

*Foreword by Chad Van Dixhoorn*

THE  
REFORMED  
PASTOR

*by*

RICHARD BAXTER

1656



UPDATED & ABRIDGED BY TIM COOPER

“*The Reformed Pastor*, by the preeminent pastor-theologian of the Puritan era, Richard Baxter, is one of the first books I read on the Christian ministry. As a pastor, I need to read and reread this classic. Crossway and Tim Cooper have done a great service to the church in making this updated and abridged volume available to us. May God use this book to save and care for many souls through pastors in his church.”

**Mark Jones**, Pastor, Faith Vancouver Presbyterian Church;  
coauthor, *A Puritan Theology*

“In the history of pastoral life, certain books stand out as classics that must be read by anyone who is serious about this utterly vital sphere of the Christian world. One immediately thinks of the books on pastoralia by Gregory the Great or Martin Bucer. Among this select group is Richard Baxter’s *The Reformed Pastor*. It can be a daunting read, for Baxter demands much of anyone who would seek to serve as a pastor to the souls of men and women and children. Daunting though it is, it is a must-read. For here we find not only a book that has influenced generations since it was first published but a work that sets forth the high calling of being a minister of the gospel. The latter is not in vogue today for a number of reasons, and to some extent we are reaping the fruit of our failure to highly prize pastoral leadership. May the reading of this new edition, rightly abridged, serve to rekindle among God’s people a prizing of the pastorate and a prayer for those who serve in it. May it be a key vehicle to help refocus the passions and goals and energies of those currently serving as shepherds of God’s people!”

**Michael A. G. Haykin**, Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality; Director, The Andrew Fuller Center for Baptist Studies, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“*The Reformed Pastor* rightfully carries the description of a ‘classic work in pastoral ministry.’ John Wesley and C. H. Spurgeon both testified to its benefit in their lives and ministries, as have thousands of other pastors. Baxter scholar Tim Cooper has abridged Baxter’s lengthy work into a more manageable (yet no less powerful) charge to pastors. It is my joy to commend this book to the current generation of ministers, that by carefully taking heed to themselves first, they will be better prepared to take heed to the flock of God.”

**Timothy K. Beougher**, Associate Dean, Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Ministry; Billy Graham Professor of Evangelism, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *Richard Baxter and Conversion*

*The Reformed Pastor*



# *The Reformed Pastor*

Richard Baxter

Updated and abridged by Tim Cooper

Foreword by Chad Van Dixhoorn

 **CROSSWAY**<sup>®</sup>  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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This book was originally published by Richard Baxter in London, 1656. In this edition, that earlier work has been abridged and the English modernized. See the introduction for more about what the editor has updated in this edition.

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*Chad Van Dixhoorn*

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## Foreword

OF ALL THE PURITAN BOOKS that have cried out for abridgment, none has done so more loudly than Richard Baxter's *Reformed Pastor*.

Every pastor, not just Reformed pastors, ought to read what Richard Baxter has to say about ministry. In fact, I have never mentored an intern or taught a class on pastoral ministry in which I have not assigned some parts of Baxter's book for reading and discussion. But it has always been *some* parts. I think I am right in saying that I have never assigned the book as a whole. I have always required reading some of this and some of that, for Baxter is not consistently helpful, and he repeats some of the best bits more than once. He wrote a passionate appeal for shepherds to care for their sheep, but like many great pastors, he could not be both passionate and concise at the same time.

The main theme of *The Reformed Pastor* is the Christian minister's need for a personal pastoral ministry. In Baxter's England there were lonely people, sick people, and complicated families. There were Christians facing sin and suffering who lacked the assurance that they should have had. And there were churchgoers with a strong sense of assurance that they should not have had. Some of these people could be reached through powerful preaching. But not all of them. Thus, Baxter emphasized personal pastoral care for its own sake: a divinely appointed means, practiced by the apostle Paul himself (Acts 20:20), to bless the people God has placed in a minister's life. Not to give it

all away, but Baxter's recipe for personal care includes praying, teaching, risking awkward questions, and insisting on hard conversations.

Baxter is most famous for his commitment to visitation. Visitation is a dying art in our day, but it need not die out altogether. Raising the topic of visiting families or individuals in a modern church is likely to raise eyebrows for most elders: "You want to visit every family in the church once a year?" It raises heart rates when elders in cooperatively shaped ministries discover that their pastor wants them to try it too: "You want me to *join* you on a visit?" And then, "Now you want me to do this by myself?" Of course, visitation is scary for members too: "Why does the pastor want to visit me? What did we do? Does he *know*?"

I remember trying to get traction with pastoral visits. I asked the secretary to set up meetings: her communications were ignored. I sent long emails with biblical explanations of why I'd like to visit: I'm not sure they were even read. I asked people after worship services if I could come by some evening to visit: panic and embarrassment. Then I started emailing a mixed group of people in the church (the alleged "problems" and the alleged "successes" in the same email) offering dates when I'd be available and telling them all I'd like to come and pray with them: success! The trial and error was painful for everyone but worth it, and I would never have persevered if it were not for reading Baxter and being persuaded by his driving concern that shepherds spend time with their flocks, that physicians of souls check in on their patients, that pastors plan visits with their people.

For what it is worth, Baxter did not press for private ministry because he was a poor preacher. As the wonderful introduction to this volume relates, there were points when Baxter's church was full to the point of bursting. But like any godly minister, he was wise enough to

know that personal pastoral care enhances a public ministry. Knowledge of one's flock and of one's neighborhood enables the preacher to shape and apply sermons with maximal effectiveness. What is more, hearers notice when a minister is so committed to them that he will leave the security of his study and venture into the messiness of their lives. People are more likely to listen to people who love them—and who take pains to prove it.

Many Christians have wanted an abbreviated version of Baxter's classic. Tim Cooper finally took it into his hands, and he is the perfect person to do so. The introduction to this volume speaks for itself, but as an award-winning teacher, thoughtful Christian, and Puritan scholar, Professor Cooper has few rivals when it comes to Baxter. He has followed Baxter's footsteps by coediting the great man's autobiography.<sup>1</sup> He has so engaged the pastor of Kidderminster's theological and practical writings that he is able, if I may use the phrase, to think his thoughts after him. Dr. Cooper is the guide we have wanted, and the Christian world owes him a debt for this service.

