

Classics Revisited

Gildas Salvianus Redeivivus—The Reformed Pastor, Richard Baxter

DAVID SCEATS

I first read Baxter's *Reformed Pastor* as an ordinand in the late 1960s. It was the time of the 'Puritan Revival' which the Banner of Truth Trust did so much to promote. I had gone up to university in 1965, vaguely dissatisfied with my background of public school religion and suburban Keswick-convention evangelicalism, both of which were deeply suspicious of anything 'intellectual'. The magic of reformed theology with its scholastic logic, its verbalism, its demand for rigour and commitment to coherence was water on parched ground, not least because at one and the same time it offered to open the door on a thinking religion, and demanded a faith commitment to a position whose minority status gave it just enough of a tinge of self-sacrifice to appeal to an adolescent from the never-had-it-so-good generation. Calvinism was suddenly cool!

I soon discovered puritanism. Here was a connection between the heady delights of reformed theology and the evangelical spirituality of my background and, during my years of theological study and preparation for ministry, the writings and thinking of English puritanism came to play an increasingly formative part in my own growth and understanding. Hardly surprising, then, that I should read Baxter's *Reformed Pastor*, the *locus classicus* of puritan thinking about ministry, in preparation for my own ordination. Nor that I should do so again when I became involved in training other people for ordained ministry, or that it should figure among the set texts of a course I taught in puritan spirituality. Inevitably when my own research work led me to investigate puritan pastoral care, *The Reformed Pastor* was a major focus of interest. It has been instructive to read it again after a space of ten years in parochial and diocesan ministry during which I have discovered how much easier it is to set goals for others than to achieve them for oneself!

For six years, now, my primary responsibility has been the development of the ministry of the whole *laos* of God, both in the sense of the shared ministry that Christians offer each other and the world, and also in the sense of patterns of local church leadership in which laity and clergy work collaboratively. I have therefore returned to Baxter's classic with another perspective and new questions, informed by discoveries about adult learning (deemed unnecessary for theological college lecturers in the 1970s!) and insights into the lay/clergy relationship. Revisiting a classic may be about rediscovering forgotten treasures, or uncovering hitherto unsuspected ones.

It may be about getting in touch with one's own roots; but it may also bring to the surface the questions of the present and a new self awareness. The visitor, not the text, will have changed.

Reforming the pastoral office

Like most puritan treatises, *Gildas Salvianas*,¹ or, *The Reformed Pastor*, showing the nature of the Pastoral work; especially in Private Instruction and Catechizing; with an open CONFESSION of our too open SINS,² began life as a sermon. Baxter prepared it for a meeting of his local ministers' fraternal at Worcester in December 1655. The ministers of the Worcestershire Association had entered into a covenant with each other to include the work of catechizing households and private instruction of individuals in their ministry. This agreement was to take effect on December 4th, and the members of the Association set that day aside for meeting together for fasting and humiliation in preparation for undertaking this ministry. Baxter, who had been catechizing his parishioners at Kidderminster for some time already, and was therefore widely regarded as an exponent of good practice in this area, was invited to give what, today, would be called the keynote address at this gathering. His health, however, which was never good, deteriorated immediately beforehand, and instead of attending the meeting to preach himself, he wrote up his notes, which, he admits, had 'proved longer than could be delivered in one or two sermons', as the work we now know by its subtitle, *The Reformed Pastor*. It is doubtful, therefore, whether any of it was heard on the occasion for which it was ostensibly written, though it met with immediate acclaim once it was published³ and subsequent generations of ministers have continued to find it an inspiration. In his introduction to the Banner of Truth reprint, J. I. Packer quotes Oliver Heywood, Samuel Wesley, John Wesley, Philip Doddridge, C. H. Spurgeon, Daniel Wilson and Hensley Henson in endorsement of it.

