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.

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

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 pastoral 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

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

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

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 ascendency.

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 MacMillian Co., 1948), 11–12.

and joining together to create networks of support, in some cases crossing denominational lines, all in an effort to grow the corporate wisdom of soul care in the larger body of Christ.

As with the origins of the biblical counseling movement, the foundation of Baxter's thinking and practice was the covenant theology of the Reformation. Both his preaching and counseling called people to a covenant-keeping relationship with God. What this means is that the core of what is wrong with us is not a horizontal (between people) issue or an internal deficiency (i.e., the nature/nurture debate). The core problem is a vertical deficiency—a lack of covenant-keeping with God.

Puritans studied human nature with amazing prescience long before the rise of modern psychology.

This fundamental spiritual insight has two implications: one theological and the other practical. First, the theological emphasis was placed on sanctification as opposed to justification. While the Puritan focus on problems in living was an obvious pastoral duty, it also served as an apologetic. The Catholic Church continued to criticize Protestant doctrines like justification by faith, stating that such teaching would inevitably create a moral vacuum. To refute the allegations of moral laxity and to pursue the goal of cultivating godliness in their communities, Puritans like Richard Baxter wrote heavily about personal holiness (i.e., sanctification) more than anything else.

Second, and more practically, the motivational question of *why do I do the things I do?* must be placed alongside the intellectual question of *what do I believe?* Indeed, understanding motives can go a long way to help understand behavior (Prov 20:24; 29:25). For Baxter, and the Puritans in general, a covenant-keeping relationship with God is to live *coram Deo,* "in the presence of God," not in the fear of man. Baxter's foundational counseling conviction was to help his people by providing an example of what this living theology looks like.

So historically and theologically, ministries like that of Baxter's are closer to us than one might think. Their dedication to studying God's Word was matched only by their dedication to studying people. Puritans studied human nature with amazing prescience long before the rise

of modern psychology. They may not have accomplished their institutional or political agendas to reform the Church of England, but they triumphed in the area of soul care, for which they are underappreciated, even within contemporary evangelicalism.[5] Even a brief look into their writings reveals a treasure trove of practical, insightful, and amazingly relevant material for what are often considered modern problems.[6]

Counseling was foundational to the primary goal of Baxter's ministry, which was the salvation *and* the cure of souls.

Finally, these Puritans also had a clear desire to help suffering people. No detail was unaccounted for, no circumstance or situation was left unattended to, and no doctrine was considered irrelevant. They served self-consciously as physicians of the soul and studied people thoroughly. In their careful observations, diagnostic schemas, and theories of human personality, they were wise "psychologists" long before the field existed. The pastoral skill they developed should encourage similar dedication today.

Baxter's Goals, Methods, and Legacy

Now we will discuss how this Puritan outlook shaped the ministry of Richard Baxter.

Baxter's goals. For Baxter, counseling was on par with preaching. To have one without the other was to undermine both.[7] This is not because his temperament was more inclined to counseling or that he preferred it over preaching. Rather, counseling was foundational to the primary goal of his ministry, which was the salvation *and* the cure of souls.

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5. Some notable exceptions are Mark Deckard's *Helpful Truth in Past Places*, J. I. Packer's *A Quest for Godliness*, Dale Smith's *Ore from the Puritans' Mine*, and Tim Keller's article "Puritan Resources for Biblical Counseling," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 9:3 (1988):11–44.

6. For example, Jeremiah Burrough's handling of anxiety and discontent in *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* or William Bridge's insight into depression in *A Lifting Up for the Downcast* evidence wisdom gained from years of knowing people intimately and applying biblical truths to their lives.

7. Daniel Webber, "The Puritan Pastor as Counsellor," in *The Office and Work of the Minister, Westminster Conference papers, 1986* (London: Tentmaker Publications, 1986), 83.