In assigning sections of Baxter's *Reformed Pastor*, I always felt like I was coming to the text with a cleaver, butchering the book by assigning chunks here and there. Dr. Cooper has approached his task with a surgeon's knife, giving the book the slimmer look that some volumes need. In this case, when sewn back together, the effect is impressive. But the improvements include supplements too, such as introductions to chapters, questions for reflection, headings for orientation, and Baxter's own catechism as a guide to pastoral care.

1 Richard Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae: Or, Mr. Richard Baxter's Narrative of the Most Memorable Passages of His Life and Times*, ed. N. H. Keeble, John Coffey, Tim Cooper, and Thomas Charlton, 5 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

## FOREWORD

Even though he admitted that it was longer than it needed to be, the Reformed pastor who first told me to read *The Reformed Pastor* also told me to read the whole thing. He was not unkind; he simply noted my personal deficits and knew that I would need every practical encouragement that Baxter (or anyone else) had to offer. I confess that I eagerly look forward to gifting him a copy of this expert abridgment. He now trains pastors himself, and my guess is that he now assigns to his students only the best selections of Baxter. I am also guessing that he, like me, will be happy to commend this fine abridgment instead.

Chad Van Dixhoorn  
Westminster Theological Seminary

# Introduction

WHEN RICHARD BAXTER PUBLISHED *The Reformed Pastor* in 1656, he had no idea that he had produced a classic text, one that would still be in print nearly four centuries later. The book was his exposition of Acts 20:28: “Take heed unto yourselves and all the flock, over which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he has purchased with his own blood.” His enduring work sets forth a vision of what pastoral ministry should be in all its rounded fullness. It summons pastors to tenacious, intentional, and sacrificial soul care of every individual under their oversight. The call is demanding and provoking, inspiring and affirming. If there is any one book that every pastor should read, this is it.

But be warned: it is no easy book to read. Partly that comes from Baxter’s message, one that is uncompromising in its high call and expectations. Reading *The Reformed Pastor* is an uncomfortable experience, and in this abridgment I have made no attempt to soften that discomfort. In several other ways, though, I have tried to make the book a great deal easier to read, mainly by modernizing much of Baxter’s seventeenth-century language and by reducing its length from 160,000 words to 30,000 words.<sup>1</sup> It is possible that in this concentrated

1 Any reader seeking a much fuller abridgment should read Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, ed. William Brown (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1989).

form, Baxter's message is only more excruciatingly intense, focused, and demanding. The easier it is to access, perhaps, the more uncomfortable his book becomes.

I have, then, tried to make *The Reformed Pastor* much more easily accessible without diluting its force. It comes to us from a distant age; Baxter's words and vision may still carry that sense of foreignness. For exactly this reason, he can speak what we need to hear. His text, now centuries old, can expose the gaps in our own conception of what it means to be a pastor. We do not need to agree with everything he says, but long after his life came to a close, Baxter still speaks. More than ever before, his is a voice we need to hear.

### **Baxter's Voice in His Context**

Richard Baxter (1615–1691) was an English pastor and a prolific author: *The Reformed Pastor* is just one of around 140 books that he wrote. On December 4, 1655, he planned to gather with his fellow pastors in the county of Worcestershire to commit themselves to a new way of ministry. As it happens, he could not attend. Dogged by ill health throughout his life, he found this to be just one more occasion when infirmity hindered his travel. Yet his preparations were not without fruit. It was his way to write out his thoughts in full, not only to do the best job he could of serving his fellow local ministers but also to share his ideas more broadly, with an eye to possible publication (he always sought to wring the greatest possible benefit from his work). And so it was. In the summer of 1656, *The Reformed Pastor* made its first appearance.

At that point, Baxter was in the middle of a flourishing pastoral ministry. But if we go back to April 1641, when he first arrived in Kidderminster at the age of twenty-five, the conditions did not bode

well. Kidderminster was a town that had long been known for its weaving and cloth industry. It lay on the banks of the River Severn in the Midlands, about 130 miles northwest of London and around 40 miles from the border of Wales. Baxter's parish comprised the town itself along with twenty villages in the nearby surrounds, with a combined population of between three and four thousand souls. A parish is what formed the basic administrative district of the Church of England, which comprised around nine thousand parishes. When Baxter first settled in his new parish, England was drifting ever more rapidly toward civil war between Parliamentarians and Royalists. Four years of armed conflict on British soil began in October 1642, the outcome of rising tensions over constitutional powers, individual liberties, taxation, and, above all, religion. King Charles I sponsored a church style that emphasized deference and order, favored the sacraments over preaching, and unsettled a previous consensus that was broadly Calvinist in its doctrine. These changes tended to bring the Church of England closer in practice and doctrine to the church of Rome. For many, this was too close for comfort. Would England see the Protestant Reformation through to its conclusion, or would that cause go backward?

We might ponder for a moment that word *reformation* and its companion *reformed*, which anchors the book's title. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, various reformations took place across Europe. For all the differences between them, the general aim was to re-form the church. For the most part, this meant bringing the church back to its initial shape in the time of the apostles as laid out in the pages of the New Testament and laying aside the worship and governance of the church that had become only ever more elaborate and even further removed from scriptural precedent across the intervening



centuries. Therefore, a reformed church was one that resembled that first original. A “reformed pastor” was one who likewise followed the New Testament precedent. We might use the later language of “revival,” which implies not just faithfulness to the scriptural model but a lively, energetic, sincere, and heartfelt minister and ministry. For Baxter, all this meant imitating the example that the apostle Paul laid out in his last speech to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:18–35. Baxter’s point is implicit but obvious: any reformation of the church must begin with a reformation of its pastors.