Whether the ministers of the Worcestershire Association would have joined this chorus of acclamation we cannot know. Significantly, Packer also notes in his introduction that

... though always respected for his godliness and pastoral prowess ...
(Baxter's) combative, judgmental, pedagogic way of proceeding with

- 1 So called after two fairly obscure Christian writers of the fifth and sixth centuries. Gildas, whom Baxter quotes in his preface (in Latin) as an example of plain speaking, to justify the plainness of his own words about the sins of the ministry, does not even merit an entry in the New International Dictionary of the Christian Church. Salvian was an Augustinian ascetic and presbyter of Marseilles, whose main work, *De Gubernatione Dei*, presents the barbarian incursions as the retribution of God's providence upon the social and sexual sins of Christian Rome.
- 2 References are to the 1862 abridged Edinburgh edition of William Brown, reprinted by the Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, as a Puritan Paperback in 1974. The full text can be found in *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter*, London, 1838, vol. iv, pp 353-484.
- 3 In his introduction to the Banner of Truth reprint, J. I. Packer cites a number of approving references to *The Reformed Pastor* from the period following its publication. Baxter himself wrote in 1665: '... it prevailed with many ministers to set upon that work which I there exhort them to. Even from beyond the seas I have had letters of request to direct them ...', *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, 1666, vol. I, p 115.

his peers made failure a foregone conclusion every time⁴

In context this is an observation about his performance in the public arena of state and church politics; readers of the *Reformed Pastor*, may wonder if the same might have been said of his way of proceeding with his ministerial colleagues in Worcestershire. He was certainly quite well aware himself that what he had written might have given offence, and his invocation of the names of Gildas and Salvian, neither of whom, it seems, could have found much use for poison as long as they had a pen in their hand, was presumably intended to claim at least the sanction of precedent for what Baxter described as 'plain speaking'. Perhaps the affliction that prevented him from delivering his message in person was at least partially diplomatic, though in view of what we know about his personality that seems unlikely!

It is in this context that Baxter's use of the word 'reformed' in the title of the treatise is to be understood. It was not, as is often assumed, an indication that he was attempting describe the work of the godly pastor influenced by Calvinistic theology, but rather a signal of the concern he expresses in his own dedicatory epistle 'To the clergy of Britain and Ireland':

To bear with the vices of the ministry is to promote the ruin of the church ... and how can we more effectually further a reformation than by endeavouring to reform the leaders of the church? For my part, I have done as I would be done by; and it is in tender love to the brethren, whom I venture to reprehend — not to make them contemptible and odious, but to heal the evils that would make them so — that so no enemy may find this matter of reproach among us Would you be but as impatient with your sins as with our reproofs, you should hear no more from us⁵

The reformed pastor, then, is the pastor whose ministerial conduct has been reformed and renewed — the pastor who has repented of the special sins of pastors, and amended his life in accordance with the prescriptions that Baxter offers. The choice of this title, then, reflects the fact that Baxter started from the assumption that the pastoral ministry of his day was ineffective and inadequate because of its sins. Only contrition, repentance, and deep-seated amendment of life — in short, reformation — on the part of the pastors could release the outpouring of the Spirit on the English church. At one time, in the heady days of the Solemn League and Covenant, the progress of the saints had seemed to hold out the promise of such an outpouring, but it had never materialised and Church and people were as divided, ignorant and uncaring of spiritual things as ever. What other conclusion could be drawn, when all had looked set so fair for renewal, but that the fault lay with those responsible for the leadership of the nation's spiritual life? The problems of the Church, in short, must be laid squarely at the door of the ministry.

To be fair to Baxter, he admits his own participation in the sins he criticises, and disclaims any intention of taking the moral high ground:

If any of you should charge me with arrogance or immodesty ... as if ... I judged myself sufficient to admonish you, I crave your candid

4 R. Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, Edinburgh 1974, p 10.

5 *Ibid.*, p 39f.

interpretation of my boldness, assuring you that I ... displease myself as much as some of you But it is the mere necessity of the souls of men, and my desire of their salvation, and of the prosperity of the church, which forceth me to this arrogance and immodesty, if so it must be called.⁶

Nevertheless, it is hard to escape the conclusion that his concern is at least partially born of the judgmental, confrontational mindset that we have already noted. And, it must be remembered, this is Baxter's analysis, not of the ministry of the Church of England as it was before the Civil War, when the spectrum of standpoints within the Church was quite wide, but of the ministry of the Commonwealth period, which, though it represented every possible view of theological and ecclesiological questions within the ambit of the Reformed tradition, was quite uniformly 'puritan' in opinions about spirituality, ministry, and what we would call 'churchmanship'. Whatever would he have made of the ministry of the Church of England today?

