fear the Lord.⁷⁹ The public aspect of repentance was stressed by Baxter as a persuasive component for the penitent believer as well as the congregation that bore witness. He referenced the Apostle Paul's public rebuke of the Apostle Peter at Antioch in Galatians 2:11-14 as a reminder that even pastors were not above the public rebuke for unrepentant sin.⁸⁰

For cases where persistent sinners were rebuked and refused to repent, Baxter cited Paul's words from 2 Thessalonians 3:6 as encouragement for pastors and congregations to keep away from unrepentant professed believers in hopes that they would repent and be restored to the flock.⁸¹ Baxter urged pastors to press through the tiring and discouraging process of church discipline by pointing out the biblical example in 2 Thessalonians 3:13-15 of difficult decisions that must be made sometimes by church leaders for the good of the flock.⁸² He furthered this point by citing Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 5:11-13 to purge the unrepentant evil from the church.⁸³ The purity of Christ's Bride was at stake, and church discipline was God's ordained process for keeping his flock holy.

⁷⁸ Baxter, *Reformed*, 82.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 84. 1 Timothy 5:20: "As for those who persist in sin rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear." Titus 2:15: "Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you."

⁸⁰ Ibid., 82. Galatians 2:11, 14: "But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned....But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

⁸¹ Ibid. 2 Thessalonians 3:6: "Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us."

⁸² Ibid. 2 Thessalonians 3:13-15: "As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother."

⁸³ Ibid. 1 Corinthians 5:11-13: "But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler – not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. "purge the evil person from among you."

In a warning to pastors and congregations against bringing God's wrath upon themselves for lax and careless practice of discipline, Baxter referred to the Lord Jesus's scathing words in Revelation 2:20 to the church in Thyatira.⁸⁴ Baxter added that the church corrupts itself in the eyes of the world "when we give the assumption that: (1) To be Christian is merely a matter of opinion, or (2) the Christian religion demands no more holiness than the false religions of the world. If, then, the holy and unholy alike are all permitted into the same sheepfold without Christ's name to differentiate them, then we defame Christ by these actions, as if He were guilty of them."⁸⁵ He also maintained that a lack of biblical discipline was misleading and permitted "the worst of men to remain uncensored," adding that "many honest Christians" would separate themselves and leave churches that allow this to go on.⁸⁶

While Baxter explicitly endorsed the biblically mandated use of church discipline, he acknowledged that it should be carried out with a "prudent mixture of severity and gentleness."⁸⁷ Baxter warned against severe discipline that could discount a pastor's effectiveness in bearing the truth to a sinner. But he was quick to point out that proper administration of discipline required that the shepherd, as best he could, know the spiritual condition of each of his sheep. Noting that church discipline was rarely practiced, Baxter was urgent in his plea for pastors to begin the neglected practice of discipline immediately:⁸⁸ "And there is scarcely such a thing as church discipline in all the land. I never lived in the parish, I confess, where a single person was publicly admonished or brought to public penitence, or excommunicated even for the vilest offences."⁸⁹ But according to Baxter, the groundwork for effective church discipline was laid with each individual relationship that a pastor developed with the congregants entrusted to him. He contended that "they must know their own congregations first."⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Baxter, *Reformed*, 103. Revelation 2:20: "But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols."

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

CONCLUSION

Richard Baxter's approach to pastoral ministry was scripturally-based and straight forward: "Accordingly, my intended method is, 1. To direct ungodly, carnal minds, how to attain to a state of grace, and 2. To direct those that have saving grace, how to use it; both in the contemplative and active parts of their lives."⁹¹ He consistently challenged professed believers, pastors and laypersons alike, to first inspect themselves for evidence of a regenerate life before engaging in ministry to others. Baxter encouraged Christians to pursue the lost around them with the gospel message, specifically encouraging pastors to speak plainly and clearly to their flocks. He reminded pastors of their duty to feed their sheep corporately and individually within the family structure that God had designed. Baxter encouraged church leaders to utilize the personal relationships they developed with families and individuals during instruction and to do the hard work of practicing church discipline when needed.

The areas of Richard Baxter's pastoral ministry examined in this paper do not represent an exhaustive evaluation based on his one hundred and forty works. An area for further research would be Baxter's desire for unity both among pastors as well as among congregants as reflected in his writings. His use of Scripture to encourage pastors to maintain unity by focusing their preaching and instruction on core doctrines of the Christian faith is worth evaluating.⁹²

⁹¹ Baxter, "Directions," 3.

⁹² Baxter, *Reformed*, 16-17.