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Paul Miller

**Spirituality, Integrity and Competence:
Essentials of Ministry in Richard Baxter's
*Reformed Pastor***

Dr Miller, the pastor of Grantham United Church, St Catherine's, Ontario, shares with us the practical advice of Richard Baxter to pastors.

Books on pastoral ministry abound. There are few that are as useful, however, as *The Reformed Pastor* by Richard Baxter.¹ Written in 1656, this 350-year-old work remains one of the best and wisest descriptions of the basis, methods and challenges of Christian ministry.

Baxter was a Puritan and he exemplified the Puritans' penchant for sober self-examination. He believed that an effective pastor is a self-critical pastor. However, Baxter viewed self-criticism in the positive sense of applying the standards of the Gospel constructively to the operation of heart, mind and will. Today, in the shadow of Freud, self-criticism tends to be regarded as neurotic and harmful. Nurturing a 'positive self-image', discovery of the 'inner child', and liberation from 'guilt trips' form the core of the inner life in today's narcissistic climate. Puritans like Baxter, however, knew that honest self-criticism is an indispensable tool in the growth of the spirit. The goal of Christian belief, for them, was personal reformation and a closer relationship with God. Self-criticism involves the knowledge of God first and then the knowledge of the self in light of God's revelation. By means of self-criticism, we begin to see ourselves as God sees us and to know ourselves as we are known. Without regular self-examination, repentance and returning, Christians are prey to the deceptions of the sinful heart.

Baxter's theology of ministry is grounded in his overall view of redemption. Pastors are first of all human beings and therefore sinners. They must embark on the same spiritual pilgrimage as lay folk do. They press towards the same goal and face identical dangers. Baxter's theology of ministry rests on his belief that all Christians have equal status before God. Clergy do not enjoy special privileges merely by virtue of their office.

¹ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, abridged edition (1862) (Edinburgh, 1974).

At the same time, however, Baxter insisted that clergy have a special calling which lays on them responsibilities weightier than those borne by others. They are answerable not only for the state of their own souls but for the spiritual well-being of the flocks given into their care. Baxter and the Puritans read with utmost seriousness the warnings uttered by the prophet Ezekiel against the unfaithful and incompetent shepherds of Israel (Ezek. 34.)

Two ideas coexist in Baxter's pastoral theology. As Christians pastors are like everyone else. But as God's chosen ministers they are set apart.

The Reformed Pastor is an extended treatment of Acts 20:28: 'Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.'

The need for pastors to 'take heed unto themselves' and to 'oversee the church of God' are the twin themes that run throughout *The Reformed Pastor*.

The work falls into three sections. In the first, Baxter outlines the need for pastors to have oversight of themselves.² The second section concerns pastoral oversight of the congregation.³ In the third section, Baxter makes a practical application of the principles outlined in the first two.⁴ This last section is a detailed argument in favor of regular, systematic, personal instruction of the congregation.

It is the first section of *The Reformed Pastor* dealing with 'the oversight of ourselves' that I want to examine here. Baxter admonishes pastors to pay close attention to five matters:

1. '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 the gospel which you preach.'⁵
2. 'Content not yourselves with being in a state of grace, but be also careful that your graces are kept in vigorous and lively exercise.'⁶
3. 'Take heed to yourselves, lest your example contradict your doctrine.'⁷
4. 'Take heed to yourselves, lest you live in those sins which you preach against in others.'⁸
5. 'Lastly, take heed to yourselves, that you want not the qualifications necessary for your work.'⁹

² Ibid., 53-86.

³ Ibid., 87-132.

⁴ Ibid., 172ff.

⁵ Ibid., 53.

⁶ Ibid., 61.

⁷ Ibid., 63.

⁸ Ibid., 67.

⁹ Ibid., 68.

These five admonitions may be summarized into three rules of pastoral practice:

1. Practise active *spirituality*.
2. Practise pastoral *integrity*.
3. Practise pastoral *competence*.

Active Spirituality

Baxter cautions pastors to make sure that they are not 'strangers to the effectual working' of the gospel. The prophet Isaiah spoke of priests and prophets who had become estranged from the message they were charged with mediating (Is. 28). They had degenerated into religious functionaries who spent their time uttering pious gibberish. But the God who had called and commissioned them had become a stranger and his work appeared to them as strange and alien. They had forgotten how to speak God's language.

