

Richard Baxter on the Spiritual Life of Church Leaders

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Some three hundred and fifty years ago the small English town of Kidderminster became the setting for one of the most vibrant and effective pastoral preaching ministries ever established. The majority of the town's 2000 adults were converted during the course of Richard Baxter's sixteen-year pastorate there. Under the hand of God his powerful experimental preaching and diligent pastoral work (with a strong evangelistic thrust), was blessed to their hearts, bringing a profound change to the spiritual climate of the whole town.

His effectiveness won him the opportunity to challenge his ministerial colleagues in the county of Worcestershire. He stirred them up to greater diligence in pastoral work and greater passion in preaching. Yet underlying both these emphases was a more fundamental concern: the personal spiritual life of those in ministry. Baxter stressed that there is much "heart work" to be done on ourselves, before we may undertake to work on the hearts of others. His concern was to see greater spiritual vitality in the lives of those who ministered and preached God's Word. He longed to see "Reformed Pastors" not just in the sense of theologically reformed (which was taken for granted), but spiritually reformed – renewed, re-vitalised, and revived in their own souls.

Preach to yourselves first, before you preach to the people, and with greater zeal. O Lord, save thy church from worldly pastors, that study and learn the art of christianity, and ministry; but never had the christian, divine nature, nor the vital principle which must difference them and their services from the dead. Do you love other men's souls more than your own? Will a dead nurse give a warm and vital milk? Nothing doth more to make you good preachers, than that which doth most to make you good Christians...²

In this spirit he warned against the dangers of cold professionalism in which a man may prepare a message without preparing his own heart, pray for success in ministry but not for personal sanctification, convict others of sin but never face squarely his own sins, take an interest in the study and proclamation of God's Word without ever coming under its power and influence in his own life. Baxter's basic premise was that which is so clearly seen in the New Testament, namely, there is an integral relationship between a man's personal spiritual life and his public effectiveness as a pastor, preacher and spiritual leader.

The qualifications for elders and deacons bear that out. They are chiefly matters of personal godliness and spiritual maturity (see 1 Tim 3:2-7, Titus 1:6-9, 1 Peter 5:2-4). The call to Timothy as a pastor was to "watch his life and doctrine closely", in that order (1 Tim 4:16) and to "set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity" (1 Tim 4:12). He was to train himself to be godly, knowing that "physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things" (1 Tim 4:7,8). The example of Paul himself confirmed his exhortations to Timothy. He could appeal to the Thessalonians, "You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among those who believed" (1 Thes 2:10), and to the Corinthians, "Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we gave conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God." (2 Cor 1:12).

¹ Material for this paper is drawn from research for a D.Min. degree through Westminster Theological Seminary, Escondido, USA.

² *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter* (Soli Deo Gloria, 2000), Vol 4, p974

The text that Baxter particularly highlighted, however, was Acts 20:28 - “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be Shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.” In *The Reformed Pastor*³ Baxter opened this text at length, giving extended consideration to what it means for a preacher to watch over himself spiritually.

I. The Need for Self-Watch

The most basic of all concerns in watching over our own souls is to be sure of our own salvation.

See that the work of saving grace be thoroughly wrought in your own souls. Take heed to yourselves, lest you be void of that saving grace of God which you offer to others, and be strangers to the effectual working of that gospel which you preach...⁴

A preacher must know in his own experience the transforming power of the gospel, the Spirit’s work in conviction of sin, the excellency and majesty of Christ, the peace of a cleansed conscience, the joy of sins forgiven, the reality of a renewed heart that desires to please God, and the hope of glory. He should not feel that he is eternally secure simply because he has been called to the work of ministry, but because he has known in his own heart the regenerating power of God and the transforming grace of the gospel.

Believe it, brethren, God never saved any man for being 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.⁵

Yet being saved is not enough. We must be sure to cultivate ongoing spiritual vitality. “Content not yourselves with being in a state of grace, but be also careful that your graces are kept in vigorous and lively exercise...”⁶ It is all too easy for spiritual fervour to decline. Our hearts become cold, our prayers formal, our work a burden instead of a joy, our fellowship with the Lord scant and superficial. When this happens it is soon felt in our preaching. With chilling honesty Baxter writes,

I confess I must speak it by lamentable experience, that I publish to my flock the distempers of my own soul. When I let my heart grow cold, my preaching is cold; and when it is confused, my preaching is confused; and so I can oft observe in the best of my hearers, that when I have grown cold in preaching, they have grown cold too; and the next prayers which I have heard from them have been too like my preaching. We are the nurses of Christ's little ones. If we forbear taking food ourselves, we shall famish them... If we let our love decline, we are not like to raise up theirs... If we feed on unwholesome food, either errors or fruitless controversies, our hearers are like to fare the worst for it.⁷

It is tempting to try remedying such spiritual decline with a quick fix - another book, seminar, conference or video. The one thing most necessary - a revitalised communion with the Lord - is the thing most easily neglected. Yet the preacher must, above all else, be a man of God, a man of the Word, a man of prayer.