Questions for preachers

The Reformed Pastor comprises four unequal parts. Its homiletic origins can be seen at the outset — it takes its point of departure from Acts 20:28,⁷ and it develops its theme in homiletic form, exploring first what it is for pastors to take heed to themselves, second, what it is to take heed to all the flock, thirdly, in typically puritan fashion, outlining a 'use' of humiliation, and finally going on to recommend the practice of catechizing and personal instruction. Its themes are the sins and inadequacies of pastors, with much attention given (as is to be expected in a puritan treatise on ministry) to the preaching office, and its method is to identify and describe the faults it criticises, and to urge a variety of motives (mainly subjective) to their correction. In the paperback edition, 37 pages are devoted to the first section on 'taking heed to ourselves', 47 to the second on 'taking heed to the flock', 30 to the 'use of humiliation', 58 to arguments in favour of catechizing, and 24 to a description of good practice based on Baxter's experience in Kidderminster. In effect there are 192 rhetorical pages and 24 practical ones.

When I first read it, it was the rhetorical part that made the impression; the section at the end about Baxter's practice of catechising at Kidderminster was simply an interesting historical detail. What young man on the verge of ordination, newly seasoned with the Reformed tradition's exalted view of the preacher's office, could fail to be moved by fervour like this?

One of our most heinous and palpable sins is PRIDE ... so prevalent in some of us that it inditeth our discourses, it chooseth our company, it formeth our countenances How often doth it go with us to our study, and there sit with us, and do our work! How often doth it choose our subject, and, more frequently still, our words and ornaments! God commandeth us to be as plain as we can, that we may inform the ignorant; and as convincing and serious as we are able, that we may

6 *Ibid.*, p 41.

7 'Take heed to yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.'

melt and change their hardened hearts. But pride stands by and contradicteth all It persuadeth us to paint the window, that it may dim the light: and to speak to our people that which they cannot understand; to let them know that we are able to speak unprofitably And when Pride hath made the sermon it goeth with us into the pulpit, it formeth our tone, it animateth us in the delivery, it takes us off from that which may be displeasing, how necessary soever, and setteth us in pursuit of vain applause. In short, the sum of all is this ... it makes men ask What shall I say, and how shall I deliver it, to be thought a learned able preacher, and to be applauded by all that hear me? When the sermon is done, pride goeth home with them and maketh them more eager to know whether they were applauded than whether they did prevail for the saving of souls.⁸

Anyone who values preaching must feel the emotional force of a passage like that, and the higher we value the preaching ministry, the more damning we are likely to find the accusation. Baxter was addressing readers who, like himself regarded preaching so highly that they tended to see it as the primary task of the ministry; indeed for many seventeenth-century puritans preaching was the whole work of pastoral ministry. Virtually every puritan treatise on the pastoral office starts from the assumption that preaching, as a method of communication, is uniquely ordained of God as the means by which men and women may experience grace.⁹ An important part of the argument of *The Reformed Pastor* is that preaching alone does not discharge the minister's responsibilities to his flock, and that individual, personalised teaching, and 'the hearing of cases of conscience' is also necessary. Indeed, it is here that the uniqueness of Baxter's work lies in the wider context of puritan *pastoralia*. It is the first pastoral treatise formally to accord an equivalent importance in pastoral ministry to the individual teaching and counselling that today we distinguish from preaching by the designation 'pastoral care'. Intriguingly, it is also the last major treatise on the pastoral office from the puritan era. Baxter's departure from tradition no doubt reflects the contextual difference — he wrote against the background of a puritan spirituality that had become part of the national establishment instead of a protest movement. But it is nevertheless surprising that only at this late stage should the literature give this explicit recognition to an approach to pastoral ministry which modern writers since William Haller,¹⁰ with his metaphor 'Physicians of the Soul', have recognised as one of the hallmarks of puritanism.