> I know that preaching the gospel publicly is the most excellent means, because we speak to many at once. But it is usually far more effectual to preach it privately to a particular sinner, as to himself: for the plainest man that is, can scarcely speak plain enough in public for them to understand; but in private we may do it much more…in private we can take our work *gradatim* (gradually), and take our hearers along with us…I conclude, therefore, that public preaching will not be sufficient… Long may you study and preach to little purpose, if you neglect this duty.[8]

Baxter, along with his Puritan brothers, believed that individual counsel was an essential aspect of ministry because it provides something that a sermon cannot. When the well-being of the soul is the first metric for pastoral focus, it requires the dual focus of the public and private application of the Word of God.

In contrast, many of today's ecclesial metrics are of the more quantifiable type, such as attendance figures, annual giving, campus size, books authored by the senior pastor, or some other "marketable" unit. But besides the glory of God (another Puritan focus), the soul's well-being ought to be *the* driving objective for the vast majority of church activities.

Admittedly, God's glory and the well-being of individual souls are harder to place on a spreadsheet and much more difficult to produce accurate analytics, but that is exactly the point; many churches are using an altogether incorrect standard to gauge their success. Results alone were never the metric for Richard Baxter and the Puritans. The personal, one-to-one ministry that Baxter was passionate about was neither efficient nor glamorous, but it was faithful, effective, and had a transformative impact on his congregation. As he noted in his autobiography, when he arrived in Kidderminster (a village of two thousand) there might be one family on a street that called upon the name of God, when he left many years later, there might be one family on the street that did not.[9]

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8. Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 196–97.

9. *Richard Baxter: The pastor's pastor; An Autobiography* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 1998), 45.

Baxter's method. For nearly twenty years, Baxter set aside two days a week to meet with fifteen of the families from his congregation. His assistant would go throughout the village and inform people of their appointment to see Baxter if their turn was at hand. Baxter meanwhile would remain in his home and minister and meet with those scheduled for that day. In this way, Baxter could personally spend time and counsel with every family in the village at least once a year.[10] Imagine the impact this kind of pastoral care and shepherding might have in our churches today!

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For Baxter, his precise mind translated into a precise ministry. Coupled with his Puritan vision that all things were related to God, he perceived his flock in distinct discipleship categories: the unconverted, the curious (about the faith), the converted, families, the wayward, and the sick.[11] Using this rubric, Baxter then identified and ministered according to these distinct categories. Of course, this requires a keen insight into human nature, as well as a solid grasp of doctrinal truth. Doctrines like sin, grace, and the Holy Spirit were key in Baxter's model of aiding individuals to be healed of their spiritual struggles.

In essence, Baxter proposed maximizing the well-being of the soul by being conversant with both theology and what we might today call psychology. He also encouraged pastors to be aware of the individual's biology as a contributing factor to their soul's well-being. To ignore the body, as the biblical counseling movement can be prone to do, or to ignore the soul, as the secular psychology movement can be prone to do, is to abandon a truly holistic approach to maximizing the true

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10. Richard Baxter, *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter: With a Preface, Giving Some Account of the Author, and of This Edition of His Practical Works: An Essay on His Genius, Works, and Times: And a Portrait*, vol. 1 (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1990), iii.

11. Baxter further subdivided those who were truly converted as those who were young and still weak in faith, those who labor "under some particular corruption," those who have become cooled in their love for Christ, and those who are strong in their faith. See Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 94–108.

health of the individual.[12] Baxter, by contrast, is a wonderful example of a balanced approach as he took both elements of human personhood seriously in his diagnosis of problems.

> The very same doubts and complaints may come from several causes…. Sometimes the cause begins in the body, and thence proceedeth to the mind; sometimes it begins in the mind, and thence proceedeth the body… Which of these is your own case, you must be careful to find out and to apply the means of cure accordingly.[13]

No doubt, a strong reason for taking the physical body as seriously as Baxter and the Puritans did was that they were accustomed to physical afflictions and ailments themselves. They understood from personal experience the interplay between the state of one's body and the spiritual health of one's soul. Among other difficulties, Baxter suffered from chronic intestinal issues, sciatica, toothaches, migraines, and extreme sensitivity to light. Thus, Baxter's view of care didn't stop at the spiritual good of his people; he was concerned for the whole person (3 John 2). In fact, Baxter once preached a sermon on depression and concluded with a section on medical prescriptions to help alleviate the struggle.[14] He was so insistent on such proper care that, in another instance, he said if someone would not take the necessary medicine to aid their situation they should be forced to do so!