It is only by nurturing an active spirituality that pastors can avoid repeating their mistakes. An active spirituality is one that sustains a living relationship with God. Active spirituality is different than the routine discharging of religious duties. If the tasks and techniques of ministry become ends in themselves, the pastor's spiritual life will be passive and impoverished. Baxter described a typical plodding pastor who goes about his business respectably, but who has never come face-to-face with the saving power of God.

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 he preacheth up holiness, both of heart and life; and how can this man choose but be holy? Oh what aggravated misery this is to perish in the midst of plenty!¹⁰

Puritan spirituality reflects the Augustinian tradition of 'heart religion'. It focuses on 'personal experience, human sinfulness, and divine initiative in salvation.'¹¹ The Puritans were sharply critical of superficial and inauthentic religion. Their criticisms remain relevant even today. How many pastors now, as then, keep a busy routine of preaching, visiting, and meeting, but have never experienced the reality of their own sin nor the liberating power of God? They treat the ministry as 'but a trade to live by'.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., 55.

¹¹ Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1982), 26

¹² Ibid., 80.

According to Eugene Peterson, North American clergy 'are abandoning their posts, their *callings*.'¹³

The pastors of America have metamorphosed into a company of shopkeepers, and the shops they keep are churches. They are preoccupied with shopkeepers' concerns how to keep the customers happy, how to lure customers away from the competitors down the street, how to package the goods so that the customers will lay out more money.¹⁴

The reason, according to Peterson, is that pastors have abandoned the sources of spiritual nourishment which have sustained ministry for generations. Prayer, a deep familiarity with Scripture, self-examination and the habit of theological thought were the mainstays of the pastor's work. In this century, however, these spiritual disciplines have come to be considered optional, in practice if not in theory. Among all the professional qualifications that congregations look for in a minister, it is rare to find prayer at the head of the list. Someone once asked Martin Luther where he found time in his busy schedule to spend three hours a day in prayer. Luther's answer was that without those three hours spent with God he would never be equal to the demands of the day. Contrast this with a recent survey of American pastors which revealed that they spend, on average, *two minutes per day* in prayer! If this is the average, it is certain that a great many have no prayer life at all—and wonder why they are discouraged and directionless.

Many pastors never read Scripture except with the utilitarian motive of preparing Sunday's message. They do not regard Scripture as a source of spiritual sustenance but merely as a repository of sermon texts. Twentieth century pastors have also become woefully ignorant of the traditions of Christian belief that have been formed over centuries of reflection.¹⁵ What passes for 'theology' today is little more than a mish-mash of personal opinion, pop psychology and the latest political fads. Many pastors today have forgotten that their work 'begins and ends with the things of God.'¹⁶ Like the Athenians in Acts 17, they 'worship an unknown God, ... preach an unknown Christ [and] pray to an unknown Spirit.'¹⁷

¹³ Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1987), 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ What Thomas C. Oden has called the 'classic tradition' of Christian theology. See *Agenda for Theology* (San Francisco, 1979); *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco, 1983); and the three volumes of his Systematic Theology: *The Living God* (San Francisco, 1987), *The Word of Life* (San Francisco, 1989) and *Life in the Spirit* (San Francisco, 1991).

¹⁶ Baxter, 60.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

This tendency has become widespread in the twentieth century. However, it is by no means confined to our time. In every age of the Church's existence pastors have struggled with unfaithfulness or incompetence. Indeed, *The Reformed Pastor* was originally prepared as an address to be given at a 'day of humiliation'—a day for clergy to look within their hearts and reflect on their sins and shortcomings. Baxter lamented the fact that so many 'become preachers before they become Christians.'¹⁸ Their ministry, he says, does not arise out of an authentic encounter with the living God. Their motives for pursuing the ministry have more to do with the gratification of their own needs and ambitions than with the service of God. In my own denomination we used to say (only half jokingly) that there were two requirements for ordination: that one refrain from using sexist language, and that one agree to join the Church Pension Plan. While said facetiously, it is not far wrong. Suitability for ministry today tends to be determined by criteria that are quite peripheral to the classic idea that the Church demands those who are spiritually fit to become shepherds of the flock and physicians of souls.