8 Ibid., p 137f.

9 See for example, R. Greenham, 'Of the Mutual Duties Between the Ministers and the People', *Works*, 1605, p 341: '... faith cannot be attained without the hearing of God's word preached; the word itself cannot be preached without a preacher; therefore preachers are the only means appointed by God to work faith in his children...', or T. Manton, 'Sermon on 1 Cor. 1:21', *Complete Works*, ed. T. Smith, 1870, vol. xiii, p 359: 'Plain preaching seems a poor, useless thing; a vain artifice to catch souls, it is as much despised by carnal reason in the heart as it is by vain men in the world, yet this is God's way to convert the soul....' The argument is usually based on a mis-translation of 1 Cor. 1:21 in the AV and other contemporary translations, which follow the Vulgate in reading *praedicationis* for the Greek *kerugma*.

10 W. Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism*, New York 1938.

The sins of the clergy

Reading *The Reformed Pastor* again, however, I find myself responding rather differently. The rhetoric still has power, but I recognise what Baxter is doing, and I am not really sure I approve. In educational design terms he is making a bid for a high level of control, and the medium through which he is trying to realise it is the guilt of his readers. There are three problems here. In the first place, this is likely to be an unsuccessful strategy. Guilt is not an effective driver of motivation; it is more likely to lead to low morale and consequent loss of confidence than to commitment and reformation. Guilt is not an agent of long-term change.

In the second place, I believe we must question the implicit theological foundation of Baxter's approach to ministry, for it seems to me that he comes very close, at a number of points, to suggesting that pastors (if not their people) are under a regime of justification by works. Probably this is no more than an effect of the well established puritan commitment to what Baxter calls 'affectionate practical divinity'. Puritan divines were always concerned to see the effects of the gospel in those who were the subjects of the gracious operations of the Spirit. Moreover, the combination of the incipient rationalism of their theological system (which led them to believe that all grace was mediated through the understanding) with this concern for the fruits of grace, meant that they were always fascinated by the search for what Thomas Hooker called 'rules and a method' which could be relied upon to guide their pastoral ministry. Add to that a consequence of their powerful belief in providence, which was that God 'worketh ordinarily by means', and that it was therefore the believer's responsibility to use the means which would secure the desired end, and their belief in the importance of 'mutual censure' to which Baxter's treatise bears mute witness, and the final result is a fertile seed-bed for an instinctive tendency to look to spiritual exercises and achievements for self-justification. This is, of course, the popular caricature of puritanism, and we need look no further than the evidence of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, for evidence that it was a caricature recognisable at the time. The caricature is not the true picture, and much puritan preaching and teaching gives it the lie, but like all caricatures, it has some foundation in reality. It is in the context of writings such as Baxter's laboured, precise and analytical examination of pastoral sins that the foundation is to be found.

In the third place, I believe Baxter's approach to the question of ministerial responsibility is pastorally flawed. Guilt (especially in the context of an implicit search for justification) is a source of stress, and it is a feeling of stress that is my chief sensation, on reading this longer first part of the text after a space of ten years. By attempting to stretch his clerical readers on the rack of their own conscience Baxter may simply be increasing the pressures that have led to the 'sins' that he criticises. This has a bearing on the value we place on Baxter's treatise today. Obviously we could not treat it as a simple prescription for the ills of the modern Church. The particular remedy that Baxter offers — catechizing — is socially and educationally contextualised quite firmly in the pre-enlightenment world, and based, as we shall see shortly, on a class-dependent relationship between clergy and laity that