While I don't advocate we involve ourselves in quite the same way, my point is that Baxter and the Puritans were able to consider a wide variety of factors as they cared for the needs of an individual. They were not plagued by the artificial divides of sacred and secular. For Baxter, there was no either/or in his schema but a both/and approach to the human condition. In other words, Baxter did not have to choose between causes

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12. To be clear, from the earliest days, Jay Adams was a proponent of discussing physical issues with one's physician. However, as the fields of psychopharmacology and biological psychology have developed, the biblical counseling movement has been less inclined to dialogue with practitioners in these fields or interact with the literature they produce.

13. Baxter, *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter*, 887.

14. Richard Baxter, "What Are the Best Preservatives Against Melancholy and Overmuch Sorrow?," in *Puritan Sermons, 1659–1689*, trans. James Nichols vol. 3 (Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, 1981), 285–92.

that were *either* physical or psychological, environmental *or* economic, social *or* cultural—there was room for all these and more.[15]

Since all of life is God's and all was before him, every field of knowledge could be brought into submission to serve God's greater purpose to glorify himself through the sanctification of his people. This is a lesson for everyone involved in soul care to heed. People are not nicely compartmentalized or easily parsed out beings, like food on a TV dinner plate. Rather, humans are more like a stew, with separate ingredients mixed together to create something much more than the sum of their individual parts. Therefore, to care for people well, understanding and willingness to care for them holistically is necessary. Baxter was, yet again, a model of this.

Baxter's legacy. If all of life is to be lived *coram Deo*, the pastor must be prepared to address every aspect of it, and Baxter wanted to do what he could to prepare men for this magnanimous task. At over a million words in length, Baxter's *Christian Directory* attempted to bring the Word of God to bear on almost every human problem.[16] It is full of case studies and practical instructions for a variety of audiences. Baxter wrote it for "younger ministers" to give them an exhaustive resource to aid them in their counseling, to provide fathers with a resource to equip their families, and for individuals to guide their personal growth.[17] There was no topic, no issue, no malady, and no circumstance that Baxter did not attempt to address.

As preaching and counseling worked together for Baxter, so too do his two works: *The Christian Directory* and *The Reformed Pastor*.

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15. For example, the Puritans made room for satanic influence, which certainly is unheard of from a secular perspective and even unusual for modern Christian counseling.

16. The full title of Baxter's Directory indicates the true scope of this work, *A Christian Directory: or, A Sum of Practical Theology, and Cases of Conscience. Directing Christians How to Use their Knowledge and Faith; How to Improve All Helps and Means, and to Perform All Duties; How to Overcome Temptations, and to Escape or Mortify Every Sin. In Four Parts. I. Christian Ethics (or Private Duties) II. Christian Economics (or Family Duties) III. Christian Ecclesiastics (or Church Duties) IV. Christian Politics (or Duties to our Rulers and Neighbors).*

17. Of the three great "summas" of the Christian faith during that time, William Perkins's *The Whole Treatise of Cases of Conscience* (1596), William Ames's *De Conscientia* (1660), and Richard Baxter's *A Christian Directory* (1665), Baxter was the most renowned.

In chapter three of *The Reformed Pastor*, Baxter outlines the motives, answers objections, and offers directions to carry out pastoral duties within any congregation. Combined with the exhaustive content in *The Christian Directory*, any student will gain a comprehensive understanding of Baxter's theory and practice of pastoral care. He wrote in ways that common people could grasp profound biblical truth. Baxter's ordinary style, combined with his keen insight into the human heart and love for Christ, provided encouragement to all his readers.[18]

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To summarize, Richard Baxter is a model of a well-formed biblical counselor because of his unique passion for the pastorate, love for Scripture, and experience with the physical limitations and afflictions of the body. But while this background and context for Baxter's life and ministry are foundational, my true aim is not just to learn *about* him but to learn *from* him. To that aim, we now turn our attention.