There was little reformation to be seen in Kidderminster in 1641 and little prospect of it. How that changed! The war took Baxter out of Kidderminster for several years, but after he returned in May 1647, now aged thirty-one, he once again set about his work in earnest. When he began, only about one family on each street comprised faithful, godly Christians. By the late 1650s, Baxter classed around a third of the adult population as consenting church members and visibly sincere Christians. Among the eight hundred families in the parish, he explained in a letter in 1658, six hundred adults were consenting church members. At first he numbered his converts “as jewels,” but he quickly began to lose count, and five galleries (forming a second tier of seating layered above the first) had to be added to the parish church to accommodate his growing Sunday morning congregation.<sup>2</sup> This remarkable turnaround says much about Baxter’s commitment, skill, and tenacity as a pastor. It is worth saying that he was unmarried. He believed it preferable for ministers to remain single so that they

2 Richard Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae: Or, Mr. Richard Baxter’s Narrative of the Most Memorable Passages of His Life and Times*, ed. Matthew Sylvester (London, 1696), 1.84–85, §136.

could devote themselves wholly to the work of ministry (see p. 84). He eventually married Margaret Charlton, one of his parishioners, but only in September 1662, after he had been ejected from public ministry; they never had children.<sup>3</sup> Thus Baxter threw everything he had into the cause.

Promising signs had emerged by March 1653, when, as Baxter explained in a letter to a friend, he considered himself to be “in the very beginning of a reformation.”<sup>4</sup> He was starting to see clearly the kinds of structures needed to bring about a renewal of orthodox, scriptural, practical, sincere, and dedicated Christianity, and he was beginning to put those structures into practice. In doing so, he was taking advantage of a new environment. Since the execution of King Charles I in January 1649, England had ceased to be a monarchy. It was now a republic (or commonwealth) with power residing in the parliament and council of state. Oliver Cromwell, a member of the council of state and, from 1654, Lord Protector, became increasingly influential. More important, the Church of England had been legally (if not entirely in practice) disestablished. Parliament could not agree on any national ecclesiastical settlement to take its place, so the 1650s offered unprecedented freedom to experiment at the local level.

Baxter was a great experimenter. In his parish he matched effective preaching with the conscientious practice of confirmation (ensuring that those coming of age adequately understood and owned the

3 For an excellent introduction to their marriage and to the book that Baxter published after Margaret died in 1681, see J. I. Packer, *A Grief Sanctified: Through Sorrow to Eternal Hope; Including Richard Baxter's Memoir of His Wife's Life and Death* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002).

4 Richard Baxter to Richard Foley, March 19, 1653, Baxter Correspondence, vol. 4, folio 141r, Dr. Williams's Library.

Christian faith) and church discipline (based on Matt. 18:15–17, the process of bringing known sinners to repentance and, in the absence of repentance, excluding them from the church community). More widely, Baxter engineered the Worcestershire Association, a local network of like-minded ministers seeking to implement effective pastoral practice. They gathered together once a month to encourage each other, to discuss difficult issues, and to embody unity and concord at a time of division even among committed Christians. In 1653, and in their name, Baxter published *Christian Concord: Or the Agreement of the Associated Pastors and Churches of Worcestershire*. It declared their public resolution to perform the work of pastoral ministry and to undertake effective church discipline. Only those who consented to come under that discipline would be subject to it—that is, only those who intentionally adopted membership in the parish church and who declared their assent to the profession of faith incorporated in *Christian Concord*. This implied a direct conversation between the pastor and each consenting member of the parish, which meshed nicely with the fundamental resolve that “each minister should endeavor to know (if possible) each person in his charge.”<sup>5</sup>

This public declaration in *Christian Concord* made no mention of a practice that Baxter began to implement around the same time. He was inspired by the apostle Paul, who taught both “publicly” and “from house to house” (Acts 20:20), but he had long been deterred by the sheer labor involved. How did one pastor possibly find time to meet individually with every person in a parish the size of Kidderminster? Baxter found a way. First, he employed an assistant. Second, they

5 Richard Baxter, *Christian Concord: Or the Agreement of the Associated Pastors and Churches of Worcestershire* (London, 1653), Propositions, sig. A3v.

each took all Monday and Tuesday every week to spend one hour with each family in the parish going through a catechism to gauge their understanding and practice of the faith. This catechism was a brief document of fundamental questions and answers designed to be easily memorized (see appendix 1 for Baxter's catechism, along with two suggestions for contemporary catechisms).

It is important not to underestimate the cost. He took a full two days out of each busy week to do this work. Touchingly, he later described how the very poorest families of the parish would come to him for instruction, leaving a "plentiful" supply of lice to inhabit his chamber "for a competent space of time."<sup>6</sup> His new system demanded dedicated, painstaking, careful work. Preaching, he discovered, was not enough to bring about the reformation he sought. It also required these one-on-one, individually tailored conversations. But the work paid off. Baxter felt he had hit on the decisive method to bring about a true reformation. As he declared in his preface to *The Reformed Pastor*, "We never took the best course to demolish the kingdom of darkness till now."<sup>7</sup>

In this way, Baxter pursued a reformation at Kidderminster from the ground up. Genuinely excited by the results, he glimpsed the potential of a countrywide movement that would see his method replicated thousands of times over in England's many parishes. He began to pursue this national vision with his fellow ministers in Worcestershire. That gathering in December 1655 was his opportunity to persuade a receptive audience to join him in this new work and commit

6 Richard Baxter to Thomas Lambe, September 29, 1658, in *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, ed. Matthew Sylvester, appendix 3, 63.

7 Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (London, 1656), preface, sig. (a6)v. As in the abridged text, I have modernized the language in all the quotations in this introduction.

themselves to the practice of annual family visitations. In 1656, they declared their commitment (and published the brief catechism they would use) in *The Agreement of Diverse Ministers of Christ in the County of Worcestershire for Catechizing and Personal Instruction*. When Baxter published *The Reformed Pastor* that same year, it was his invitation to England's ministers to follow suit. As his confidence rose, he allowed himself to imagine a reformed England populated with reformed parishes overseen by many thousands of reformed pastors.