An active spirituality is a matter of life and death for the pastor, according to Baxter. The unique pressures of ministry today are often underestimated, as they were in Baxter's time.¹⁹ Many are unprepared for the stress of dealing with peoples' needs day-in and day-out.²⁰ When pastors are unable to find methods of sustaining themselves inwardly they become statistics in the epidemic of clergy burn-out. It is not that pastors experience job stress because stress is common in many occupations. It is because they deal on a daily basis with matters of the spirit and cannot do so without spiritual sustenance. The metaphor of burn-out is telling. It suggests starvation or the exhaustion of a fuel supply. Like Elijah (1 Ki. 19), many pastors simply find themselves inwardly depleted. The psychic and spiritual malaise which afflicts pastors cannot be treated simply by 'taking a day off' or taking up a relaxing hobby. Only an active spirituality which enables pastors to drink deeply of the living water of God's grace can sustain them.

Baxter insisted that active spirituality is not only important for the well-being of the shepherd but for the welfare of the sheep. Pastors have a responsibility to care for their own spiritual health because otherwise they will not be able to care for others. 'We are nurses of

18 *Ibid.*, 56.

19 *Ibid.*, 78.

20 See, e.g., Percy H. Biddle, 'Stress in Ministry', *The Journal of the Minister's Personal Library*, volume 3, no. 2, 8ff.; Archibald D. Hart, 'The Loss-Proneness of Ministry' in *ibid.*, 3ff.; David C. Olsen and William N. Grosch, 'Clergy Burnout: A Self Psychology and Systems Perspective', *Journal of Pastoral Care* 44 (1991): 297-304; William E. Hulme, 'Coming to Terms with Clergy Burnout', *The Christian Ministry* (Jan.1984), 5-7.

Christ's little ones', wrote Baxter. 'If we forbear taking food ourselves, we shall famish them.'²¹ Only if we take heed to the condition of our own souls before God can we care for others adequately. If we fail to maintain our spiritual fitness, Baxter argues, the effects will become immediately apparent. 'When I let my heart grow cold', he writes, 'my preaching is cold, and when it is confused my preaching is confused.'²²

Practising active spirituality is essential to effective pastoral ministry, according to Richard Baxter.

Pastoral Integrity

Pastors must act with integrity. 'As our people must be "doers of the word and not hearers only", so we must be "doers and not speakers only", lest we 'deceive our own selves.'²³ This is simply the old principle that our actions speak louder than our words. A careless action can undo the most eloquent sermon. Persistent character flaws can undermine the most persuasive preaching. If people sense a contradiction between our doctrine and our practice, they conclude that we lack integrity; and our ministry will be damaged.

In the seventeenth century it was axiomatic that pastors were role models. This assumption has been widely questioned today to the Church's detriment. It is clergy themselves who often refuse the role of moral and spiritual leaders, ostensibly to get closer to their people. However, the truth is that most congregations want their pastors to exemplify certain standards of conduct. They want their ministers to demonstrate integrity.

Ministry, in a sense, really is a twenty-four-hour-a-day calling. This does not mean that pastors have no right to any time for themselves, but it does mean that they cannot separate the way they act in the pulpit or the office from the way they act at home or in the community.

There are two aspects to integrity, according to Baxter, one negative and one positive.

Negatively, he admonishes pastors to 'let your lives condemn sin.'²⁴ Pastors should lead by example in counteracting the effects of sin and alienation in the world. This is not to be interpreted only in the narrow moralistic categories often pejoratively associated with a 'puritanical' outlook—prohibitions against drinking, extramarital sex and the like. While it is true that Baxter regarded drunkenness, fornication, gambling and Sabbath-breaking as the main indicators of ungodliness, he saw sin manifesting itself in many other ways as well. He suggests, for

21 *Ibid.*, 61.

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*, 64.

24 *Ibid.*, 65.

example, that pastors can condemn sin actively by making wise and profitable use of their time and not wasting it with useless controversies. He stressed the need for pastors to overcome the sins of pride and vanity. Pastors should be humble and forgiving. They should not act in a stubborn manner or use contemptuous words.²⁵ They should not indulge in idle gossip or inappropriate conversation. Their conduct should give evidence that the Spirit of Christ is alive in them.