Richard Baxter's Relevance for Today

In today's church, "pastor as CEO," "pastor as motivational speaker," or even "pastor as expositional preacher" is regarded as the ideal. In stark contrast, Baxter portrays the pastor as *counselor* before anything else—and he is calling us back to it. He is calling us back to a model of the pastor as shepherd to the sheep and thus *away* from the modern model in which the pastor rarely sets aside time for formal counseling and lacks a developed methodology to instruct his people. Whatever else must fill a pastor's schedule, counseling must be a part of that time.

The call. It is a shame that such a bifurcation exists today between the pastor's public ministry of the pulpit and his personal ministry of counsel, such that he could focus upon one without the other. Clearly,

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18. Shorter works like Baxter's *Directions for Hating Sin* are exemplary of his practicality and appeal to the laity, while longer works like his *Reformed Pastor* are exemplary of his insight into pastoral ministry and appeal to the clergy. For a fantastic introduction to the appeal of Baxter for both audiences, read Michael Lundy's *Depression, Anxiety and the Christian Life, Practical Wisdom from Richard Baxter*.

this has allowed, reinforced, or even encouraged the separation of the shepherd from his sheep. Ironically, this disconnect is most obvious in a pastor's preaching. When counseling is neglected, his preaching lacks the personal insight and understanding needed to resonate with his hearers. And he will fail to gain the pastoral skill to make the Scripture sing in someone's life. He preaches to everyone but actually speaks to no one. Finally, this bifurcation has distorted people's understanding of the true nature of the pastorate, and professionalized the pastorate rather than personalized it.

The pastor as counselor seems unusual to us because, in our modern culture, counselors are "professionals" who typically study behavioral sciences, making them "the experts" on human behavior and conduct. Yet, Richard Baxter and the other Puritan divines challenge the idea that modern therapists are the primary experts on the human condition. The Puritans, far from being simplistic and antiquated in their understanding of human behavior, had a robust system of diagnosis, treatment, and follow-up care. Their writings display a level of sophistication that anticipates later psychological developments found in cognitive-behavioral, psychodynamic, and existential psychologies today.

Baxter saw the minister's duty to be a "counselor for their souls" of such high concern that failure at this point was failure in the minister's duty in its entirety! Richard Baxter "wrote the book" on being a pastor, and to be a pastor was to be a counselor.

> A minister is not to be merely a public preacher, but to be known as a counselor for their souls…so that each man who is in doubts and straits, may bring his case to him for resolution; as Nicodemus came to Christ, and as it was usual with the people of old to go to the priest, 'whose lips must keep knowledge, and at whose mouth they must ask the law, because he is the messenger of the Lord of Hosts.' (Mal. 2:7) But as the people have become unacquainted with this office of the ministry, and with their own duty and necessity in this respect, it belongeth to us to acquaint them with it, and publicly press them to come to us for advice about the great concerns of their souls. We must not only be willing to

> take the trouble, but should draw it upon ourselves, by inviting them to come.[19]

The call is for pastors to reform themselves personally, to examine themselves, and to take up this crucial task of pastoral counseling. No higher achievement or accolade can a pastor claim than to likewise be such a physician to the soul.

The night when my own counseling inadequacy was made vividly clear is a constant reminder of this profound truth. Before she stormed out of my office, slam ming the door behind her, a woman I was trying to help cried, "You couldn't help me if your life depended on it. Unfortunately, it's not your life that is suffering; it's mine." She was right, I couldn't help her. I could muster up excuses for my failure—that she was obstinate, stubborn, and "mired in sin"—but none of that was true. And, even if it was true—and it wasn't—it didn't change the fact that I was ill-prepared to pastor people in the trenches of life. And yes, at that moment, I wanted to quit the ministry (probably the second time that week if I'm honest), but I was convinced that the gospel was the "power of God for salvation" (Rom 1:16). So I committed to learning how to counsel. I reasoned that if Paul told the believers in Rome that he was convinced that they were competent to counsel (Rom 15:14), and if Peter encouraged the saints that everything we need for life and godliness was granted to us through the knowledge of Christ (2 Peter 1:3), then I could do what needed to be done as well.