Before considering that life of fellowship with the Lord, however, there is another concern the Christian leader must have in regard to his self-watch. He must guard against subtle sins of the heart. Baxter constantly addressed sins such as pride, hypocrisy, lust, worldliness and laziness. He knew they had a special propensity to rob the preacher of spiritual vigour. They distract a man from the things of God, taking his time and focus away from spiritual matters and pointing him to the world and the flesh. They rob him of focus when preparing, of time for ministry, of joy in the things of God, and of peace in presenting the Word to others. They prohibit a man from being passionate in speaking

³ *The Reformed Pastor* (Banner of Truth, 1979)

⁴ *The Reformed Pastor*, p53

⁵ *Ibid.*, p54

⁶ *Ibid.*, p61

⁷ *Ibid.*

against the sins he indulges in. “Do you think it is a likely thing, that he will fight against Satan with all his might, who is himself a servant of Satan?”⁸ Sin in our hearts makes us blunt the edge of application to others. We will tame down our application in order to ease our conscience, and hence tamper with the power and effectiveness of God’s Word.

Most devastatingly of all, such sins may cause the Holy Spirit to withdraw his power from our ministry. The Spirit is grieved by our unholiness and may leave us to work in our own strength:

To his faithful servants he hath promised that he will be with them, that he will put his Spirit upon them, and his word into their mouths, and that Satan shall fall before them as lightning from heaven. But where is there any such promise to ungodly ministers? Nay, do you not, by your hypocrisy and your abuse of God, provoke him to forsake you, and to blast all your endeavours, at least as to yourselves, though he may bless them to his chosen?⁹

In view of these realities, Baxter urged that we be serious about the business of life. “We must study as hard how to live well, as how to preach well.”¹⁰ Yet he observed “All the week long is little enough, to study how to speak two hours; and yet one hour seems too much to study how to live all the week.”¹¹ He stressed that we must be greatly concerned to ensure our life adorns the gospel, and commends our preaching to our people, for “One proud, surly, lordly word, one needless contention, one covetous action may cut the throat of many a sermon, and blast the fruit of all that you have been doing.”¹²

II. The Need for Fellowship with Christ

Any serious self-watch will awaken us again and again to our need of Christ. Our greatest need is a vital daily communion with the Lord. There are many elements to such a communion but here we will consider just two aspects that Baxter particularly emphasised: prayer and meditation.

Regarding prayer Baxter’s advice to pastors was to “be much at home and much with God” and to “be much in secret prayer and meditation. Thence you must fetch the heavenly fire that must kindle your sacrifices.”¹³ The reason for this is that it is from God himself that we must draw life and light:

Christians who are much in secret prayer, and in meditation and contemplation, rather than they who are more in hearing, reading and conference, are men of greatest life and joy, because they are nearer the source of the fountain, and have all more immediately from God himself.¹⁴

Moreover, the pastor must pray in order to express his utter dependence on God. It is only in earnest prayer to the Father that we can express our sense of insufficiency for the task we are called to:

Our whole work must be carried on under a deep sense of our own insufficiency, and of our entire dependence on Christ. We must go for light, and life, and strength to him who sends us on the work. And when we feel our faith weak, and our hearts dull, and unsuitable to so great a work as we have to do, we must have recourse to him, and say, ‘Lord, wilt thou send me with such an unbelieving heart to persuade others to believe? Must I daily plead with sinners about everlasting life and everlasting death, and have no more belief or feeling of these weighty things myself? O, send me not naked and

⁸ Ibid. , p82

⁹ Ibid. , p86

¹⁰ Ibid. , p64

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. , p63

¹³ Ibid. , p62

¹⁴ Quoted in John MacArthur, *The Glory of Heaven* (Crossway Books, 1996), p176

unprovided to the work; but, as thou commandest me to do it, furnish me with a spirit suitable thereto.¹⁵

In addition to praying for ourselves, we have a particular calling to pray and intercede for our people. It is apparent from the opening verses of many of Paul's letters that he had a disciplined habit of thanksgiving and intercession for the many churches with which he was connected. Similarly, the Apostles in Acts 6:4 set a clear priority in their work when the demand of the widows was made known to them. They declared that while others would be appointed to take care of that need, they would give themselves to "prayer and the ministry of the Word". The pastor, while commonly designated a minister of the Word and sacraments is, in fact, a minister of prayer and the Word.

