



## **The Baxter Model –**

### **Wallace Benn**

#### ***Guidelines for pastoring today***

Some books mark you deeply and change your life, although there are not many that you want to read over and over again. Richard Baxter's *The Reformed Pastor*, first published in 1656, is one of those rare life-changing books. In the twenty-one years that I have been in the ministry, I have tried to read this great work on pastoral ministry every five years. I need to, lest I forget what being an under-shepherd of the flock of God is really all about.

Baxter was a salaried preacher at Kidderminster (1641-2) and then vicar of the same town from 1647 to 1661. More than any other, he has been the model parochial minister. His was 'a ministry during which he just about converted the whole town'.<sup>1</sup> His magnificent book is a heartfelt appeal to other Puritan ministers for good pastoral practice, and is an extended discussion based on Acts 20:28, 'Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.'

Let me give you a taste of the passion and power of Baxter:

So brethren, watch over your own heart. Keep out sinful passions and worldly inclination. Keep up the life of faith and love. Be much at home with God ... My second exhortation is preach to yourself the sermon that you propose before you preach it to others. When your mind is enjoying heavenly things, others will enjoy them too (p.96).

For he that, does not pray for his people will not preach powerfully to his people. If we do not prevail with God to give them faith and repentance, then we are unlikely to prevail with them to believe and to repent ... when our hearts are out of order, theirs will also be out of order (p. 18).

We fail to go deeper, to see how we can set these matters forcibly in the hearts of other people. We ought to study how to convince, and how to get inside people, and how to bring the truth to the quick - not to leave it in the air ... few ministers preach with all their might ... What a tragedy it is, then, to hear a minister expand doctrines and yet let them die in his people's hands for the lack of a relevant and living application. Could we speak coldly of God and of men's salvation? So, in the name of God, brethren, labour to waken your own hearts before you come and are fit to awaken the hearts of sinners (p.56).

I know that public preaching of the Gospel is the most excellent means of ministry because we speak to so many at once. Other than that single advantage, it is usually more effective to preach the Bible's message privately to a particular sinner ... I conclude, therefore, that public preaching is not enough. You may study long, but preach to little purpose, unless you also have a pastoral ministry (p.1 14).

Such personal teaching will make our public preaching so much better understood and regarded (p. 106).

When the people see, then, that you love them unfeignedly, they will hear what you say ... and

they will follow you the more readily (p.22).<sup>2</sup>

Small wonder then that Jim Packer describes *The Reformed Pastor* as 'another all-time classic, admonishing, motivating, and instructing the clergy'.<sup>3</sup>

The effect of Baxter's ministry at Kidderminster was extraordinary. Packer writes in *Among God's Giants*: 'Kidderminster was a town of some 2,000 adults, and most of them, it seems, were converted under his ministry. He found them, he tells us, "an ignorant, rude and revelling people, for the most part ... they had hardly ever had any lively serious preaching among them." But his ministry was wonderfully blessed.

When I first entered on my labours I took special notice of everyone that was humbled, reformed or converted; but when I had laboured long, it pleased God that the converts were so many, that I could not afford time for such particular observations ... families and considerable numbers at once ... came in and grew up I scarce knew how.

Here is Baxter's retrospect of what went on:

The Congregation was usually full, so that we were fain to build five Galleries after my coming thither.... [The Church would have held about a thousand without the galleries.] Our private meetings were also full. On the Lord's Days there was no disorder to be seen in the Streets, but you might hear an hundred Families singing Psalms and repeating Sermons, as you passed through the Streets. In a word, when I came thither first, there was about one Family in a Street that worshipped God and called on His Name, and when I came away there were some Streets where there was not past one Family in the side of a Street that did not so; and that did not by professing serious Godliness, give us hopes of their sincerity. And those Families that were the worst, being Inns and Alehouses (sic) usually some persons in each House did seem to be religious.... When I set upon Personal Conference and Catechising them, there were very few families in all the Town that refused to come.... [Baxter asked them to call at his home.] And few Families went from me without some tears, or seemingly serious promises of a Godly Life.