But it was not to be. Oliver Cromwell died in September 1658. The rule of his son Richard collapsed in May 1659, and the country slipped into chaos. A year later, the monarchy was restored, along with the bishops. The terms required for ministry in the restored Church of England were so narrowly defined that around two thousand ministers could not in good conscience comply. The bishop of Worcestershire refused Baxter permission to preach in Kidderminster ever again or even to offer a public farewell to his beloved parishioners. By 1662, Baxter's optimism had collapsed in the dust of bitter disappointment and reversal. Many years later, in 1684, he admitted that all these events had "made so deep a wound in my heart, as never will be fully healed in this world."<sup>8</sup> *The Reformed Pastor*, therefore, emerges from a context of excitement and optimism that ended all too soon. But it was written by a man who, if nothing else, had certainly put his own advice into practice—and to great effect.

### **Baxter's Voice in Our Context**

All that history is important because it locates Baxter in a particular time and place, facing very real difficulties and obstacles. He was

8 Richard Baxter, *Catholic Communion Doubly Defended* (London, 1684), 7.

clearly a pastor who thought deeply about his ministry and was prepared to work hard to be effective in it. Yet his context could scarcely be more different from our own. In his day, people rarely moved or traveled. Most remained within the same parish their whole life. There was by definition only one church in each parish, so people had precious little choice about which church they attended. Back then, it was much easier to know exactly who was a consenting member of each parish and who was not. In our day, in contrast, people are nothing if not mobile. Each Sunday morning they might drive past ten or twenty churches to reach the one that best meets their needs or suits their preferences. They choose from a bewildering array of alternatives, and if they come to dislike the church they are in, they can easily move on to another one just around the corner. This makes it challenging for us to match the practical way that Baxter set about his vision of pastoral ministry.

There is also another crucial difference. These days, churches generally do not use anything like a catechism for intentional, individual instruction. Discipleship tends to be practiced in small groups, without the direct involvement of the pastor. Having read Baxter's prescription, we might ask ourselves if we have lost something important. Is it time we recovered the catechism or something like it?

Yet for all the substantial differences, Baxter's text remains powerfully relevant. Church members still require individual soul care as far as is possible, and the high values and biblical imperatives that drive Baxter's vision are timeless. Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders is still in our Bible. The human heart is fundamentally unchanged across the centuries, and Baxter's insight into the patterns of sin, grace, and the gospel remain lively and all too accurate. He was an extremely shrewd observer of his own heart as much as anyone else's,

and his words of caution and encouragement for pastors remain both vital and current.

One reason Baxter's voice is so important is precisely that he *does* come from a context so different from our own. This is indicated on the title page of *The Reformed Pastor* in two obvious ways (see fig. 1). First, the correct title of the book is *Gildas Salvianus*. This is an allusion to two earlier figures in church history: Gildas the Wise, a sixth-century British monk, and Salvianus, a fifth-century French priest. Both men were remembered for speaking hard truths to their respective clergy. Thus, Baxter was co-opting an ancient tradition of calling ministers to account, which is why *Gildas Salvianus*, to give the book its proper title, is not always comfortable reading. Baxter was acutely aware of this. In his long preface (not included in this abridgment), he explained why he concentrated so much on the sin of England's pastors. The December 1655 gathering was, he said, first of all a day for confession and repentance. "The fire is already kindled that reveals our sin," he said, so why would they try to hide or deny their sin?<sup>9</sup> "Judgment must begin at the house of God" (1 Pet. 4:17). Effective leadership begins with candid self-assessment:

I think it is no time now to neglect our duty and befriend our sins, and so provoke the Lord against us. Instead, it is fitting for us to fall down at the feet of our offended Lord and to justify him in his judgments, and freely and penitently to confess our transgressions, and to resolve upon a speedy and thorough reformation before wrath breaks out upon us, which will leave us no remedy.<sup>10</sup>

9 Baxter, *Reformed Pastor*, preface, sig. A3v.

10 Baxter, *Reformed Pastor*, preface, sig. A4r.





The second feature of the title page is a verse rendered (not unusually) in the original Greek from Luke 12:47. There are many verses that we might expect to see on the title page of a book for the encouragement of pastors today, but this is not one of them: “That servant who knew his Lord’s will and did not prepare himself or do what was required will be beaten with many stripes.” Baxter’s choice of verse demonstrates again his acute concern for sin and judgment. Certainly, his God is a God of grace and love, but he is also a God who judges, who is displeased by sin in his children, and who expects from ministers that they lay down their lives for the flock.

This is not a particularly therapeutic Christianity, and yet, arguably, it speaks to the real condition of the soul and to the true nature of pastoral ministry. We might see all this as a touch dark and obsessive. Indeed, Baxter’s perspective is, like anyone’s, open to critique. But to the extent that sin, judgment, and repentance are underplayed in contemporary Christianity, his perspective and his voice become all the more important. He addresses a blind spot in our own way of seeing. Even if he speaks of judgment and sin too much, we speak of it too little. Let Baxter’s voice, then, be heard again.

### **Baxter’s Voice in This Abridgment**

*The Reformed Pastor* presents the reader with a significant challenge: it is very long. My main aim, therefore, has been to make the book shorter. Much shorter. In this abridgment it is less than one-fifth of its original length. I have cleared away a great deal of material that I think the twenty-first-century reader does not need. I have removed those sections that relate to controversies of Baxter’s day along with references to other writings from the seventeenth century or from further back in church history, as well as several long quotations in Latin. If

Baxter has already made his point earlier, I have sought to minimize repetition. If I have felt that he has made his point sufficiently in the first half of a long paragraph, I have quite happily omitted the second half, or I have retained what I think are the most pertinent, affecting, and accessible of his sentences and deleted the rest.

I have, therefore, taken liberties without making any of them obvious in the abridged text. I have reorganized the chapters. I have split many long sentences in two; amended Baxter's heavy use of colons, semicolons, and commas; modernized his rather random placement of apostrophes; and used contemporary spelling. I have inserted new words to ease the flow from one sentence to another or shifted a clause from the end of a long sentence to the beginning. I have also amended all those tiny archaic constructions that snag the eye and get in the way, removed the initial capital letter in many of the nouns, and replaced unfamiliar, ancient words with their contemporary equivalents. And I have modernized seventeenth-century verb endings (e.g., *hath*, *hindereth*). (See fig. 2 for a glimpse of Baxter's writing from a page in the original.) Even so, there is a residual strangeness to his writing. His distinctive construction of written English is a useful reminder that, for all the many continuities, Baxter lived in a world far different from our own. For the same reason, I have also not updated his gendered language.