Maybe you can relate? Maybe you have a similar story? Pastors, be encouraged. Counseling is our calling.[20] If we do not bring gospel hope and help to people, no one will. And today more than ever, people seek help from counselors and pay huge sums of money to do so. Surely, they will see you, but only if you invite them. But you will only invite them if you feel prepared yourself. Men like Baxter have thrown down the gauntlet. Are you willing to pick it up?

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19. Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor,* 96.

20. David Powlison, "The Pastor as Counselor," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 26:1 (2012): 23–39; Jeremy Pierre and Deepak Reju, *The Pastor and Counseling: The Basics of Shepherding Members in Need* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015); Harold L. Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor's Heart* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019).

The challenges. With such a weighty responsibility placed upon a pastor's shoulders, the questions that naturally arise are: How? How do we answer this call? And how applicable is Baxter's strategy in today's context? It's one thing to pastor a small, homogenous congregation in a bucolic setting in which the prevailing worldview is shared by all. Furthermore, to pastor in a cultural time when ministers were held to be the authorities over life's problems without competition from an expanding therapeutic industry, seems an entirely different experience than to pastor in today's typical urban or suburban church. Even mundane factors (like how far the average congregant lives from the church) stand in stark contrast to Baxter's experience, when all his congregants lived within walking distance.

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One weakness of Baxter's model is the almost total absence of the laity in the work of the ministry. Though the priesthood of all believers was a key tenet of the Reformation, this emphasis is missing from Baxter's model of congregational care. The emphasis on the special role of ordained ministers is typical throughout most of church history, but for scriptural and practical reasons we can take his approach a step further, bringing the principles of pastoral care into the organized practice of one-another lay ministry. Ephesians 4:12 states it is the pastor's role to equip the saints for the work of the ministry. Therefore, while it is incumbent upon the pastor to minister to his congregants directly, he must also minister through others in his church as well. In other words, he must give a good amount of his time to pastoring fellow pastors (staff or otherwise) who will, in turn, pastor others within the church. He will still engage in some counseling, but by allowing others to participate in the soul-care work of the church, the needs of many other congregants are also provided for.

In short, as we look to Baxter's ministry, we must discern principle from practice, then adapt our practice to fulfill the principle.

Getting started. To engage in adapting your practice to fulfill the principle is not a small task, and describing all the variables you will encounter, challenges you will face, and logistics that need to be addressed is beyond the scope of this article. However, prior articles in

this journal are available to assist you to refine your thinking and sharpen your questions.[21]

That said, based on Richard Baxter's principles and my own experience with this process, I offer a few suggestions for the pathway ahead. These are not necessarily linear steps, but rather are three ongoing practices to help build a culture of care and counseling within your church. These practices are:

- build a vision for counseling in the church,
- equip the congregation for counseling, and
- engage the congregation in counseling.

Let me describe what I mean.

Build a vision for counseling. Your ability to fruitfully communicate a vision for biblical counseling will in large part be contingent upon what your people understand about counseling in the first place. Such factors include proximity to a Christian university that may have a counseling program that has local influence, the number of individuals from your church who currently see a therapist and their respective experiences in therapy, members of your church who are part of the behavioral sciences community, and so forth. Each reality must be considered as you communicate the vision for counseling.

In some cases, you will have to convince some that counseling *is* a ministry of the church. In other cases, you will have to clarify the distinctions between biblical counseling and other forms of counseling. And yet in still other cases, you will have to explain why other secular forms of counseling are not *inherently* sinful and "of the devil." Most likely you'll be engaged in this apologetic on an ongoing basis until your church understands what *you* mean by counseling and what that will look like at the local church level.

A practical word of encouragement: this process is well worth the effort as you will be forced to think through theological, methodological, and practical considerations. Furthermore, as you bring your people along (and it may take awhile), they will be encouraged by the

21. David Powlison, "Ten Questions to Ask before Starting a Counseling Ministry in Your Church," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 29:1 (2015): 48–61 and Michael Gembola, "An Interview with the Founders of Two Church-Based Counseling Ministries," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 34:2 (2020): 80–95.

comprehensiveness of Scripture and its practical nature for ministering to everyday problems.