What Baxter refers to here is the practice which he describes and commends in *The Reformed Pastor*, [...] of systematically interviewing families for the purpose of personal spiritual dealing. Baxter met families in this way at the rate of seven or eight a day, two days a week, so as to get through all 800 families in the parish every year. "I first heard them recite the words of the catechism [the Westminster Shorter Catechism was the one he used] and then examined them about the sense, and lastly urged them with all possible engaging reason and vehemency to answerable affection and practice. I spent about an hour with a family." His testimony to the value of this practice is emphatic. "I find we never took the tightest course to demolish the kingdom of darkness till now.... I find more outward signs of success with most... than of all my public preaching to them."<sup>4</sup>

### **Is Baxter relevant today?**

As I read this stirring story, I found myself moved and challenged. Certainly the times have changed, and the willingness of people generally to undergo such a 'personal conference' would be very much less in the secular world of our day! Yet I found myself admiring Baxter's practice and constantly asking myself whether there is a way of doing this today. I was convinced of the benefit to pastor and people of such a practice, but wondered whether it was still feasible. Was there a way to adapt and update it?

I became increasingly convinced that people needed pastoring which was as thorough as this, and that there was a lot of confusion amongst the Lord's people about how to work out their

faith, given the challenges and pressures of modern living. Although I believed passionately in the priority of preaching (and still do), and how basic pastoring is done through preaching and teaching, I was beginning to see that, like Paul, I must take every opportunity to minister the Word and not just be a pulpiteer.

How could this be achieved? Much pastoral work is done traditionally by visiting families but in many areas this has become difficult. Afternoon visiting is the traditional practice but, increasingly, who is at home? If anyone is, it is usually the mother, and how appropriate is visiting that never reaches the man in the family? Furthermore, I often found that much goodwill was created by my visiting, but it was hard to have any serious spiritual conversations when the TV was left on and you might find yourself battling against 'Neighbours' or the children's need for tea!

The following pages record my attempts, however inadequately, to learn from Baxter's model and to try and adapt his method in two different situations in which I have served. The first occasion was with a large youth fellowship, and the second concerns my present parish ministry.

When I was a curate in Cheadle, Cheshire, I was privileged to be the leader of a marvellous and rapidly growing youth work. At its peak, the youth fellowship numbered over two hundred - their ages ranging from fifteen to twenty. We were desperately short of leaders and so we began choosing and training some of the older young people to help. Each week it seemed that people were being converted, and our evangelistic efforts, by God's grace, were attracting lots of interest and attention. How were these folk to be adequately pastored? How were they progressing? Numbers, especially with young people, can be deceptive. We had a conversational Bible study which I led each week and which had over sixty coming to it. Although it broke all the rules of group dynamics it worked wonderfully! (Indeed I would say that those Wednesday Bible studies were the most exciting, stimulating and encouraging experiences of my life as a minister.) There was teaching and a great deal going on, but what about one-to-one contact?

With a group, which was eager to learn, coming from a wide variety of backgrounds and representing no less than twelve secondary schools, surely here was a situation in which I could try Baxter's insights. Thanks to my rector, I had the space to create my own system of pastoral care for what was becoming a large church within a church. So I decided to invite each member of the youth fellowship to come and see me for half an hour. I wondered how they would take it. Would people refuse to come, and would it have a very heavy image? I set out to correct some bad impressions before they could take root, playfully calling it my 'surgery' and assuring them that there would be no amputations! I emphasised that I wanted to get to know each one of them because each one mattered, and that I would not buttonhole them or embarrass them. However, I made it clear that I wanted to talk with them about their relationship with the Lord and to try to help them with any questions and problems they might have.

I found out rapidly that I needed a 'secretary' to make the appointments and chase up people, because that was a job in itself. I asked for a volunteer to help, and one of the star girls in the fellowship volunteered! She did an excellent job, giving me a list of people each weekend for the coming week and arranging all the times on the basis of the days which I had free. Over the next weeks I saw people after school on four days a week from four o'clock until six, and on Saturday mornings from nine until one. The next six or more months were exhausting but very exciting, and although I tried to do too much in the early days, I learnt from my mistakes! It was a great encouragement. As far as I know, nobody refused to come, and the fellowship and assistant leaders prayed faithfully for it.

What were the results? In spite of my inadequacies, there was a noticeable increase in spiritual seriousness' amongst members of the group. I found those who were not yet Christians and who

needed and wanted help to find Christ. I discovered the hidden problems and heartaches behind smiling faces, and was able to discuss real questions and problems that were holding people back. I found that, once over the initial hurdle of coming to see me, people were more than willing to talk. It began to be known that 'surgery' was 'OK' and that I wasn't too much of an ogre! People became more willing to come and see me and other leaders with their problems, or just to ask for advice. During this time the fellowship grew markedly in spiritual depth and continued to grow numerically, and I became more convinced than ever that Baxter had much still to teach us. So the results of that time with young people were very encouraging (see Appendix II for my colleague's experience with young people today). However, young people are adaptable and teachable - would it work with adults?