simply no longer obtains. Clearly we shall need to do some hermeneutical work with the pragmatic parts of this text. But the rhetorical sections, which explore the inner motivations and the spiritual priorities and objectives of the pastor, appear at first to speak much more immediately to modern readers. And in the situation of the contemporary Church, with its falling rolls and financial difficulties, with its ever more thinly-stretched manpower, with the impossible (even if sometimes imaginary) burden of perceived expectations that many clergy find projected upon them, and with the ever-increasing sense of inadequacy that arises from our inability to motivate the Church or stem the tide of secularism, pluralism and plain old-fashioned wickedness, stress is enough of a problem already. It is as easy now to stir up guilt as it was in 1655, but, heaven knows, we can find cause enough in our own consciences for self-accusation, without needing a Baxter to tell us that what we *have* accomplished has all been born of pride, carnal hypocrisy and self-promotion.

Besides this, Baxter's approach rests, as we have seen, on the assumption that the problems of the Church are the consequence of the failings of the ministry, a popular thesis that nevertheless needs at least to be examined. To advance such an argument takes us uncomfortably close to the view that the ministry is the Church (in a sense different from that in which the laity is the Church). That Baxter would formally have repudiated such a view is not in doubt, but it is a perception with a very long pedigree and a tendency to manifest itself in all sorts of guises and instinctive reactions. Baxter's answer would be that ministers, being called to special privileges and a unique dignity, have commensurate responsibilities.

Weaker gifts and graces may carry a man through in a more even course of life ... 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 ... you must look to come off with greater shame and deeper wounds of conscience than if you had lived a common life¹¹

Consider that you have the honour to encourage you to the labour. And a great honour it is to be the ambassadors of God, and the instruments of men's conversion Consider that you have many other excellent privileges of the ministerial office to encourage you to the work Is it nothing to be brought up to learning when others are brought up to the cart and plough? and to be furnished with so much delightful knowledge when the world lieth in ignorance? Is it nothing to converse with learned men ... when others must converse with almost none but the most vulgar and illiterate? ... But especially, what an excellent privilege is it, to live in studying and preaching Christ!¹²

Nevertheless, the question must remain open whether Baxter, whose approach to the pastoral relationship of clergy and laity (like that of every other mainline puritan writer on the subject) was deeply clericalist, was not implicitly transferring something of the mediaeval notion of the religious — the *real* Christian — to the minister of the reformed Church. There are

11 *Ibid.*, pp 77f.

12 *Ibid.*, pp 127f.

certainly times when, in common with his peers, the language he uses of the dignity and honour of the ministry is so exalted that it is hard to escape the conclusion that he is describing something remarkably similar in practice (if not in concept) to the priesthood he so vigorously criticises in those who espouse the 'prelatical' or 'romish' factions.

It is not, in any case, I believe, true to our own experience to suppose that the Church's problems are a result of the sins of its ministers. I can speak, of course, only for those I meet, but as a diocesan officer responsible for encouraging the development of new patterns of shared ministry in some 470 parish and district churches, my impression of the Church's ordained ministry is of godly men and women deeply concerned for the well-being of those they serve, and sacrificial in the way they give themselves to their work. Scapegoating is, for many, a not unfamiliar experience, and here they might find themselves on familiar ground with *The Reformed Pastor*, but it seems to me that to argue the ministry as the cause of the Church's ills is to accord it an unwarranted significance in the scheme of things. The truth is far more complex, and the clergy, like the Church they serve, are much more likely to be the victims than the source of the problems.

My difficulty with Baxter, in other words, is that his view of ordained ministry was over-inflated, and this makes his diagnosis suspect. What the ministry of today most needs is affirmation and encouragement as we move into a situation in which the clear distinction between pastor and flock which we have been used to for so many centuries is increasingly likely to dissolve. For Baxter, that distinction was a fundamental given of the socio-economic status *quo*, and it betrays itself in the sort of language he uses to describe the pastoral relationship.

