

"A revitalized pastor, renewed in heart and spirit, to serve God fully"

The Reformed Pastor

by Richard Baxter

A Book Review and Ministry Challenge from Dean Taylor

The *Reformed Pastor* by Richard Baxter was one of those books that I kept bumping into and hearing about for years, but never actually got around to reading it. To be honest, the word "reformed" in the title probably scared me. However, shortly after my ordination a year ago, the Lord placed this book upon my heart and I can honestly say without hesitation that this book has marked my ministry and changed my life in many ways.

Richard Baxter was an interesting man. Born in 1615 during the controversial times of Reformation England, Baxter became an influential pastor of the small town of Kidderminster. Even though he wrote over 130 books, his pastoral heart of devotion, instruction, guidance, and counseling to his flock was the epitome of relentless, non-compromising commitment and service. George Whitfield, who came

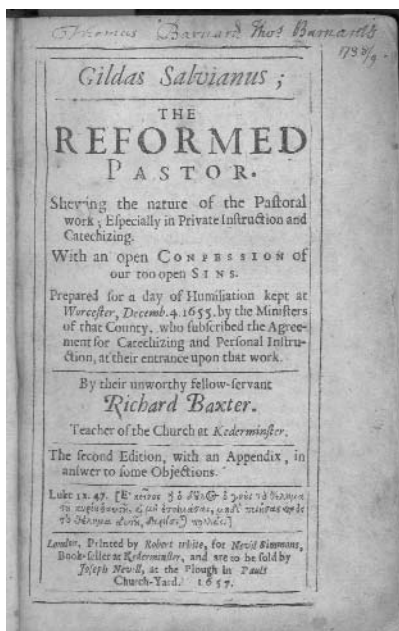
through Kidderminster 50 years after Baxter's death said, "I am greatly refreshed to find what a sweet savor of good Mr. Baxter's doctrine, works, and discipline remain unto this day." The book *The Reformed Pastor* is known to have personally influenced such men as John and Charles Wesley, George Whitfield, and Charles Spurgeon. Spurgeon said that he often had his wife read it aloud to him on Sunday evenings to "quicken his sluggish heart."

Baxter's Theology

To completely pin down Baxter's theology is difficult. The Calvinists called him an Armenian in disguise because of his teaching that faith must be received and practiced to be effectual, and because

some of his teachings seemed to affirm the idea that a person could possibly "lose" his salvation. Baxter simply considered his theology Biblical, without the constraints of having to fit into exact theological modes of his day. To describe himself and his teaching he coined the phrase "Mere Christianity." J.I. Packer, in his doctrinal dissertation on Baxter, finally summed up his theology as "Baxterianism." Interestingly, the preface to my Multnomah Press edition of *The Reformed Pastor* says, "By 'Reformed,' Baxter did not mean Protestant or even Calvinist; he meant a revitalized pastor, renewed in heart and spirit to serve God fully."

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Baxter, The Man

Putting aside all the theological technicalia so common in his day, Baxter had a faith, life and ministry that was profoundly inspirational. Baxter preached an hour twice a week, every Monday and Thursday. It was said of his preaching that he had enormous energy. But more than being just a good preacher, perhaps the most impressive part of his ministry was his pastoral heart, seen acted out in weekly personal visitations. Twice a week, he and an assistant started at one end of town and went through the town visiting families. They would stay with each family for approximately an hour, giving them counseling and instruction. He averaged 15-16 families a week, until he had visited all 800 families of his church, and then he would start the cycle again!

The Book

The inspiration for the book *The Reformed Pastor* was spurred by a meeting held in 1655 for the pastors of the English Churches. The vision for the meeting was to invite the pastors to come together and publicly repent for the sin of spiritual neglect of the Church of Christ. Furthermore, they wanted to make commitments to each other to better pastor, teach and council those souls that God had entrusted to them. Richard Baxter could not make the meeting and out of the burden of his heart for this meeting this book was spawned, so he sent the book in his place.

The book focuses on the challenging scripture found in Acts 20:28, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood."

He divides this topic into two sections, "yourselves" and "the flock". He says that a pastor's first duty is to take care of himself. He stresses that a pastor's own spiritual needs must be met before he can have the inspiration and anointing to minister to others. Mere studying for a sermon is not enough—to be effective the pastor must have a true relation-

ship with God. He said, "Perspiration is no substitute for inspiration. If fervency then is not also accompanied with reverence to God, it will have little effect on the hearers."