As an example, when I launched Grace Counseling Center in 2012 as a ministry of my previous church in La Mirada, California, we were in proximity to a prominent Christian university that had a well-established school of psychology. Many of the university's students and faculty members were involved at the church. This meant spending time defining what we meant by counseling and explaining the differences between a professional stand-alone counseling practice and a church-based counseling center. Furthermore, we had the added benefit and challenge of practicing and student marriage and family therapists and licensed professional counselors participating in the ministry. This called for further time investment so that we could build team cohesion, partnership, and trust between the career counselors and those who counseled only as members of the ministry. Finally, because the university's therapeutic orientation varied dramatically with the model of biblical counseling we practiced, we spent even more time talking and learning from each other. In the end, the ministry was stronger because of these unique challenges.

Equip your congregation. Baxter aimed to equip the pastor for the task by writing two books. In a similar manner, we must have a strategic method for equipping all believers within our churches to do this important work. However, our method must take into account that individuals will vary in their knowledge, skill, and experience. Therefore, I recommend a three-tiered approach to accommodate these differences.

At the introductory level, giving out biblical counseling books and booklets is an easy way to expose people to such training. We frequently give away books at our monthly Sunday evening Communion services. This gives me the opportunity to discuss the importance of the resource and provides a built-in pastoral follow-up with the individuals who receive the books. This giveaway creates an intentional pastoral conversation later in the month as I follow up on what they learned from the reading.

Another simple but effective practice is to reference biblical counseling resources during the Sunday morning sermon, or print them at the bottom of a church bulletin. I recently did this when I preached

a sermon series on emotions titled "Life Is Stressing Me Out." I highlighted specific materials on anger, anxiety, stress, and emotions. The response was incredibly positive as was the ability to give individuals an immediate resource to build on the momentum from the sermon series.

Offering Sunday school classes using curriculum materials like the ones published by CCEF is another introductory way to expose people to the ministry of counseling, define what you mean by it, and show the practical nature of Scripture. These classes provide a friendly way to lay out basic epistemological assumptions about counseling without seeming combative, defensive, or too academic. Furthermore, while classes on the atonement may draw few attendees, classes on relationships, conflict resolution, depression, and other practical matters have immediate application and therefore better attendance. These practices are the low-hanging fruit of exposing and equipping individuals in the church to the personal ministry of counseling. Sowing such seeds over months and even years can slowly shape the conversations around counseling more toward Scripture and less toward secular literature.

> The body of Christ can be engaged to accomplish both the organizational tasks required to fulfill this pastoral duty and the actual work itself.

At an intermediate level, pastoral staff can offer in-depth courses on counseling problems and procedures for those who show an interest and desire to learn beyond the Sunday morning offerings.[22] Today, there is an abundance of training materials available where just ten years ago they were sparse. The Care and Discipleship Training program from the Institute for Biblical Counseling and Discipleship or the Certification Pathway from the Association of Biblical Counselors (and others like them) provide the necessary resources to train individuals in the church who desire to help in this important ministry.

As a possible hybrid method, you can assign selected readings from the growing biblical counseling literature to interested participants and

22. These more in-depth training courses can be offered on either a Sunday morning or weekday evening.

another volunteer or staff member can facilitate weekly discussions. The advantages of this method are broader exposure to more literature on current topics in biblical counseling, reduced preparation time for the staff member since students come ready to discuss the assigned readings, and the provision of leadership opportunities among the volunteers if a staff member is not able to attend.

If semester-long classes do not fit your context or if there is not a qualified staff member or volunteer to teach the materials, another option is to attend the various biblical counseling conferences held at the local, regional, and national levels. All the major biblical counseling organizations have a least one conference per year. If the multiweek training is the steady diet of meat and potatoes, then the weekend conference is a can of Red Bull—high intensity, high impact in a short amount of time. Each option holds advantages and disadvantages. The determining factor of which direction would be best for your church is dependent upon the variables of budget, resources, available and qualified individuals, time, etc.

Finally, at the advanced level of training, there are formal classes, such as the ones offered through the School of Biblical Counseling at CCEF, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, The Master's University, Westminster Theological Seminary, and Reformed Theological Seminary.