In all this, my intention is to make the text clear and accessible. I want to offer you, even in this abridged form, the genuine Baxter. I have tried to be faithful to his original vision and purpose, as I understand them, and to convey what I think he would want to say to us now. I have tried to leave nothing out of the full text that is essential. I am seeking to relay his seventeenth-century message to a modern audience. I hope that it comes through cleanly, accurately, and powerfully and that you find you can read the text with relative ease.

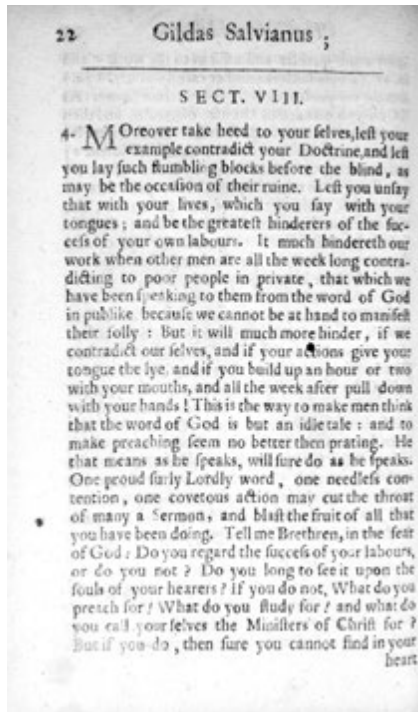


Figure 2 A page from the original publication of *The Reformed Pastor*. For the equivalent text in this edition, see pp. 33–34. Used by permission of Dr. Williams’s Library, London.

It helps that Baxter is a great writer. He has a passion that infiltrates just about every sentence. He has a way of bringing in illustrations and metaphors from everyday life. You may notice his favorite images of the pastor: schoolmaster, soldier, and, above all, physician. These represent domains of life that shaped his own experience profoundly. Baxter is a very personable writer, willing to give himself away and to inject his own personality and intensity into his books. As William

Bates put it when he preached Baxter's funeral sermon, "There is a vigorous pulse in his writing that keeps the reader awake and attentive."<sup>12</sup> May the concentrated vigor of this abridgment keep you awake as well.

*The Reformed Pastor* is an extended exposition of one verse in particular, Acts 20:28: "Take heed unto yourselves and all the flock, over which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he has purchased with his own blood." The English Standard Version renders this as follows: "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock . . ." Pay careful attention! First to yourselves, then to all the flock. The first chapter examines how we are to pay careful attention to ourselves; the next two chapters set out the way we are to pay careful attention to all the flock individually. Chapters 4 and 5 offer a confession of pastoral sin and a failure to pay careful attention. The next three chapters seek to motivate the reader by laying out the need, benefits, and difficulties for the work of individual pastoral instruction. Chapter 9 strongly rebuts six possible objections to Baxter's practice. The final chapter presents his practical direction and advice. All this takes us to the heart of the pastoral vocation. The book elevates our ideals. It sets a high bar.

Is it too high? *The Reformed Pastor* is inspiring and invigorating. It is also daunting and, potentially, discouraging. It is, almost literally, a recipe for burnout: "What is a candle made for but to be burnt? Burnt and wasted we must be" (p. 121). You will see that Baxter was driven by a perpetual sense of urgency. He is a physician living in a time of plague; a teacher of students whose final exam is, at any moment, just a heartbeat away; a pastor whose parish includes hardened sinners

<sup>12</sup> William Bates, *A Funeral-Sermon for the Reverend, Holy, and Excellent Divine, Mr. Richard Baxter* (London, 1692), 112.

hurrying on to judgment. In the pages of this book, he is consumed by an overriding passion. He presents an ideal that only the most energetic and dedicated among us can ever hope to emulate. Therefore, this is a book that we must read, but we must read it with care. Be inspired but not burdened. Glimpse success, but do not feel defeated or despairing. Even if we do not match his standards, we can lift our own, and that can only be good.

In the book, Baxter was speaking to his fellow ministers, whom he addresses as his “brethren.” He was speaking to them; now he is speaking to us. I hope his words are of interest to all those who take their Christian faith seriously, but in framing my brief opening summary of each chapter and in posing questions for reflection, I have in mind in particular those who are themselves in pastoral ministry (or who are preparing for it). That was me, some time ago, so I am not without experience. But I must admit that I still struggle to answer the question put to me by my good friend Robin Taylor, who so kindly read the first draft of this abridgment: “What do you want people to do with it?” An excellent question. What do we do with Baxter when we have largely lost the use of a catechism and the imminent urgency that invests his language of hell and judgment? We hear his call, but how can we possibly live up to it? That is the challenge of this book.

Even though the message is a difficult one to receive, let alone put into practice, I still believe it is one we need to hear. *The Reformed Pastor* remains a classic text, and it deserves to be read by a new generation of pastors. If nothing else, we need to know that those who have labored before us had a different view and different standards from our own. So I do have an answer to my friend’s question, or at least an encouragement. Begin with Scripture, especially with the passage that so animated Baxter: Acts 20. This is one reason why I have

## INTRODUCTION

tried to provide a reference for each of his allusions to the Bible: you can then assess for yourself the degree to which he has authentically grounded his vision in Scripture. Imitate the Bereans. When they heard the confronting message of Paul and Silas, they returned to the Scriptures afresh “to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11 ESV). Follow Paul’s advice to test all things and hold fast to what is good (1 Thess. 5:21). More than that, read through the book with others. That first gathering in December 1655 was a gathering of many. In Baxter’s model, the pastor worked in a solitary parish, but he did not work in isolation. Gather other pastors or wise counselors around you to find the balance, perspective, and accountability you need. I hope the questions for reflection at the end of each chapter help with this.