Oh what a world of work have you to do! ... To have such a multitude of ignorant persons, as most of us have, what work will it find us! What a pitiful life is it, to have to reason with men that have almost lost the use of reason, and to argue with them that understand neither themselves nor you! O brethren, what a world of wickedness have we to contend with in one soul; and what a number of these worlds! ... And when you think your work doth happily succeed ... alas! they may after all this prove unsound and false at the heart In the saints themselves, how soon do the Christian graces languish if you neglect them; and how easily are they drawn into sinful ways to the dishonour of the gospel, and to their own loss and sorrow. If this be the work of a minister you may see what a life he hath to lead.¹³

It should hardly surprise us to find little sense here of any sort of collegiality between pastor and people. We are, after all, in an age when the vast majority had only the most rudimentary education if they had any at all. What is more disturbing is the absence of any sense of commonality of faith. It does not feel as though pastor and flock are part of the same community. The relationship indicated here is one in which the people are merely the subjects of the activity of the pastor. An 'us and them' relationship of this sort is a far cry, not only from the way in which the relationship of ministry and congregation is increasingly being understood today, but, even more seriously,

13 *Ibid.*, pp 125f.

from the way in which it seems to have been understood in the New Testament.

The development of collaborative patterns of ministry which is likely to be an increasing feature of the Church of our future will almost certainly result in changes in the role of the stipendiary ministry, and in the transfer of many of the functions with which *The Reformed Pastor* is concerned to unpaid voluntary ministry. Baxter would have disapproved of such a development¹⁴ as a devaluation of the quality of the Church's ministry. But he was able to assume as part of the unchanging fabric of things the continuation of a 'professional' ministry whose members would be drawn from the educated classes (and therefore whose interests would coincide with those of the lesser gentry who exercised local leadership as magistrates, and were the main constituency represented in Parliament), and who would continue to receive the state-sanctioned support of the tithe in circumstances of relative economic stability. In effect his exploration of the pastoral office is based on an economic and social relationship between clergy and people which can no longer be sustained, and this must call in question how far what appears to be a 'timeless' exploration of the pastoral office in the rhetorical sections of this work is, in fact, just as historically and culturally conditioned as the descriptions of Baxter's catechetical method in the final section.

Practical advice

By contrast with what had so far proved a disappointing experience of revisiting *The Reformed Pastor*, it was the last 24 pages — the section describing Baxter's approach to catechizing at Kidderminster, that I found the most moving and remarkable part of the whole work in this re-reading. In part this reflects how my own interests have developed since I last read it. A five-page description of good practice now seems to me to be worth twenty-five pages of theory. But above all I found myself surprised by the contrast between this short final section and the rest of the work. Gone is the hectoring tone, the combativeness, the repetitiveness. The paternalistic and slightly patronising relationship with the lay members of the Church is still present, of course, but the sense of distance, of pastor and people as creatures from different, though intersecting, planetary spheres is almost completely absent. And there is sound pastoral sense:

... it will be very necessary that we give one of the catechisms to every family in the parish, whether rich or poor so that they may be without excuse: for if you leave it to themselves to buy them, perhaps the half of them will not get them As to the delivery of them, the best way is for the minister first to give notice in the congregation ... and then to go from house to house and deliver them ... and, as he goes round, to take a list of all the persons who have come to years of discretion in the several families, that he may know whom he has to take care of and instruct, and who he has to instruct when it cometh to their turn¹⁵

14 *Ibid.*, p 151.

15 *Ibid.*, p 235f.

Tell them publicly, that if they have learned any other catechism already, you will not urge them to learn this, unless they desire it themselves As for the old people who are of weak memories ... who complain that they cannot remember the words; tell them that you do not expect them to perplex their minds overmuch about it, but to hear it often read over and to see that they understand it¹⁶

Responsibility still resides with the minister; Baxter is hardly putting forward a method of instruction that will encourage people to take responsibility for their learning, but it is unfair to suggest he should: Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is still three hundred years in the future. His instincts, however, are sound enough:

... 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 it will tend to their shame to have others hear their answers I find by experience, people will better take plain close dealing about their sin, and misery, and duty when you have them alone.¹⁷

I would, however, advise you to be very cautious how you pass too hasty or absolute censures on any you have to do with; because, it is not so easy a matter to discern a man to be certainly graceless, as many imagine it to be, and you may do the work in hand as well without such an absolute conclusion as with it.¹⁸

What is more surprising is that this sort of thing needed to be said at all to experienced pastors. Perhaps it is just Baxter being thorough. But perhaps it is a vivid illustration of just how much the puritan pastor assumed that preaching really was the sum total of the pastoral office.