He warns, "It is possible also that many a man has warned others not to come to that place of torment which they have hastened to themselves. Is it possible also that many a preacher is now in hell who has called upon his hearers a hundred times to use their utmost care and diligence to escape its dark destiny? Believe it brethren, that God never saved any man for being a preacher!"

When the church does not respond properly to the sermon he encourages the pastor to look for reasons within himself saying, "How many sleep before us, because our hearts and tongues are all so sleepy! And we do not even have enough skill and zeal to wake them up!"

One of the biggest qualities that he said the pastor must work the most to maintain all through his life and ministry is was that of humility. He said, "For God who thrust out a proud angel, will not tolerate a proud preacher either...The very heart of the Gospel is the need to be self abased. The work of grace is only begun and sustained by humility...When we rebuke a drunkard or a fornicator and state that they cannot be saved without repentance, have we not greater reason to tell ourselves we cannot be saved unless we become humble? Indeed, pride is a greater sin than whoredom and drunkenness...So we must study

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humility, preach it, as well as possess and practice it."

In the second part of the book he focuses on the flock. His practical advice throughout these chapters is very instructive. As of primary importance he stressed the salvation of souls. He said "The work of conversion is the first and most vital part of our ministry. For there are those who are Christian only in name, who have need to be truly 'born again.'" He puts such an emphasis on this that he said we must do it even if it meant that the pastor must live in poverty

to do it. He said, "Is it not better to live in reduced economic circumstances than that your parishioners are damned? Your bread is not more important than their eternal salvation, is it?"

Baxter cautioned that the pastor must see how the families react to one another in their homes. He said, "Get information about how each family is organized, and how God is worshiped there." He also said that the pastor should encourage the fathers of homes to have an active ministry to their children. He wrote, "Moreover, the master of a family needs to preach to his own family, as a school-master does to his students."

Throughout the pastoral portion of the book he identified many needs that certain types of Christian's possess. The new Christian and the experienced, the contentious and schismatic, the people-pleaser and the lukewarm all require different types of instruction, and he gave some insight on how to pastor these needs.

If time is lacking he recommended gathering people into small cell groups for instruction. He wrote, "If you are limited on time, take several together. This is much better than to be hasty with individuals and superficial in your contacts with them. Be sure those you bring together are common friends so they will hold each other's confidences while you talk with them."

Sadly lacking even in his age, Baxter mentions the problems caused by a lack of discipline. He said, "We corrupt Christianity itself in the eyes of the world when we give the assumption that: (1) To be a 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 sheep-fold without Christ's name to differentiate them, then we defame Christ... We also make good men separate themselves from our churches by our laxity of discipline when we permit the worst of men to remain uncensored."

Finally, Baxter's constant cry throughout the book is that this all must be done out of love and devotion to Christ. With stirring words he exhorted, "Let us

hear the words of Christ, whenever we feel the tendency growing in us to become dull and careless. 'Did I die for them and you will not look after them? Were they worthy of My blood, and yet they are not worthy of your labor? Did I come down from heaven to earth, to seek and to save that which was lost, and will you not go next door or to the next street or village to seek after them...Have I done and suffered so much for their salvation, and was willing to make you a coworker with me, and yet you refuse that little that lies within your hands?'"

Judging from the quotes mentioned above it is plain to see how seriously Baxter took his calling. He clearly saw himself as being a co-laborer with God. He saw his pastoring as a vital means of grace for his flock. With this in mind he said, "personal conversion involves two things: a well informed judgment of basic issues, and the change of will that is brought about by this truth." Being a minister who did so faithfully, Baxter could justly be called a true "Reformed Pastor." "If bishops will do this work, I will see them as *Reformers*. If elders will do so, I will also take them to be *Reformers*. Those that neglect and hinder it, I will only see as *Deformers*."

The Challenge

Since our new church has begun here in Terre Hill, Mark Brubaker and I have by God's grace sought to incorporate at least a portion of what Baxter has suggested. Most every Tuesday night, Mark and I, along with our wives, try to visit two families from the fellowship. During these visits we are able to share hearts and encourage the brethren. During one of our first visits one brother got saved who had been attending our church for over 9 years! I can testify that much of what Baxter is suggesting in his book has greatly affected my personal life and the life of our church. So don't let the name scare you! Grab a copy of *The Reformed Pastor* and allow his challenges and encouragements to mold your life or ministry after the example of our good pastor and shepherd, Jesus Christ. □

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