Baxter was very critical of clergy who put on airs. He railed against those who attempt to use their position as a means of gaining social status or of ingratiating themselves with people. Even today, many pastors enter the ministry to meet their own need for affirmation. This makes them vulnerable to the temptation to curry favour with people at any cost. Baxter also warned pastors not to be contemptuous of the poor but to treat all people as equal in God's sight.

Positively, Baxter says that pastors ought to 'abound in works of charity and benevolence.'²⁶ They need to lead by example in making Christian compassion concrete. How many pastors preach a prophetic line about justice for the poor, but do not have the time or inclination to help those who come to them for assistance? A passive concern for the poor, like that described in the Letter of James (2:15-16), which merely expresses sympathy for their plight is not good enough. 'Go to the poor', Baxter says, 'and see what they want.'²⁷ He does not confine this injunction to material wants but includes spiritual needs as well.

We should recall that Baxter lived at a time when the church actually included poor people. The contemporary Church has been transformed in the twentieth century into an almost entirely middle- and upper-class institution. Our dealings with the marginalized have become remote and institutionalized. Most congregations have few, if any, really poor people. We know, too, that poverty is not merely a matter of means, but of attitude and culture as well. The Church exudes an aroma of homogeneous respectability. My own congregation's words about those who are different was put to a severe test when a former member of the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang began to attend. It was painfully obvious that our comfort zone had been invaded. Yet Christ's pastors cannot evade the truth that Jesus himself ministered to the poor with special compassion. The disappearance of the poor from our churches is evidence that we have lost sight of Christ's own pattern of ministry, a pattern that was still very much alive in the practice of Richard Baxter.

25 *Ibid.*, 65-66.

26 *Ibid.*, 66.

27 *Ibid.*

Pastoral Competence

'Take heed', Baxter warns, 'that you be not lacking in the qualifications necessary to your work.' Every pastor who has been ordained more than a few weeks knows how complex and demanding the work of ministry is. Pastors must demonstrate competence in a wide range of skills. They are interpreters of Scripture, leaders of worship, counselors, comforters, motivators and mediators. Every day pastors come face-to-face with what the Puritans used to call 'the wounded conscience'—peoples' sense of failure, guilt and inadequacy before God.

Naturally, every pastor will have a greater aptitude in certain areas than in others. However, Baxter points out that effective pastors should develop competence in all basic areas of ministry regardless of their natural inclination. Following Baxter, we can say that parish pastors should not specialize in certain areas of ministry to the neglect of others.

One pastor is a careful and thorough theologian. He knows Scripture and has a firm grasp of Reformed theology. But his ministry is in trouble. Why? He refuses to visit with his people. He sits in his office reading and writing but will not go out to his people's homes or places of work to be with them. 'If they want me they know where to find me' is his response.

Another pastor is a wonderful, warm and caring individual who spends long hours visiting with the sick and the elderly. They appreciate his ministry deeply. But his sermons are a mess, poorly thought-out and carelessly thrown-together on Saturday evening. Sunday worship is an uncomfortable ordeal that fewer and fewer of his people are prepared to endure.

These two pastors are not practising pastoral competence because they are selecting those aspects of ministry which they choose to practise and neglecting the others. Not everyone is comfortable with pastoral visitation, but the fact is that visiting is an important aspect of ministry. Some pastors feel awkward going into peoples' homes, but by not doing so they are diminishing the effectiveness of their work, which, Baxter never fails to remind us, is not really their own but Christ's. Effective pastors know that they need to develop skills in pastoral care and visitation. They cannot hide behind the excuse that other needs are more pressing or more suited to their abilities.

Similarly, some pastors are not gifted orators, but the fact is that preaching is one of the principle means of grace and all pastors must strive to improve their competence in this area. Their people come looking for bread and woe to the pastor who gives them stones instead out of carelessness or neglect. While preaching may not come naturally, it is incumbent on every pastor to develop skills in biblical

exegesis and the arts of communication. We may never become Spurgeons, but we can all learn to become thoughtful and adequate preachers.

