Richard Baxter (1615-1691) was vicar of Kidderminster from 1647 to 1661. In an introduction to this reprint, Dr. J.I. Packer describes him as ‘the most outstanding pastor, evangelist and writer on practical and devotional themes that Puritanism produced’. His ministry transformed the people of Kidderminster from ‘an ignorant, rude and reveling people’ to a godly, worshipping community. These pages, first prepared for a Worcestershire association of ministers in 1656, deal with the means by which such changes are ever to be accomplished. In his fervent plea for the discharge of the spiritual obligations of the ministry, Baxter, in the words of his contemporary, Thomas Manton, ‘came nearer the apostolic writings than any man in the age’. A century later Philip Doddridge wrote, ‘The Reformed Pastor is a most extraordinary book…many good men are but shadows of what (by the blessing of God) they might be, if the maxims and measures laid down in that incomparable Treatise were strenuously pursued.’ Today, Baxter’s principles, drawn from Scripture, and re-applied in terms of modern circumstances, will provide both ministers and other Christians with challenge, direction and help. (from the back cover of the book)

The Reformed Pastor

Richard Baxter

(Excerpts and Edit by Dr. Jerry Nelson, Southern Gables Church)

The Reformed Pastor

*Take head 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. Acts 20:28*

The Oversight of Ourselves

Let us consider, what it is to take heed to ourselves.

1. 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; and lest, while you proclaim to the world the necessity of a Saviour, your own hearts should neglect him, and you should miss of an interest in him and his saving benefits.

   It is a fearful thing to be an unsanctified professor, but much more to be an unsanctified preacher. Doth it not make you tremble when you open the Bible, lest you should there read the sentence of your own condemnation?

2. Content not yourselves with being in a state of grace, but be also careful that your graces are kept in vigorous and lively exercise, and that you preach to yourselves the sermons which you study, before you preach them to others.

   We are the nurses of Christ’s little ones. If we forbear taking food ourselves, we shall famish them; it will soon be visible in their leanness, and dull discharge of their several duties. If we let our love decline, we are not like to raise up theirs. If we abate our holy care and fear, it will appear in our preaching: if the matter show it not, the manner will. If we feed on unwholesome food, either errors or fruitless controversies, our hearers are like to fare the worse for it. Whereas, if we
abound in faith, and love, and zeal, how would it overflow to the refreshing of our congregations, and how would it appear in the increase of the same graces in them!

3. Take heed to yourselves, lest your example contradict your doctrine, and lest you lay such stumbling-blocks before the blind, as may be the occasion of their ruin; lest you unsay with your lives, what you say with your tongues; and be the great hinderers of the success of your own labors.

It is a palpable error of some ministers, who make such a disproportion between their preaching and their living; who study hard to preach exactly, and study little or not at all to live exactly.

4. Take heed to yourselves, lest you live in those sins, which you preach against in others, and lest you be guilty of that which daily you condemn.

5. Lastly, take heed to yourselves, that you want not the qualifications necessary for your work. He must not be himself a babe in knowledge, that will teach men all those mysterious things which must be known in order to salvation.

Having showed you what it is to take heed to ourselves, I shall next lay before you some motives to awaken you to this duty:

1. Take heed to yourselves, for you have a heaven to win or lose, and souls that must be happy or miserable forever; and heed to yourselves as well as to others.

2. Take heed to yourselves, for you have a depraved nature, and sinful inclinations, as well as others.

3. Take heed to yourselves, because the tempter will more play you with his temptations than other men. If you will be the leaders against the prince of darkness, he will spare you no further than God restraineth him. He beareth the greatest malice to those that are engaged to do him the greatest mischief.

4. Take heed to yourselves, because there are many eyes upon you, and there will be many to observe your falls.

5. Take heed to yourselves, for your sins have more heinous aggravations than other men’s. It was a saying of King Alphonsus, that ‘a great man cannot commit a small sin’

(a) You are more likely than others to sin against knowledge, because you have more than they; at least, you sin against more light, or means of knowledge.