The method, of course, is open to question. By the time Baxter has finished describing it we are left wondering whether someone going through it would really have the root of faith in them, or whether, in reality, what it is all about is providing the pastor with sufficient basis for feeling he has discharged his duty, and that if anyone still does not understand, it must be because their mind is darkened. And as with any catechetical approach to teaching, there is a danger that people are simply taught the verbalisation of politically correct statements. But in this connection it is worth quoting a passage at greater length:

When you perceive that they do not understand the meaning of your question, you must draw out their answer by an equivalent, or expository question; or, if that will not do, you must frame the answer into your question, and require in reply but Yes or No. I have asked some very ignorant people, 'How do you think your sins, which are so many and so great can be pardoned?' and they tell me, 'By their repenting and amending their lives;' and never mention Jesus Christ. I ask them further, 'But do you think that your amendment can make God any amends or satisfaction for the sin that is past?' They will

16 Ibid., p 236.

17 Ibid., p 239.

18 Ibid., p 248.

answer, 'We hope so, or else we know not what will?' One would now think that these men had no knowledge of Christ at all, since they make no mention of him; and some indeed, I find have no knowledge of him; and when I tell them the history of Christ, and what he is and did, and suffered, they stand wondering at it as at a strange thing; and some say They never heard this much before, nor knew it, though they came to church each Lord's Day. But some, I perceive, give such answers because they understand not the scope of my question; but suppose that I take Christ's death for granted, and that I only ask them 'What shall make God satisfaction as their part under Christ?' — though in this also they reveal sad ignorance. And when I ask them 'Whether their good deeds can merit any thing from God?' they answer, 'No; but they hope God will accept them.' And if I ask them further 'Can you be saved without the death of Christ?' they say 'No.' And if I ask still further, 'What hath he done or suffered for you?' they will say, 'He died for us; or he shed his blood for us;' and will profess that they place their confidence in that for salvation.¹⁹

This is a fascinating window on a puritan pastor at work. He is using the catechism not as procrustean bed, but as a flexible tool to explore the spiritual understanding and pastoral needs of his congregation.

We have different tools today, and different methods of using them — *Good News Down the Street*, Lent Study Groups, the Bishop's Certificate Course — but they have much the same purpose. It is no longer culturally possible, even it were pastorally desirable to 'require' the congregation to visit their ministers by families to 'repeat' the sermon from the previous Sunday, as was Baxter's practice every Thursday night,²⁰ but we recognise the value and importance of face to face ministry. We have similar objectives, too, though we may feel more concerned to ensure the reality of inward experience, and less persuaded of the importance of the exact verbal accuracy of the statements by which Christians try to articulate their faith. Faith itself, for some, may well seem much less patient of such precise definition, and much more susceptible to doubt and uncertainty than the scholastic formulations of seventeenth-century Bezan Calvinism. But inasmuch as *The Reformed Pastor* is a testimony from the past to the abiding importance of a ministry based on immediate personal relationships as well as on pulpit work of various kinds, we may well find it still has a part to play in encouraging us to explore ways in which we can secure effective patterns of personal ministry for our own cultural setting. On the other hand, however, if we look to it as an inspiration for our motives and objectives in ministry, we may need to treat it with care: it speaks to things deeply buried in our tradition which may be better not exhumed and if we search here for models of our ministerial and pastoral relationships, we shall run the risk of being seriously misled. Richard Baxter speaks to us from the past. He cannot take us into the future.

The Revd David Sceats is Director of Local Ministry Development and Warden of Readers in the Diocese of Lichfield

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 242f.

²⁰ *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, vol. i, p 83.