

Characteristics of Baxter's Soul Care Within the Local Church

By: Joe Miller



In my previous blog post, I addressed Richard Baxter's (1615-1691) heart for soul care in the local church, the importance of which is expressed in his own words, "It is no small part of a minister's duty to counsel men, as a wise, skilful, and faithful [duty]." However, as a preacher and teacher, Baxter recognized that his own passionate pleas from his weekly pulpit ministry remained ineffective at times.[1] The Puritan preacher, "Roaring" John Rogers, acknowledged this same challenge within his congregation, whom he described "like the Smiths [blacksmith's] dogge, who can be under the hammers noyse, and the sparks flying, and yet fast asleep." [2]

One of Baxter's passions was to help his people develop a robust theology so that by God's grace, they would be able to carry the weight of the suffering and sin of life in ways that glorify the Lord (Isa. 43:7) while also experiencing satisfying joy (John 15:11; 17:13). My hope is that this post will direct your

attention back to this seventeenth-century reformed pastor. Richard Baxter devised his soul care ministry to complement his preaching and teaching ministry, which could both inspire and inform soul care ministry within your church. This blog will first take a look at Baxter's personalized approach in providing both individual and family soul care; second, his use of mid-week small group gatherings as means to extend the influence of Sunday sermons; and third, Baxter's philosophy and intentionality of church restoration (discipline) as part of his comprehensive approach to soul care within the local church.

Individual and Family Soul Care

Baxter wholeheartedly believed that a life-on-life approach to soul care was most rewarding and effective.[3] He describes his sessions in the following way:

First they recited the Catechism to us (a family only being present at a time, and no stranger admitted); after that I first help them to understand it, and next enquired modestly into the state of their souls, and lastly endeavored to set all home to the convincing, awakening, and resolving of their hearts according to their several [spiritual heart] conditions; bestowing about an hour ... with every family [or individual]; and I found it so effectual ... that few went away without some seeming humiliation, conviction, and purpose and promise for a holy life[4]

Baxter developed a catechistic methodology of soul care.[5] Before each meeting, the individual or family received a copy of the catechism curriculum in order to prepare for their soul care session. During their one-on-one, Baxter invested time diagnosing the spiritual heart conditions of those participating,

intentionally discussing their faith and personal challenges with sin and self (Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:5-11).[6] If he was not confident in a person's faith in Christ Jesus, he spent time passionately sharing the message of the gospel.[7] Baxter closed every meeting by asking each person to summarize what they had learned and benefited from during their time together. In addition, he provided recommended reading to help the individual(s) to continue to grow in their understanding of biblical doctrine and Christ.[8]

Baxter believed the greatest soul care impact upon a family occurs under the instruction and leadership of godly parents:

Get the masters of families to do their duty, and they will not only spare you [pastors/ shepherds] a great deal of labour, but will much further the success of labours... [Pastors/shepherds] are not like to see any general reformation, till [they] procure family reformation. Some little religion there may be, here and there; but while it is confined to single persons, and is not promoted in families, it will not prosper, nor promise much future increase.[9]

Baxter's model of individual and family soul care can prove to be an effective part of your church's mission to make more and better disciples of Christ.

Baxter's Use of Small Groups to Provide Soul Care Within the Local Church

Clearly ahead of his time, Baxter developed a small group ministry to further soul care within the local church. Like many of today's faithful preachers and teachers of the Scriptures, Baxter realized many in his church were growing in

head knowledge but remained disconnected in making personal application of the truths of God's Word to their daily lives as part of their sanctification.

Baxter responded to this unacceptable gap by establishing weekly small groups to provide more effective discipleship counsel for his people. On Thursday evenings in his home, Baxter met with people to discuss the points of his previous sermons in order to help them discover practical applications, while also providing the group with opportunities to ask questions pertaining to the Scriptures or other spiritual life issues.[10] Baxter concluded that the effectiveness of small groups hinged on the leader's theological insights, as well as his shepherding heart attitude as described in Psalm 78:72:

Most judge of the counsel, as they judge of the affection of him that gives it: at least, so far as to give it a fair hearing. Oh therefore [small group leader], see that you feel a tender love to your people in your breasts, and let them perceive it in your speeches, and see it in your conduct. Let them see that you spend, and are spent, for their sakes; and that all you do is for them....[11]

Despite four hundred years between Baxter and us, I have found that the goals for small groups are still very much the same: a demonstrative overflow of love and grace, well-trained leaders who are capable of providing sound theological/biblical soul care, and a place where the "one-anothers" are modeled and lived out.