(b) Your sins have more hypocrisy in them than other men’s, by how much the more you have spoken against them.

(c) Your sins have more perfidiousness in them than other men’s, by how much the more you have engaged yourselves against them.
6. Take heed to yourselves, because such great works as ours require greater grace than other men’s. Weaker gifts and graces may carry a man through in a more even course of life that is not liable to so great trials. 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 Satan and his followers; if you will engage yourselves against principalities and powers, and spiritual wickednesses in high places; if you will undertake to rescue captive sinners out of the devil’s paws; do not think that a heedless, careless course will accomplish so great a work as this.

7. Take heed to yourselves, for the honour of your Lord and Master, and of his holy truth and ways, doth lie more on you than on other men. As you may render him more service, so you may do him more disservice than others. The nearer men stand to God, the greater dishonor hath he by their miscarriages; and the more will they be imputed by foolish men to God himself.

8. Lastly, take heed to yourselves, for the success of all your labours doth very much depend upon this. God useth to fit men for great works, before he employs them as his instruments in accomplishing them. Now, if the work of the Lord be not soundly done upon your own hearts, how can you expect that he will bless your labours for effecting it in others? Can it be expected that God will bless that man’s labours, who worketh not for God, but for himself?

Having showed you, What it is to take heed to ourselves, I am to show you, next, What it is to take heed to all the flock.

It was first necessary to take into consideration, what we must be, and what we must do for our own souls, before we come to that which must be done for others: ‘He cannot succeed in healing the wounds of others who is himself unhealed by reason of neglecting himself.

Before we speak of the work itself, we shall notice somewhat that is pre-supposed in the words before us.

1. It is here implied, that every flock should have its own pastor, and every pastor his own flock.
2. When we are commanded to take heed to all the flock, it is plainly implied, that flocks must ordinarily be no greater than we are capable of overseeing, or ‘taking heed to.’

Having noticed these things, which are presupposed, we shall now proceed to consider the duty which is recommended in the text, Take heed to all the flock.

It is, you see, all the flock, or every individual member of our charge. To this end it is necessary, that we should know every person that belongeth to our charge: for how can we take heed to them, if we do not know them? We must labour to be acquainted, not only with the persons, but with the state of all our people, with their inclinations and conversations; what are the sins of which they are most in danger, and what duties they are most apt to neglect, and what temptations they are most liable to; for if we know not their temperament or disease, we are not likely to prove successful physicians.

But, while it is our duty to take heed to all the flock, we must pay special attention to
some classes in particular. By many, this is very imperfectly understood, and therefore I shall dwell a little upon it.

1. We must labour, in a special manner, for the conversion of the **unconverted**. The work of conversion is the first and great thing we must drive at; after this we must labour with all our might.

2. We must be ready to give advice to **inquirers**, who come to us with cases of conscience.

3. We must study to build up those who are already truly converted. In this respect our work is various, according to the various states of Christians.
   (a) There are many of our flock that are **young and weak**, who, though they are of long standing, are yet of small proficiency or strength. This, indeed, is the most common condition of the godly. Most of them content themselves with low degrees of grace, and it is no easy matter to get them higher.
   (b) Another class of converts that need our special help, are **those who labour under some particular corruption**, which keeps under their graces, and makes them a trouble to others, and a burden to themselves. Alas! there are too many such persons. Some are specially addicted to pride, and others to worldly-mindedness; some to sensual desires, and others to frowardness or other evil passions. Now it is our duty to give assistance to all these; and partly by dissuasions, and clear discoveries of the odiousness of the sin, and partly by suitable directions about the remedy, to help them to a more complete conquest of their corruptions.
   (c) Another class who demand special help are **declining Christians**, that are either fallen into some scandalous sin, or else abate their zeal and diligence, and show that they have lost their former love.
   (d) The last class whom I shall here notice, as requiring our attention, are **the strong**; for they, also, have need of our assistance: partly to preserve the grace they have; partly to help them in making further progress; and partly to direct them in improving their strength for the service of Christ, and the assistance of their brethren; and, also, to encourage them to persevere, that they may receive the crown.