My next parish in the Potteries was very different, with a church turning in an evangelical direction in an old village-type mining-town. God graciously blessed the work, and the congregation became a growing and lively village church. Yet in the time that I was there, the 'Baxter method' never seemed quite suitable.

At present I am vicar of St Peter's, Harold Wood, in suburban north-east London, and it is here that I have used, and am still using, 'Baxter's method' with adults. Though my experience may not be appropriate for every parish situation, I hope you will at least ask the question, 'Could I do it here - would it help where I am?' I hope, too, that you will learn from some of my mistakes! I have been learning as I have tried to put Baxter's insights into practice.

### **The method adapted**

I became convinced that Harold Wood was an appropriate place to try this method. The congregation is large (over 500) and it would be a long time before I got to know people really well, but here was an opportunity to get to know them better. Although some 80 per cent of the congregation is indigenous, there are others who come from outside the parish, and it was unlikely that I would ever get around to everyone unless I tried this way. Harold Wood also has a history of being willing to experiment with new ideas when convinced that they are helpful.

After much prayer, I launched the idea at the annual houseparty one September. I told everyone that I wanted to get to know people, that in a large church this was not easy, and that this idea was a way to help. I reminded people that each was important and that, if I could, I wanted to help them spiritually. I said that I believed the Lord had laid this on my heart, and I asked them to pray for it and to seek to minimize any misunderstanding or criticism of it which might arise. Learning from my experience in Cheadle, once again I nicknamed it my 'surgery'.

Furthermore, I told people that I was going to work through the electoral roll of the church and, being Irish, I was going to do it backwards! There was motive in my madness. If you start with 'A', it is a long time before you seem to be making progress, and months later you may still be on 'C'. If you start with 'Z', how many members of your congregation have a surname beginning with that letter? Your passage up the alphabet is rapid, and a lot of progress seems to be made very quickly. This is important in the early days, since there is a great deal of interest and also a considerable amount of speculation about what will be said to particular people!

As we saw earlier, it is essential to have a 'secretary' to make all the arrangements. They can often get complicated, with people having to cancel for good reason, and it is important that someone other than the pastor handles this. A fine Christian woman, who helps part time at the church office, has taken this on as her principal area of concern. Each week she gives me a list of those coming. I give her my availability as far ahead as I can, and she works out the rest. On individual cards are brief family and work details if known, plus space for me to make short comments which I keep and file away afterwards. Cards are filled in after people have left - not at the time.

### What happens at an interview?

When people arrive they are given a cup of coffee or tea - something to make them feel relaxed and at home. I always ask husbands and wives to come together if at all possible, even if one partner is a known unbeliever. This shows interest in, and concern for, their marriage. If, of course, the other partner does not want to come, that is accepted. If a babysitter cannot be arranged or the children want to come, they are welcome to do so, and my dear and sometimes long-suffering wife looks after them in the other room! This emphasizes that the interview is a joint effort. People like to meet her, too - maybe more than me!

Everyone is asked to come for only half an hour, since I think that anything longer is too threatening. I have learned, having become famous for backlogs or 'surgery queues', to allow three quarters of an hour for each appointment.

Though I have been light-hearted about the way in which a visit is set up, I am clear as to its purpose: to get to know people better, to ask them how they are progressing in the Christian faith, and to give them an opportunity to ask me anything they want. Because of the impossibility of visiting everyone at home, I have asked them to be so kind as to come and see me, and that is very important. If you visit them, you may never get beyond small talk. If it is a visit to me with a stated purpose, it is easier to have a spiritual conversation. This is expected, and is one of the things that I have learned 'by chance'.

People often ask, 'What do you say?', and before I set about the task, I asked myself the same question. What you say needs personalizing, and others may do it far better, but this is what I have found helpful. To begin with, we chat for about five minutes or so. I try to get to know their family and work details, and any problems which they may be facing. Then I have found that really I need only to ask them three questions, since these three questions open up three key areas.