Importance of Matthew 18 and Church Restoration

Baxter also appreciated the great value of church restoration (discipline), as described in Matthew 18:15-20 (c.f. 1 Cor. 5:1-12; Gal. 6:1-2; 2 Thess. 3:14-15),^[12] for effective soul care. He was convinced of the need for the body of Christ to follow the biblical demand to confront a habitual non-repentant heart attitude. Baxter committed to graciously and patiently walking through the steps of Matthew 18, and if necessary, removing the individual(s) from the church. Interestingly, he warns us that many within the church are “not ready for it; they will not bear it,”^[13] because they do not possess the heart to endure the difficulties and burden of church restoration. Nevertheless, one of the reasons for Baxter’s success was his faithfulness to recognize the value of Matthew 18, which today’s church leaders could greatly benefit from employing in their own ministries of soul care.

My Final Encouragement: Consider Baxter’s Model of Effective Soul Care for Your Church

Scripture reiterates the need to love one another and to care for the souls of God’s people (Col. 3:13; 1 Thess. 5:11, 14, 15-18; 1 Pet. 4:10). The Baxter model can help your church make disciples and train them up (Matt. 28:18-20; 2 Tim. 2:2). I pray that we receive Baxter’s timely tap on the shoulder to remain faithful and thoughtful in training up men and women to provide biblical soul care that offers both help and hope to others within Christ’s church (1 Cor. 8:1-3; 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Questions for Reflection

1. Would you consider reading two of Baxter’s discipleship resources for the family to gain a better understanding of his

approach to family discipleship: *The Poor Man's Book* (1674) and *The Catechizing of Families* (1681)?

2. How can you utilize the Baxter model of discipleship counseling to establish a culture of soul care within your local church?
3. Would you consider writing a catechism for your church that reflects its specific doctrinal perspective and preferences that can be used as part of the discipleship process for those in the church?

[1] Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, (Banner of Truth, 1974)156.

[2] John Rogers, *The Doctrine of Faith*, 5th ed. (London, 1633), 99.

[3] Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 90; Charles F. Kemp, *A Pastoral Triumph: The Story of Richard Baxter & His Ministry at Kidderminster* (New York: The McMillan Company, 1948), 43.

[4] Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, II. 180, §44 (London, 1696).

[5] Capill, *Preaching with Spiritual Vigour* (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2003), 81.

[6] Baxter, *The Cure of Melancholy and Overmuch Sorrow, by Faith*, cntrb. Steve Doan, Puritan Sermons.com, accessed November 27, 2014, <http://www.puritansermons.com/baxter/baxter25.htm>.

[7] Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 94-96.

[8] Ibid, 101.

[9] Ibid., 102.

[10] Baxter and Orme, *The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter* (London: James Duncan, 1830), 1:115, Logos Bible Software.

[11] Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 118.

[12] Ibid., 46-47.

[13] Ibid., 46-47.

About the Author

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Joe serves as Counseling Pastor at Canyon Hills Community Church in Bothell Washington, where he has the privilege of coming alongside God's people to help them to become more like the Savior. Joe is a certified member of the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors. He received a B.S. from the University of California Los Angeles, an M.Div. from The Master's Seminary, and a D.Min. in Biblical Counseling from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Over the last 20 years, Joe has served in local churches in Colorado, California, Minnesota, Florida, Tennessee, and Washington preaching God's Word, teaching biblical counseling, as well as shepherding, discipling, and providing soul care to God's people. Joe is also the Japan Coordinator for Overseas Instruction in Counseling (OIC). Joe has been blessed with a godly wife, Tara, and they have four remarkable children, Huntington, Dakota, Skye, and Liberty, along with a Bernese Mountain Dog, Charles Spurgeon.