4. We must have a special eye upon **families**, to see that they are well ordered, and the duties of each relation performed. The life of religion, and the welfare and glory of both the Church and the State, depend much on family government and duty. If we suffer the neglect of this, we shall undo all. What are we like to do ourselves to the reforming of a congregation, if all the work be cast on us alone; and masters of families neglect that necessary duty of their own, by which they are bound to help us? To this end, let me entreat you to attend to the following things:
   (a) Get information how each family is ordered, that you may know how to proceed in your endeavours for their further good.
   (b) Go occasionally among them, when they are likely to be most at leisure, and ask the master of the family whether he prays with them, and reads the Scripture, or what he doth? Labour to convince such as neglect this, of their sin; and if you have opportunity, pray with them before you go, and give them an example of what you would have them do. Perhaps, too, it might be well to get a promise from them, that they will make more conscience of their duty for the future.
   (c) If you find any, through ignorance and want of practice, unable to pray, persuade
them to study their own wants, and to get their hearts affected with them, and, in the meanwhile, advise them to use a form of prayer, rather than not pray at all.

(d) See that in every family there are some useful moving books, beside the Bibled

(e) Direct them how to spend the Lord’s day; how to des-patch their worldly business, so as to prevent encumbrances and distractions; and when they have been at church, how to spend the time in their families. The life of religion dependeth much on this, because poor people have no other free considerable time; and, therefore, if they lose this, they lose all, and will remain ignorant and brutish.

5. We must be diligent in visiting the sick, and helping them to prepare either for a fruitful life, or a happy death.

6. We must reprove and admonish those who live offensively or impenitently. Before we bring such matters before the church, or its rulers, it is ordinarily most fit for the minister to try himself what he can do in private to bow the sinner to repentance, especially if it be not a public crime.

7. The last part of our oversight, which I shall notice, consisteth in the exercise of Church discipline. This consisteth, after the aforesaid private reproofs, in more public reproof combined with exhortation to repentance, in prayer for the offender, in restoring the penitent, and in excluding and avoiding the impenitent.

Having thus considered the nature of this oversight, we shall next speak of the manner; not of each part distinctly, lest we be tedious, but of the whole in general.

1. The ministerial work must be carried on purely for God and the salvation of souls, not for any private ends of our own. They who engage in this as a common work, to make a trade of it for their worldly livelihood, will find that they have chosen a bad trade, though a good employment. Self-denial is of absolute necessity in every Christian, but it is doubly necessary in a minister, as without it he cannot do God an hour’s faithful service.

2. The ministerial work must be carried on diligently and laboriously, as being of such unspeakable consequence to ourselves and others.

3. The ministerial work must be carried on prudently and orderly. Milk must go before strong meat; the foundation must be laid before we attempt to raise the superstructure. Children must not be dealt with as men of full stature. Men must be brought into a state of grace, before we can expect from them the works of grace.

4. Throughout the whole course of our ministry, we must insist chiefly upon the greatest, most certain, and most necessary truths, and be more seldom and sparing upon the rest. If we can but teach Christ to our people, we shall teach them all.

   Hence it is, that a preacher must be oft upon the same things, because the matters of necessity are few. We must not either feign necessaries, or fall much upon unnecessaries, to satisfy them that look for novelties, though we must clothe the same truths with a grateful variety in the manner of our delivery.

5. All our teaching must be as plain and simple as possible. This doth best suit a teacher’s ends. He that would be understood must speak to the capacity of his hearers. Truth loves the light, and is most beautiful when most naked.