We make the mistake of thinking that the 'gifts' of ministry correspond to our natural aptitudes—those abilities that come to us easily and effortlessly. God often surprises us, though, by making use of us in ways that are very different from our inclinations. Competence in ministry has more to do with disciplined attentiveness to the call of God than it does with talent. If there is an area of ministry at which a pastor feels at a particular advantage, that person needs to work even harder to develop competence. Often these areas that are developed through hard work turn out to be greater blessings to their people than the areas in which they naturally shine.

'Study, pray, confer and practise', Baxter wrote, 'for in these four ways your abilities must be increased.'²⁸ Pastoral competence involves a disciplined pursuit of these four practices: studying Scripture and theology; cultivating a vibrant prayer life; conferring and sharing with others; and working intentionally to improve all areas of ministry.

Baxter is offering a method for growth in pastoral competence. We may divide these four practices into two pairs—study and prayer; and conference and practice. The first pair have to do with deepening our experiential knowledge of God. The second pair have to do with applying that knowledge to the practical situation of the congregations for which we care.

Study and prayer deepen the vertical relationship between the pastor and God. For Baxter this meant study of Scripture primarily. However, he never approached the study of the Bible as a cloistered academic pursuit. To study Scripture is to grow in knowledge of the self-revelation of the living God. Necessarily, this means growing in the practical understanding of life for God is the ground and source of life. The proper study of God always leads to a discernible increase in godliness, according to Baxter. 'Nothing can be rightly known if God be not known', he wrote, 'nor is any study well managed, nor to any great purpose, if God is not studied.'²⁹ Furthermore, the study of God is the study of the self—the true self, the self as it is known by God. It is necessary for the pastor to study how to 'live exactly' as well as the techniques of how to 'preach exactly.'³⁰ Study could rightly be defined as the pursuit of theology, or of what used to be called 'divinity'. However, Baxter reminds us that all true theology is 'practical' in nature.³¹

28 *Ibid.*, 71.

29 *Ibid.*, 56.

30 *Ibid.*, 58.

31 *Ibid.*

Prayer is the communion of the heart with God. It is prayer that enlivens knowledge. Through prayer the Spirit of God breathes life into the word of knowledge. There is a tendency to think of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a wasteland of arid scholasticism, devoid of feeling. To Puritans like Baxter, however, the study of theology was pointless without prayer. Prayer is what animates spirituality with the breath of life. The pastor's rational knowledge of God must be infused with the power of prayer.

Conference and practice deepen the pastor's horizontal communion with the people.

Conference meant what we would call personal sharing. However, in Baxter's day, sharing had a more disciplined and less subjectivistic connotation than it has today. What is shared is the experienced knowledge of God's ways. Pastors confer in two ways. First, they can confer with with mentors and guides whose Christian experience is greater than their own. These are the people who can help them deepen their own spiritual life. Secondly, pastors confer with parishioners, playing the role of the mentor or guide. Even here, however, conference benefits the pastor as well as the people. It is our people, after all, who teach us the art of pastoral ministry. By guiding them, sharing in their joys and struggles, comforting and challenging them, we become better pastors. Pastoral leadership is always pastoral service, according to Baxter. When we confer with our people, it is never in a haughty or overbearing manner, but in Christ-like humility. No pastor can increase in competence without intentional sharing with mentors, colleagues and congregation.

Finally, Baxter's admonition to 'practise' reminds us of the methodical nature of pastoral ministry. We become better at what we are called to do by practising it. This implies that we learn from our mistakes, which suggests in turn a conscious decision to reflect on them. Nothing is learned from experience if we simply repeat the same mistakes again and again. Growth in competence involves a decision of the will and a consciously-pursued method. It requires an orientation of the heart and mind through which pastors commit themselves to using their experience to increase their competence.

Undoubtedly the Christian church and its ministers are faced with unique challenges on the eve of the Third Millennium. People in the seventeenth century could scarcely have imagined the dilemmas that confront us today.

And yet the task of being a servant of the Gospel in 1996 is fundamentally the same as it was in 1656. We can profit today from the wisdom of Richard Baxter who counsels us to practise active spirituality, pastoral integrity and pastoral competence.