The first question is. When did you become a Christian? It is important to note that the question is not 'Are you a Christian?' The first version is gentler, gives the benefit of the doubt, and finds out the same information. When people begin to answer, you soon find out whether they are or not. Dependence upon church or family background - without a personal, saving faith - can usually be spotted quite easily. Once this is established, then that whole area can be addressed. If the person is a believer, it does them good to tell their story and I rejoice with them. If they are unclear or unsure, this can be addressed. Sometimes a 'Discovering Christianity' course, or a visit to discuss matters further with me or with another member of the team, can be suggested. For unsure Christians, suggestions can be made about books to read, or the teaching of 1 John on assurance can be briefly explored.

The second question is How is your Christian life going - are you encouraged or discouraged, and do you have any problems or questions that are holding you back?. It is in this whole area that we can discuss walking with God daily by reading the Bible and by prayer. In particular I ask them whether they belong to a home Bible study group or fellowship group and emphasize the importance of supplementing Sunday worship and teaching with an opportunity to learn and to ask questions about the faith in a group setting. It is also true that, in a larger church situation, belonging to a study group is a great way of getting to know some other Christians really well and enjoying rich fellowship together. I urge them to belong to such a group and, if they do belong, I ask how their group is getting on. With most people this is the main area to address, as it encourages them to get the necessary help and support that they need. It is the key area of spirituality and Christian living.

If you look at Ephesians 4, you will see that the way in which Christians grow is by learning

(w.11-12) and by serving (w.12,16). So the third question is 'What are you doing to serve the Lord in the church family and in the world - what are your gifts and/or how can we help you find and use them?' (We are beginning to run a 'Networking' course to help people find and use their gifts.) I also spend time in encouraging people to see their job and their family as their calling, and the primary area where God calls us to serve him. Through all the conversation I am seeking to encourage a practical acknowledgement of the lordship of Christ over every area of life. All these are really areas of question, and I do not follow a rigid system of certain things to get through: rather, I use these areas as a framework for the matters which I want to raise. We may of course never get past question one! We pray together at the end (I pray, then remain silent for a few moments so that they can pray too if they want to). Finally, I encourage them to talk to their home Bible study leader or to see me again if we can be of any further help. The fact that others are known to be coming, and are heard arriving, makes us disciplined with the time! On leaving I give them a copy of 'A Spiritual Life Check-Up', which a friend brought to my attention (see Appendix 1). It comes from Leadership magazine, and I urge people to use it and compare notes, telling them that it is fun but that it does ask all the right questions and is important. I explain that I do not want to see the results (I have known pastors who ask people to do it in advance and bring it with them - I admire their courage but I think that it is needlessly threatening). I do suggest that they talk over the answers with me if they wish - most do not!

These talks with people are relaxed and yet concern eternal issues. So they are very tiring and draining. When I began in Harold Wood, I tried to see twenty couples a week. That was folly, but it helped me get through the Icing list. Now I try to spend one evening a week doing this, if at all possible. Recently that has proved difficult with many emergency pastoral needs requiring time, but one night a week, or an occasional Saturday morning, is my normal pattern at present.

### **Surprises**

There have been many lovely surprises. The greatest, perhaps, is that no one to my knowledge has refused to come! And other things have happened. Let me refer to three incidents among many.

On one occasion a husband and wife came to see me, although the husband was not yet a believer. I knew this because we had talked about it together, and I began our session by saying how grateful I was that he had come, as I knew he was not yet a Christian. He said to me: 'Don't bother talking to my wife, she's fine.'

Talk to me because I need it and I'm worried!' What a God-given opportunity! We had a good conversation and have had several since then.

Secondly, I think of a conversation with a dear brother in Christ who was getting on in years and who was troubled about his area of service in the church. Did I still want him to carry on? He wanted to, but was it still alright? I was able to reassure him and tell him frankly how greatly we valued what he did, and I heard that he went home overjoyed. The next day he died. It was so good to have talked with him on that occasion, and how precious that conversation became! We had shared the joy of being believers together and the privilege of serving God; and his wife, who has had to face the sad loss, was there for the conversation. How good, though sad, it was to be able to quote that conversation at the funeral service.

Thirdly, I had an important conversation with a woman a week before she died, about things that were troubling her, and in God's good mercy she was encouraged and apparently helped. Again, it was good to be able to refer to it carefully at her funeral. The only problem was that at one period it seemed that everyone I saw was doomed to die. My surgery was beginning to appear to have the kiss of death!

## Problems

There have been few. Sometimes people come with a list of questions and attempt to set their own agenda, but that does not often happen. My response is to let them continue for fifteen minutes, and then say that they have had a good innings and isn't it about time we changed ends because I have a few questions I would like to ask them. It is surprising what you can get away with if you say it with a smile on your face!