6. Our work must be carried on with great humility.

7. There must be a prudent mixture of severity and mildness both in our preaching and discipline; each must be predominant, according to the quality or character of the person,
or matter, that we have in hand. If there be no severity, our reproofs will be despised. If all severity, we shall be taken as usurpers of dominion, rather than persuaders of the minds of men to the truth.

8. We must be serious, earnest, and zealous in every part of our work. Our work requireth greater skill, and especially greater life and zeal than any of us bring to it. It is no small matter to stand up in the face of a congregation, and to deliver a message of salvation or damnation, as from the living God, in the name of the Redeemer.

9. The whole of our ministry must be carried on in tender love to our people. We must let them see that nothing pleaseth us but what profiteth them; and that what doeth them good doth us good; and that nothing troubleth us more than their hurt. We must feel toward our people, as a father toward his children: yea, the tenderest love of a mother must not surpass ours. We must even travail in birth, till Christ be formed in them.

10. We must carry on our work with patience. We must bear with many abuses and injuries from those to whom we seek to do good.

11. All our work must be managed reverently, as beseemeth them that believe the presence of God, and use not holy things as if they were common. Reverence is that affection of the soul which proceedeth from deep apprehensions of God and indicateth a mind that is much conversant with him.

12. All our work must be done spiritually, as by men possessed of the Holy Ghost.

13. 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 own 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? 0, send me not naked and unprovided to the work; but, as thou commandest me to do it, furnish me with a spirit suitable thereto."

14. We must be very studious of union and communion among ourselves, and of the unity and peace of the churches that we oversee. We must be sensible how needful this is to the prosperity of the whole, the strengthening of our common cause, the good of the particular members of our flock, and the further enlargement of the kingdom of Christ.

I shall now proceed to exhort you to the faithful discharge of the great duty which you have undertaken, namely, personal catechizing and instructing every one in your parishes or congregations that will submit thereto.

First, I shall state to you some motives to persuade you to this duty.

1. It will be a most hopeful mean of the conversion of souls
2. It will essentially promote the orderly building up of those who are converted, and the establishment of them in the faith.
3. It will make our public preaching better understood and regarded.
4. By means of it, you will come to be familiar with your people, and may thereby win their affections.
5. By means of it, we shall come to be better acquainted with each person’s spiritual
state, and so the better know how to watch over them.
6. By means of this trial and acquaintance with our people’s state we shall be much assisted in the admission of them to the sacraments.
7. It will show men the true nature of the ministerial office, and awaken them to the better consideration of it, than is now usual. It is too common for men to think that the work of the ministry is nothing but to preach, and to baptize, and to administer the Lord’s supper, and to visit the sick.
8. It will help our people better to understand the nature of their duty toward their overseers
9. It will much conduce to the better ordering of families, and the better spending of the Sabbath. When we have once got the masters of the families to undertake that they will, every Lord’s day, examine their children and servants, and make them repeat some catechism and passages of Scripture, this will find them most profitable employment; whereas many of them would otherwise be idle or ill-employed.
10. It will do good to many ministers, who are too apt to be idle, and to mis-spend their time in unnecessary discourse, business, journeys, or recreations.

It is so great a work which we have before us, that it is a thousand pities it should be destroyed in the birth, and perish in our hands. And though I know that we have a knotty generation to deal with, and that it is past the power of any of us to change a carnal heart without the effectual operation of the Holy Ghost; yet it is so usual with God to work by means, and to bless the right endeavours of his servants, that I cannot fear but great things will be accomplished, and a wonderful blow will be given to the kingdom of darkness by this work, if it do no miscarry through the fault of the ministers themselves.