Let Baxter speak. Hear him again. Put his vision into practice in your own time, in your own place, and according to your own values, capacities, and convictions. His pastoral labor came to an end in the distant past, but may his voice inspire and bless you as you fulfill your pastoral labor in the present day, for the good of “the church of God, which he has purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

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## Take Heed unto Yourselves

*In this chapter Baxter offers four reasons for the importance of Paul's command to the Ephesian elders to "take heed unto yourselves." He then offers eight reasons why this is so critical to effective ministry. The essential problem is the deceitfulness and stubborn staying power of indwelling sin. Just as it can subvert the heart of any believer, it is still at work in the hearts of pastors. They must pay close attention to themselves.*

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IF THE PEOPLE IN OUR CHARGE are to teach, admonish, and exhort each other daily (Col. 3:16; Heb. 3:13), no doubt we may do the same for one another. We have the same sins to kill and the same inner workings of God's grace to be enlivened and strengthened as our people have. We have greater works to do than they have and greater difficulties to overcome, so no less necessity is laid on us. Therefore, we need to be warned and awakened as well as they do, and we should deal with one another as plainly and intimately as the most serious pastors among us do with their flocks. Otherwise, if only our people have the benefit of sharp admonitions and reproofs, only they will be sound and lively in the faith. I need no other proof that this was Paul's judgment



than his rousing, heart-melting exhortation to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20: a short sermon but not quickly learned. If the leaders and teachers of the church had thoroughly learned this short exhortation, how happy it would have been for the church and for them! Therefore, let us consider what it is to take heed unto ourselves.

### **The Importance of Taking Heed unto Ourselves**

1. Take heed unto yourselves lest you be void of that saving grace of God that you offer to others and be strangers to the effectual workings of the gospel you preach. Take heed unto yourselves lest while you proclaim the necessity of a Savior to the world, your own hearts neglect him and you miss out on an interest in him and his saving benefits. Take heed unto yourselves lest you perish while you call on others to take heed of perishing and lest you starve yourselves while you prepare their food. Can any reasonable man imagine that God should save men for offering salvation to others while they refused it themselves and for telling others those truths that they themselves neglected and abused? Many a tailor goes in rags who makes costly clothes for others. Many a cook barely licks his fingers when he has prepared for others the most costly dishes. Believe it, brethren, God never saved any man because he was a preacher, nor because he was an able preacher, but because he was a justified, sanctified man and consequently faithful in his Master's work. Therefore, first take heed unto yourselves so that you will be that which you persuade your hearers to be, believe that which you persuade them daily to believe, and have heartily accepted that Christ and Spirit whom you offer unto others.

2. Take heed unto yourselves lest you live in those actual sins that you preach against in others and lest you be guilty of that which you daily condemn. Will you make it your work to magnify God and,

when you have finished, dishonor him as much as others do? Will you proclaim Christ's governing power and yet treat it with contempt and rebel yourselves? Will you preach his laws and willfully break them? If sin is evil, why do you live in it? If it is not, why do you dissuade men from it? If it is dangerous, how dare you venture upon it? If it is not, why do you tell men that it is dangerous? If God's threatenings are true, why do you not fear them? If they are false, why do you trouble men needlessly with them and put them into such a state of fear without cause? Do you know the judgment of God that those who commit such things are worthy of death (Rom. 1:32), and yet will you do them? You who teach another, do you not teach yourself?

3. Take heed unto yourselves that you are not unfit for the great employments that you have undertaken. He must not be himself a babe in knowledge who will teach men all those mysterious things that are to be known in order to enjoy salvation. Oh, what qualifications are necessary for the man who has such a charge on him as we have! How many difficulties in theology to be opened! How many obscure texts of Scripture to be expounded! How many duties to be done wherein ourselves and others may miscarry if they are not well informed in the matter, end, manner, and circumstances! How many sins to be avoided, which cannot be done without understanding and foresight! What manner of people ought we to be in all holy endeavors and resolutions for our work! This is not a burden for the shoulders of a child. What skill does every part of our work require, and of how much importance is every part?

4. Take heed unto yourselves lest your example contradict your doctrine and you lay stumbling blocks before the blind that may be the occasion of their ruin. Take heed unto yourselves lest you deny with your lives that which you say with your tongues and so be the greatest

hinderers of the success of your own labors. This is the way to make men think that the word of God is merely an idle tale and to make preaching seem no better than prattling. He who means as he speaks will surely do as he speaks. One proud, surly, lordly word, one needless disagreement, one covetous action may cut the throat of many a sermon and destroy the fruit of all that you have been doing.

Tell me, brethren, in the fear of God, do you value the success of your labors, or do you not? Do you long to see it in the souls of your hearers? If you do not, why do you preach? Why do you study? Why do you call yourselves ministers of Christ? It is a palpable error in those ministers who will allow such a distance between their preaching and their living that they will study hard to preach exactly and yet study little or not at all to live exactly. All the week long is little enough time for them to study how to preach for an hour, and yet one hour seems too much to study how to live all the week. They are loath to misplace a word in their sermons or to be guilty of any notable blemish (I do not blame them, for the matter is holy and weighty), but they make nothing of misplacing affections, words, and actions in the course of their lives. Oh, how carefully have I heard some men preach, and how carelessly have I seen them live!

Certainly, we have very great cause to take heed what we do as well as what we say. If we will be the servants of Christ indeed, we must not be tongue servants only. 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 ourselves (James 1:22). A practical doctrine must be practically preached. We must study just as hard how to live well as how to preach well. We must think and think again how to compose our life as well as our sermons so that both may encourage men's salvation in the best way that they can. When you are preparing what to say in

a sermon, you will always ask, “Which way should I lay it out for the greatest good, especially to men’s souls?” You should ask the same question concerning the money in your purse. Oh, that this were your daily study: how to use your wealth, your friends, and all you have for God, as well as your tongues. Then we should see fruit for your labors that is never likely to be seen otherwise.

### **Why We Should Take Heed unto Ourselves**

Having showed you in four particulars how it is that we must take heed unto ourselves and what is included in this command, I will now give you the reasons for it, which I entreat you to take as motives to awaken you to your duty.

*Reason 1.* You yourselves have a heaven to win or lose. You have souls that must be happy or miserable forever. Therefore, it concerns you to begin at home and to take heed unto yourselves as well as unto others. Preaching well may succeed to the salvation of others without the holiness of your own hearts or lives. It is possible at least, though less likely. But it is impossible that preaching well should serve to save yourselves. “Many will say to me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name?’” They will be answered with “I never knew you, depart from me, you who work iniquity” (Matt. 7:22–23).

Oh, sirs, how many men have preached Christ and perished for lack of a saving interest in him? How many who are now in hell have told their people of the torments of hell and warned them to avoid it? How many have preached of the wrath of God against sinners who are now feeling it? Oh, what sadder case can there be than for a man who made it his very trade and calling to proclaim salvation and to help others attain it—after all that to be himself shut out! Alas, that we should have so many books in our libraries that tell us

the way to heaven, that we should spend so many years in reading those books and studying the doctrine of eternal life, and yet after all that to miss it! All because we preached so many sermons about Christ while we neglected him, about the Spirit while we resisted him, about faith while we did not heartily believe, about repentance and conversion while we continued in the state of flesh and sin, and about a heavenly life while we remained carnal and earthly ourselves. Believe it, brethren, God is no respecter of persons. He does not save men for their clerical clothes or callings. A holy calling will not save an unholy man.

*Reason 2.* Take heed unto yourselves, for you have a depraved nature and sinful inclinations as well as others do. If innocent Adam needed to take heed unto himself and lost himself and us for lack of it, how much more need have such as we? Sin dwells in us even when we have preached much against it. Alas, even in our hearts as well as in our hearers there is an averseness to God and a strangeness to him, along with unreasonable and almost unruly passions. In us there is at best the remnants of pride, unbelief, self-seeking, hypocrisy, and all the most hateful deadly sins. Does it not then concern us to take heed? Alas, how weak are those of us who seem strongest! How apt we are to stumble over a mere straw! How small a matter will cast us down by enticing us to folly or kindling our passions and inordinate desires, thus perverting our judgments, abating our resolutions, cooling our zeal, and dulling our diligence. Ministers are not only sons of Adam but sinners against the grace of Christ as well as others. Those treacherous hearts will one time or another deceive you, if you do not take heed. Those sins will revive that now seem to lie dead. Your pride, worldliness, and many a noxious vice will spring up that you thought had been weeded out by the roots. It is most necessary, therefore, that

men of such infirmities should take heed unto themselves and be careful in the feeding and nurture of their souls.

*Reason 3.* Take heed unto yourselves, because such great works as ours have greater temptations than many other men face. Smaller strength may serve for lighter works and burdens. But if you will venture on the great undertakings of the ministry; if you will lead on the troops of Christ against the face of Satan and his followers; if you will engage yourselves against principalities, powers, and spiritual wickedness in high places (Eph. 6:12); if you will undertake to rescue captive sinners and to fetch men out of the devil's paws: do not think that a heedless, careless minister is fit for so great a work as all this. If you think that you can do such work as this with a careless soul, you must expect greater shame and deeper wounds of conscience than if you had lived a common life. It is not only the work that calls for heed but the workman also, that he may be fit for business of such weight. If you will venture into the midst of the enemies and bear the burden and heat of the day (Matt. 20:12), take heed unto yourselves.

*Reason 4.* Take heed unto yourselves, because the tempter will make his first or sharpest onset on you. If you will be the leaders against him, he will spare you no further than God restrains him. He bears the greatest malice against those who are engaged to do him the greatest mischief. As the devil hates Christ more than any of us, because he is the general of the field and the captain of our salvation, so does he hate the leaders under him more than the common soldiers. He knows what a rout he may make among the rest if the leaders fall before their eyes. Therefore, take heed, for the enemy has a special eye on you. You will bear his most subtle insinuations, incessant temptations, and violent assaults.

As wise and learned as you are, take heed unto yourselves lest he deceive you. The devil is a greater student than you and a nimbler disputant. He can transform himself into an angel of light to deceive (2 Cor. 11:14). He will get within you and trip up your heels before you are aware. He will play the conjurer with you undiscerned and cheat you of your faith or innocence, and you will not know that you have lost it. Indeed, he will make you believe your faith is multiplied or increased when it is lost. You will see neither hook nor line, much less the subtle angler himself while he is offering you his bait. They will be so fitted to your temper and disposition that he will be sure to find advantages within you and cause your own principles and inclinations to betray you, and whenever he ruins you, he will make you the instrument of your own ruin.

Oh, what a conquest will he think he has won if he can make a minister lazy and unfaithful, if he can tempt a minister into covetousness or scandal! He will glory against the church and say, "These are your holy preachers: you see what their scrupulousness is and where it will bring them?" He will glory against Jesus Christ himself and say, "These are your champions! I can cause your chief servants to abuse you. I can make the stewards of your house unfaithful." Oh, do not so far gratify Satan. Suffer him not to use you as the Philistines did Samson, first to deprive you of your strength and then to put out your eyes, and so to make you the matter of his triumph and derision (Judg. 16).

*Reason 5.* Take heed unto yourselves, because there are many eyes on you, and many will observe your falls. You cannot miscarry and the world not hear about it. If you take yourselves to be the lights of the churches, you should expect that men's eyes will be on you. If other men may sin without observation, you cannot. You should thankfully consider how great a mercy this is, that you have so many eyes to watch

over you and so many people ready to tell you of your faults. In these ways you have greater helps than others, at least for the restraining of your sin. People may tell you your faults with a malicious mind, but you have the advantage from it. God forbid that we should prove so impudent as to do evil in the public view of all and to sin willfully while the world is gazing on us!

*Reason 6.* Take heed unto yourselves, for your sins have more heinous aggravations than other men's. You are more likely than others to sin against knowledge, because you have more knowledge than others. You know your Master's will, and if you do not do it, you will be beaten with many stripes (Luke 12:47). Your sins have more hypocrisy in them than other men's because you have spoken against those very sins. Oh, what a heinous thing it is to study how to disgrace sin to the utmost and make it as odious to our people as we can and, when we have done all that, to live in it and secretly cherish that which we openly disgrace!

*Reason 7.* Take heed unto yourselves, for the honor of your Lord and Master and of his holy truth and ways lies more on you than on other men. As you may do him more service, so also you may do him more disservice than others. Would it not wound you to the heart to hear the name and truth of God reproached because of you? Would it not grieve you to see men point to you and say, "There goes a covetous priest, a secret drinker, a scandalous man. Here are those who preach for strictness when they themselves can live as loosely as others. They condemn us by their sermons and condemn themselves by their lives. For all their talk, they are as bad as we are." Brethren, could your heart endure to hear men cast the dung of your iniquities in the face of the holy God, of the gospel, and of all those who desire to fear the Lord? Would it not break your heart to think on it, that all the poor godly



Christians about you should suffer reproach for your misdoings? Oh, take heed in the name of God of every word that you speak and every step you tread, for you bear the ark of the Lord (Josh. 3:8, 17), you are entrusted with his honor, and dare you let it fall and cast it in the dirt?

*Reason 8.* Take heed unto yourselves, for the souls of your hearers and the success of all your labors very much depend on it. God prepares men for great works before he will make them his instruments in accomplishing them. He exercises men in those works to which they are most suited. If the work of the Lord is not soundly done upon your own hearts, how can you expect that he should bless your labors for the fulfilling of it in others? He may bless your labors if he chooses to, but you cannot be sure that he will.

### **Reasons Why Our Effectiveness Depends on Our Taking Heed**

I here show you some further particular reasons under that last general reason.

First, can it be expected that God should bless that man's labors who works not for God but for himself? Such men make the ministry merely a trade to live by. They choose it rather than another calling because their parents directed them to it, because it is a life wherein they have more opportunity to furnish their intellects with all kinds of knowledge, because it is not so toilsome to the body for those who have a will to favor their flesh, because it is accompanied with some reverence and respect from men, because they think it a fine thing to be leaders and teachers and to have others depend on them and receive the law from their mouth (Mal. 2:7), and because it affords them a competent income. They are ministers for reasons such as these, and were it not for these ends, they would quickly cease being ministers. Can we expect God to bless the labors of men such

as these? They preach not for him but for themselves and their own reputation or gain.

Second, how can you set yourselves day and night to a work that your carnal hearts are averse to? How can you call out with serious fervor to poor sinners to repent and come in to God when you never repented or came in yourselves? How can you heartily warn poor sinners with urgent appeals to take heed of sin and to set themselves to a holy life when you yourselves never felt the evil of sin or the worth of holiness? I tell you, these things are never well known until they are felt and never well felt until they are possessed. He who does not feel them himself is unlikely to speak feelingly to others or to help others to the feeling of them. How can you aid sinners with compassion in your hearts and tears in your eyes and beseech them in the name of the Lord to stop their course and return and live when you have never had so much compassion on your own souls as to do this much for yourselves?

Third, do you think it is a likely thing that he will fight against Satan with all his might who is a servant to Satan himself? Will he do any great harm to the kingdom of the devil who is himself a member and subject of that kingdom? Will he be true to Christ who is in covenant with his enemy, who does not have Christ in his heart? Why, this is the case of every unsanctified man, whatsoever cloth his coat is made of. Though many of these men may seem excellent preachers and cry down sin as loudly as others, yet it is all but an affected fervency and too often merely an ineffectual bawling. For he that cherishes sin in his own heart never falls upon it in others with godly sadness. An unsanctified man who loves the enemy is very unfit to be a leader in Christ's army. He who cleaves to the world and the flesh himself is unlikely to draw others to renounce them.

Fourth, it is unlikely that the people will value the doctrine of such men when they see that they do not live as they preach. They will think a man does not mean what he says if he does not live as he speaks. They will hardly believe a man who seems not to believe himself. If a man tells you to run for your life because a bear or an enemy is at your back, and yet he does not quicken his pace himself in the same way, you will be tempted to think that he is merely in jest and that there is really no such danger as he pretends. When preachers tell people that holiness is necessary and that without it no man will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14), and yet they remain unholy themselves, the people will think they preach only to pass away the hour because they must say something for their money. As long as men have eyes as well as ears, they will think they see your meaning as well as hear it, and they are more likely to believe their sight than their hearing.

All that a preacher says with his actions is a kind of preaching. When you live a covetous or careless life, you preach these sins to your people by your practice. Men will allow you to preach against their sins and encourage godliness as much as you like as long as you leave them alone afterward and be friendly and merry with them when you have finished. They will be content as long as you talk as they do and live as they do. For they take the pulpit to be just a stage where preachers must show themselves and play their parts, where you have liberty to say what you like for an hour. Is that man likely to do much good or be fit to be a minister of Christ who will speak for him an hour on Sunday and by his life will preach against him all the week besides?

Lastly, the success of your labors depends on the grace and blessing of the Lord, and where has he made any promise of his assistance and blessing to ungodly men? To his faithful servants he has promised that he will be with them (Matt. 28:20), that he will put his Spirit on

them and his word in their mouths (Isa. 59:21), and that Satan will fall before them as lightning from heaven (Luke 10:17–18). But where is there any such promise to the ungodly, who are not the children of the promise? God may often do good to his church by wicked men but not so ordinarily nor to such a degree as by his own.

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### Questions for Reflection

1. Baxter begins a book on leadership with a clear-eyed look at leaders. Why do you think he starts there?
2. Baxter says that “you have a depraved nature and sinful inclinations as well as others do” (p. 36). Why is it so important to be aware of this? How do you see the truth of this assertion in yourself?
3. Reflect on Baxter’s advice in this chapter. Which of his insights resonate with your experience? What other thoughts or advice would you add?
4. In this opening chapter, Baxter has set the tone for the whole book. What do you make of that tone? How is it sitting with you?
5. As you look around, you will see examples of pastors whose public sin has discredited their ministry. How will you put Baxter’s advice into practice so that you finish well in your own ministry?