Engage the congregation in counseling. The body of Christ can be engaged to accomplish both the organizational tasks required to fulfill this pastoral duty and the actual work itself. Once again, individuals will come from varying backgrounds and therefore our practices must account for this diversity, while still offering appropriate opportunities to join in the work.

At the introductory level, an interested individual might assist in facilitating the organizational aspects of the Sunday school classes or the midweek course offered by the pastoral staff. This allows the individual to get more experience with the material than the other participants and a taste of leadership responsibilities. Furthermore, the pastoral staff could allow a trainee the opportunity to facilitate or teach a session. This pushes trainees to inculcate the material at a deeper level. It also provides opportunities for the staff to observe, offer feedback, and develop the

teaching skill of trainees, all the while broadening the team equipped to offer soul care in the church.

The next level of engagement could be involvement with what is called an open-counsel night. One night a week our church campus is available to all who require counsel.[23] The open nature of the situation lends itself to single-session counseling rather than a formal counseling arrangement. Such single-session counseling provides wonderful training for new counselors without the fear of getting into a multi-week commitment that might be beyond their abilities. In fact, such open-counsel nights can serve as an intake session for further counseling by other seasoned counselors. In other words, open-counsel nights can offer immediate care for those who need wise counsel, provide a smooth on-ramp for trainees in the task of soul care, and act as a means to discern between counselees who need weekly counsel and discipleship and those who simply need to talk through a concern.

While open-counsel nights can serve these purposes, this is not the only format that can meet those goals. Traditionally, churches have individuals who stand near the pulpit after the service for prayer and encouragement. In practice, there is no reason that these moments could not also serve the same purpose as the open-counsel night if approached with such intentionality.[24]

Finally, at the advanced level, individuals who have gone through the many introductory and intermediate training opportunities could serve as counselors, with supervision provided by the pastoral staff on a weekly or biweekly basis. This is the most time-intensive level for the trainee but also promises the richest reward. It is, as I have heard Ed Welch say, "a front-row seat into the process of sanctification." To do this

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23. Alternatively, these open-counsel nights could be held biweekly or monthly. At Christ Community Church, we call these open-counsel nights "Coffee and Conversation."

24. This should not be taken as an either/or but rather and/also. You don't have to choose either an open-counsel night or after-service encouragement, but a church can have both. Some people might well respond immediately after the sermon because an issue was raised, and they are prompted to come forward. Others might feel intimidated by discussing intimate matters in such a public environment, furthermore their issue may have nothing to do with the sermon. While both formats can provide the same advantages, both formats will meet different needs.

well, however, I have found that lay counselors, on average, can handle no more than two counseling cases at a time.

Taken together, a church would have a three-tiered approach to equipping and engaging the body of Christ in the work of personal counseling. While these practices might look very different from the ministry model of Richard Baxter from 350 years ago, it is different only on the surface. Underneath, the same passion for equipping pastors and individuals to counsel the Word of God and having a process to do it is still there.

Final Thoughts and Reflections

In nearly twenty-five years of pastoral practice and twenty years of biblical counseling practice, I have found an 80–10–10 rule to be true when it comes to meeting the counseling needs of a church. Eighty percent of the people who come to see a pastor about an issue in their life can be helped by someone in the church who knows them, loves them, and knows the Word of God with some level of competence. Another 10% of people wait until their situation becomes more complicated and intractable so they need someone with more skill, training, and experience to walk them back into the light. The final 10% of people come with problems of such psychological and biological (i.e., medical) complexity that it is wise to refer them to someone with the requisite training. But in 100% of the cases, the body of Christ can still play a role, however large or small.

Baxter's pastoral practice can be our vision—the church can and is counseling. Across the globe, the body of Christ is coming alive to its duty and while it may never quite be the same as in 17th-century Puritan England, it can be just as effective if not more so![25] If these are the lessons that Richard Baxter can continue to teach the church today, then he truly was a great man and we must continue to know him and his work.

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25. For example, I teach practical theology and biblical counseling courses at Christ Bible Seminary in Nagoya, Japan as well as at my church in Laguna Hills, California.

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