## Benefits

1) Once people have been over the threshold of your home, it is easier for them to come again if they have a real problem. I believe that it also encourages people to be more open about their faith, bringing out the challenges they face as well as the joys.

2) It helps us to minister the Word of God in a very personal way and to be able to apply it very directly. It enables us to talk about really important issues and to see who really needs help (not just the ones who are always asking).

3) It sharpens your preaching, as you get to know a congregation better and understand the real problems they face. It helps your consideration of which Bible book to preach on next (pick the one that most relates to your situation) and also is a great help in working out application. Of course no confidence is broken, but we become more generally aware of the areas of challenge or difficulty that people are facing. We see, too, where they are spiritually and what encouragements and warnings they need.

4) Too many preachers do not like people, and can remain aloof from people while defending this attitude by their view of the priority of preaching. I believe that passionately too but, as Baxter said, how will we preach effectively if we do not know the real joys and problems of our brothers and sisters. This is a particular danger for the senior pastor in a large church, who can, by virtue of his job, become distant from his people. Priority time must be made and kept in order to preach well to the congregation, and too many personal demands can dangerously swamp that, but it is bad for a preacher not to know his people.

5) There are others to whom people can be referred, and it is essential to have a small back-up team. This helps the church to function better and enables leaders to see what would most help people in the programmes of the church.

6) Unused gifts and talents can be spotted and encouraged for use in the Lord's service.

7) Problem areas in a congregation can be noted. For example, I have noticed how many lonely people we have, even though we have the reputation of being a very friendly church.

8) I believe that it can raise the spiritual tempo in the life of a church.

9) People see that their minister cares. One person said to me, 'You are the first minister to care'. This was very far from the truth, and a compliment that I would not take too seriously. There may be many more who do not think that I care enough, or as much as someone else, but it does make a comment about the perception of how caring we are.

10) It encourages prayer as we see the grace of God in people's lives (thanksgiving), as we see how weak is some people's hold on the things of the Lord (petition), and as we see a mutual growing affection for the Lord, his people, and his ways (adoration). It encourages a minister in

humble dependence on God, and I believe also encourages our congregation to pray for us as we seek to pray for them.

### **Some questions remain**

1) Am I seeking to take all pastoral care to myself - what about the pastoral care of home groups? This form of care, it seems to me, is the basic pastoral care unit in a congregation, and nothing I have said above seeks to detract from that. But a Christian needs access in an emergency to his or her pastor, and the 'Baxter method' encourages that. It also provides a supplement to the basic pastoral care of groups, to the benefit of both pastor and people. We take home-group pastoring seriously, delegating pastoral care to the groups and urging them to take it seriously, especially the bearing of one another's burdens. All this is light years away from 'heavy shepherding', and seeks rather that unobtrusive pastoral care which constantly points people to the Good Shepherd and the wisdom of his Word written.

2) Might I not be swamped by all this? Will I keep on doing it? I have not yet been through all the electoral roll membership of the church, so the question is premature! We have a staff team here which is now committed to this pattern and with whom I can gladly share the task (Baxter shared the task with his curate).

However, in going through for the first time, I have felt the need to do so myself. Later it can be shared with the staff and pastoral team. You will realize by now that I am sold on Baxter's ancient wisdom, but read *The Reformed Pastor* and make up your own mind. You may want to adapt his wisdom differently, but I have found that people are very interested in his pattern. Ask yourself the questions, 'Could I do it where I am?' and 'Would it be helpful?'. If it is at all possible, do it, because there is still a lot of mileage left in it!

### **Let Baxter have a last word:**

Such personal teaching will make our public preaching so much better understood and regarded (p. 106).

Ministerial work must be done purely for God and the salvation of his people. It can never be done for any private gain of our own (p. 13).

When the people see, then, that you love them unfeignedly, they will hear what you say...and they will follow you the more readily (p.22).

It makes me leap for joy to anticipate what pastoral work, when it is well-organized, can produce. Truly, my brothers, you are privileged in such a work (p.105).<sup>6</sup>

May God the Son, the good Shepherd of the sheep, be glorified by pastoral care that teaches his Word and rejoices in his Gospel, with a deep love for those for whom he died.

*The Rt Revd Wallace Benn was previously vicar of St Peter's Church, Harold Wood, Essex, and is now Bishop of Lewes in the diocese of Chichester. The substance of this paper was given at a leaders' seminar at Word Alive Week, Pwllheli, 1993.*