I am first to give you some directions for bringing your people to submit to this course of catechizing and instruction.
1. The chief means of all is this, for a minister so to conduct himself in the general course of his life and ministry, as to convince his people of his ability, sincerity, and unfeigned love to them.
2. Supposing this general preparation, the next thing to be done is, to use the most effectual means to convince them of the benefit and necessity of this course to their own souls. The way to win the consent of people to anything that you propose, is to prove that it is good and profitable for them.
   Make them understand that it is not an arbitrary business of our own devising and imposing; but that necessity is laid upon us, and that is we look not to every member of the flock according to our ability, they may perish in their iniquity; but their blood will be required at our hand. Show them that it is God, and not we, who is the contriver and imposer of the work; and that therefore they blame God more than us in accusing it.
3. When this is done, it will be very necessary that we give one of the catechisms to every family in the parish, whether rich or poor, that so they may be without excuse. As to the delivery of them, the best way is for the minister first to give notice in the congregation, that they shall be brought to their houses, and then to go himself from house to house and deliver them, and take the opportunity of persuading them to the
As to the order of proceeding, it will be necessary that we take the people in order, family by family, beginning a month or six weeks after the delivery of the catechisms, that they may have time to learn them.

4. Be sure that you deal gently with them, and take off all discouragements as effectually as you can.

**Having used these means to procure them to come and submit to your instructions, we are next to consider how you may deal most effectually with them in the work.**

The directions which I think it necessary to give for the right managing of the work, are the following:

1. When your people come to you, one family or more, begin with a brief preface, to mollify their minds and to take off all offence, unwillingness, or discouragement, and to prepare them for receiving your instructions.

2. When you have spoken thus to them all, take them one by one, and deal with them as far as you can in private, out of the hearing of the rest; for some cannot speak freely before others, and some will not endure to be questioned before others, because they think that it will tend to their shame to have others hear their answers; and some persons that can make better answers themselves, will be ready, when they are gone, to talk of what they heard, and to disgrace those that speak not so well as themselves.

3. Begin your work by taking an account of what they have learned of the words of the catechism, and receiving their answer to each question; and, if they are able to repeat but little or none of it, try whether they can rehearse the creed and the decalogue.

4. Then choose out some of the weightiest points, and try, by further questions, how far they understand them.

5. When you have done what you see cause in the trial of their knowledge, proceed next to instruct them yourselves, and this must be according to their several capacities.

6. Whether they be grossly ignorant or note, if you suspect them to be unconverted, endeavour next to make some prudent inquiry into their state.

7. If, however, you have, either by former discovery of gross ignorance, or by these later inquiries into his spiritual state, discerned an apparent probability that the person is yet in an unconverted state, your next business is, to employ all your skill to bring his heart to a sense of his condition.

8. Conclude the whole with a practical exhortation, which must contain two parts; first, the duty of believing in Christ; and secondly, of using the external means of grace for the time to come, and the avoiding of former sins.

9. At the dismissing of them, do these two things:

   (1) Mollify their minds again by a few words, deprecating anything like offence.

   (2) As you may not soon have an opportunity to speak with the same persons, set them in the way of perfecting what you have begun. Engage the master of each family to call all his family to repeat, every Lord’s day, what they have learned of the catechism; and to continue this practice till they have all learned it perfectly: and when they have done so, still to continue to hear them regularly recite it, that they may not forget it.

10. Have the names of all your parishioners by you in a book; and when they come and repeat the catechism, note in your book who come, and who do not and who are so
grossly ignorant as to be unfit for the Lord’s supper and other holy communion, and who
not: and as you perceive the necessities of each, so deal with them for the future.

And now, brethren, I have done with my advice, and leave you to the practice.
Though the proud may receive it with scorn, and the selfish and slothful with distaste, or
even indignation, I doubt not but God will use it, in despite of the opposition of sin and
Satan, to the awakening of many of his servants to their duty, and the promoting of the
work of a right reformation; and that his blessing will accompany the present
undertaking, for the saving of many a soul, the peace of you that undertake and perform
it, the exciting of his servants throughout the nation to second you, and the increase of the
purity and the unity of his churches.