

PASTORAL HOME VISITS

a brief study

1. Elder Home Visitations

Luther knocked on doors and discovered that his parishioners didn't know even the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, or the Lord's Prayer. Some were not even prepared to receive Communion. What should a pastor do about congregants like these? Well, he should get to know them in concrete situations. He should go to them. He should basically evangelize his own congregation. When Luther did this, the result was the Small and Larger Catechism.

In Reformed circles, too, Calvin—arguably, a busy guy—taught his Genevan Catechism to the youth. Consequently, they understood that the faith they were learning from Calvin and other pastors in Geneva was the same faith that their parents and others held in the church. They weren't simply passed off to a “youth ministry” that had little connection with the regular life of the church.

Pastors today aren't as busy as Luther. Yet Luther said that it was the pastor's duty to teach the catechism to the people, and he did so. He did it for the young people. And he taught them on personal visits.

Baxter set aside two days per week, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, to perform this work of pastoral visitation.

Richard Baxter taught the following:

Visiting, Baxter argued, is the principle method of bringing about personal "reformation" in the parish.

Baxter combined visitation with instruction into an overall strategy of pastoral care. He insisted that every pastor should devote a large portion of the week to visiting people in their homes, following the apostles' example ([Acts 5:42](#)) by instructing them on the "principles of religion" and testing their knowledge.

"as the physician's work is half done when he understands the disease, so, when you are well acquainted with your people's case, you will know what to preach on"

Visitation also engages the pastor as a healer. Baxter uses the images of the "shepherd" and the "physician" to describe the minister. We are called to bind up the brokenhearted and to heal their wounds with the medicine of the gospel. Unlike other helpers, pastors can actually go out to seek and save the lost. We have what Paul Pruyser has called "the pastoral right of initiative and access." Once people have invited us in, we discover how many broken and breaking hearts there are out there. It never ceases to amaze me how people will open their hearts to their pastor during the course of the visit, confiding things they have not told even their closest friends or family. We can use such opportunities to teach them of the healing power of the Savior.

Using Pastoral Visitation to Teach/Instruct the Flock

First, the pastor has certain "rites of passage" which provide excellent teaching opportunities.

Second, pastors can teach during times of crisis.

3 reasons for home visitation (taken from Richard Baxter)

1. **Evangelism** – We have the best opportunity to convince people of the truth when we speak to each one's particular questions and situation. We need to be able to say to the sinner, "You are the man!" and plainly mention his particular case. Too direct? Perhaps more later on our terrible inability to identify sin with clarity *and* care.
2. **Education** - Visiting from house to house comes from Paul's example in Acts 20. He says he taught in public and from house to house. Our people need personal instruction in the faith, not just public preaching. By the way, Baxter used a catechism for this.
3. **Preaching** - Our preaching is much better when we know the people hearing it. This is the Word of God for the people of God. We preach best when we know both. I fear that more sermons now originate in the boardroom (the strategic direction speech) than a living room. I even worry that too many sermons originate only in a pastor's study (the academic treatise or the personal reflection that misidentifies where others are).

Below is a list of questions for both congregants and elders to review *before* a pastoral visit (from Joseph Pipa):

Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves. [2 Cor. 13:5](#)

I. YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF YOURSELF

- * Do you know for sure that you are a Christian?
- * Are you engaged in regular Bible Study? Alternatively, are you having difficulty with consistent Bible Study and family devotions?
- * How is your prayer life? Do you pray regularly?
- * Can you point to areas of your life where you have grown recently?
- * Are there any areas in your Christian experience in which you are having problems?
- * Is there a particular temptation or sin that continues to defeat you spiritually?
- * Where would you like to see yourself be spiritually in 1 year, 5 years, 10 years?

II. YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF GOD

- * What has God been teaching you about Himself lately? Or, what Attribute of God has meant the most to you recently?
- * Are there any theological truths/doctrines that you are wrestling with, confused about, or need clarification on? Have any of your theological beliefs changed?
- * What Christian books have you read lately?
- * Are you able to share your faith with others? If not, would you be interested in learning how to share your faith? Would you like to be discipled?

III. YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO THE WORLD

- * If you have a family, how is your family doing spiritually? What are you doing with respect to family devotions (Bible reading, prayer, catechism, etc.)?
- * Do you see any evidence of grace in the lives of your children? Are they showing an increased interest in the things of the Lord? Do they like to pray and read the Bible? Are they baptized? Are they ready to make a profession of faith?
- * How is your relationship with your Spouse? Children? Others?
- * How do others see your walk as a Christian (home, neighbors, work, church, etc.)?
- * How are you seeking to affect the world around you with your Christian faith?

IV. YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO THE CHURCH

- * What would you like to see improved at our Church?
- * What do you especially like about our Church?
- * What kind of advice/counsel can we provide you with at this time?

From the *Westminster Directory for Worship*

It is the duty of the minister not only to teach the people committed to his charge in publick, but privately; and particularly to admonish, exhort, reprove, and comfort them, upon all seasonable occasions, so afar as his time, strength, and personal safety will permit.

He is to admonish them, in time of health, to prepare for death; and, for that purpose, they are often to confer with their minister about the estate of their souls; and, in times of sickness, to desire his advice and help, timely and seasonable, before their strength and understanding fail them.

Reminder to the Elder/Shepherd to Keep the Visit Practical & Focused — