

Richard Baxter: Puritan Ministry for Modern Churches



by RIC RODEHEAVER

It was once said of Martin Luther that “great men need not that we praise them; the need is ours that we *know* them.”¹ Richard Baxter, a 17th-century Puritan pastor, is one of those men. Baxter shaped a vision for pastoral ministry far beyond what any could have expected to come from a small village in rural England. His name is synonymous with pastoral excellence and his legacy has been called the “ripest fruit of the Reformation’s pastoral theology.”² The book that he is most well-known for, *The Reformed Pastor*, is still read by seminary students, pastors, and interested laymen today, over 350 years after it was first published. Richard Baxter accomplished a great deal during his eventful life, but he is best known for being a pastor.

What makes Baxter significant for our time is that he was a pioneer and proponent of regularly and effectively counseling people from God’s

1. A. C. McGiffert, *Martin Luther: The Man and His Work* (New York: The Century Co., 1919), 3.

2. Derek Tidball, *Skilful Shepherds: Explorations in Pastoral Theology* (Leicester: Apollos, 1997), 192.

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Word. Like most Puritans, Baxter esteemed the pulpit, but he recognized the limitations of preaching if it were not used alongside one-on-one counseling. In some cases, Baxter even preferred the ministry of personal counsel to that of the pulpit. He wrote, “one word of seasonable, prudent advice, given by a minister to persons in necessity, may be of more use than many sermons.”³ As a result, Richard Baxter’s ministry is a model of biblical counsel, care, and practical theology and is well worth emulating in the 21st century.

But while such practical ministry is crucial for the health of the church, counseling rarely is considered part of the modern pastor’s work. If it does occur, it is often theologically vacant, historically uninformed, and practically irrelevant. Most seminary-trained pastors today are lucky to get one or two courses on pasto-

ral counseling and, even then, it amounts to little more than “leave it to the professionals.” Baxter’s ministry provides an alternative to this narrative and offers an example that can encourage, motivate, and inspire pastors to embrace a more biblical view of our calling.

I’ll never forget the night I came to the stark realization of my own inadequacy in counseling. My seminary education had prepared me well to defend my flock from liberal German theologians and gnostic heretics, but my people weren’t in any real danger from them. They weren’t losing sleep over the hypostatic union or the nature of Christ’s subordination to the Father. No, they wanted to know why they kept losing their temper with their kids. They wanted to know how to overcome their fears or gain freedom from lifelong sins. I could explain higher criticism, but I couldn’t explain heightened anxiety. I felt overwhelmed and underprepared. To be clear, my training was essential, but it wasn’t enough. Pastoring meant giving hope and help to those who came to see me with their life’s problems from the Word of God. Men like Baxter

Men like Baxter helped me realize that pastoring was also counseling and, more importantly, he provided an example of how to do both.

3. Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, Puritan Paperbacks (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 97.

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As Baxter helped to encourage me in this task, I hope to encourage you to do the same. I recognize, however, that many pastors face a multitude of cultural-ecclesial contexts that might make an effective counseling ministry seem impossible. So we will also begin to answer the question: How can 21st-century pastors *adapt* this 17th-century model as a way to better serve their congregations? My point is not to make you a Richard Baxter clone, only to highlight him as a model—not *the* model—but *a* model that can serve as a launching pad for your own pastoral counseling ministry. However, before we consider what Baxter has to say to us in our context, let's look first at his.

Richard Baxter: His Historical and Theological Context

At first glance, a Puritan from the 1600s may seem like an unlikely model for the challenges of modern ministry, yet many of the historical and theological differences that seem to separate us are merely superficial. Much like today's pastoral context, Baxter's life took place in a world of turmoil and change. In his lifetime, the Thirty Years' War was fought in Europe, the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth, Galileo was tried for heresy, and John Locke published his *Essay on Human Understanding*.⁴ Baxter's ministry reminds us that pastors will always face turbulent times with new theories, voices, and ideas vying for cultural ascendancy.

Furthermore, 17th-century Puritanism was a movement similar to 21st-century evangelicalism in that it was a heterogeneous coalition defined by shared scriptural beliefs. Core Puritan convictions included the centrality of the Scriptures, worship, and human responsibility before God. It was fueled by local pastors with popular appeal rather than the institutional Anglican Church itself. Likewise, the growing biblical counseling movement is taking place at the local church level, led by individuals and parachurch groups rather than by our denominational institutions. Every day, pastors and ministry leaders are taking the lead within their own congregations, pooling resources with other churches,

4. Charles F. Kemp, *A Pastoral Triumph: The Story of Richard Baxter & His Ministry at Kidderminster* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1948), 11–12.

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