Baxter therefore urged preachers in particular to be faithful in praying for their congregations:

Prayer must carry on our work as well as preaching: he preacheth not heartily to his people, that prayeth not earnestly for them. If we prevail not with God to give them faith and repentance, we shall never prevail with them to believe and repent. When our own hearts are so far out of order, and theirs so far out of order, if we prevail not with God to mend and help them, we are like to make but unsuccessful work.¹⁶

He also urged prayer for the lost, reflecting later in his life on his own growing convictions in that regard:

My soul is much more afflicted with the thoughts of the miserable world, and more drawn out in desire of their conversion than heretofore. I was wont to look but little further than England in my prayers, as not considering the state of the rest of the world. Or if I prayed for the conversion of the Jews, that was almost all. But now, as I better understand the case of the world and the method of the Lord's Prayer, so there is nothing in the world that lieth so heavy upon my heart as the thought of the miserable nations of the earth..... No part of my prayers are so deeply serious as that for the conversion of the infidel and ungodly world, that God's name may be sanctified and his kingdom come, and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven.¹⁷

Despite the great importance of prayer and the joys and blessings that attend it, it remains one of the hardest disciplines of the Christian life for many church leaders. Satan will do anything he can to keep us from praying. He will seek to distract our thoughts, make us attend to administrative matters first, cause us to settle for brief, superficial prayers, and content ourselves with formal and public prayers only. We need, then, to be very conscious of prayer as an integral part of our calling, not merely supplementary to it. We need to be conscious of our great need of prayer, realising that we are powerless without it. And we need to develop the habit of covering each activity in prayer throughout the day, pausing in prayer before we go about any given task of ministry so that we might draw greater life and power from God himself.

Alongside prayer Baxter also stressed the importance of spiritual meditation. He bemoaned the fact that it was a discipline neglected by many believers:

It is confessed to be a duty by all, but practically denied by most. Many that make conscience of other duties, easily neglect this; they are troubled if they omit a sermon, a fast, or a prayer in public or private; yet were never troubled that they had omitted meditation perhaps all their life-time....¹⁸

He described meditation as "the acting of all the powers of the soul"¹⁹ in which spiritual truth is turned over and digested, so as to be brought home to the heart. In quaint seventeenth century terms he said,

¹⁵ *The Reformed Pastor*, p122

¹⁶ *Ibid.* , pp122-3

¹⁷ *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter* (London: Dent and Sons, 1925) p117

¹⁸ *Saints' Everlasting Rest* (London: Religious Tract Society, 19-) p275

¹⁹ *Ibid.* , p276

“As digestion turneth food into chyle and blood, for vigorous health; so meditation turn the truth received and remembered into warm affection, firm resolution, and holy conversation.”²⁰ It is the work of taking what is known and understood intellectually and absorbing it into one’s heart and soul, so that it is felt and experienced.

In such mediation, one really preaches the truth to one’s own heart and life. Baxter advocated taking up some great biblical truth and preaching it to yourself, as David did when he said, “Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name” (Ps 103:1), or “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put you hope in God..... (Ps 42:5). Baxter explained,

It is preaching to one’s self: for as every good master or father of a family is a good preacher to his own family; so every good Christian is a good preacher to his own soul. Therefore the very same method which a minister should use in his preaching to others, every Christian should endeavour after in speaking to himself. Observe the matter and manner of the most heart-affecting minister; let him be as a pattern for your imitation; and the same way that he takes with the heart of his people, do thou also take with thy own heart.²¹

He advocated finding a regular time which can be set aside for such serious contemplation of biblical truth. For himself, he found the evenings, before he retired to bed, most opportune. Amid the rush and busyness of our lives it is not easy to pause for meditation and spiritual reflection. Yet if we are to draw near to the Lord, and if his Word is to come home to our hearts with clarity and power before we endeavour to bring it home to the hearts of others, we must take time alone, time to think, time to ponder.

In addressing the great need of self-watch and the spiritual disciplines of prayer and meditation, Baxter challenged Christian leaders in his day to men of greater spiritual life, in order that they may be sharper instruments in the hand of God. The same challenge remains for us today. We cannot avoid the reality that, ordinarily, our personal spiritual life will profoundly shape and affect the effectiveness of our public ministry:

When your minds are in a holy, heavenly frame, your people are likely to partake of the fruits of it. Your prayers, and praises, and doctrine will be sweet and heavenly to them. They will likely feel when you have been much with God: that which is most on your hearts, is like to be most in their ears.²²

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²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid. , p312

²² *The Reformed Pastor*, p61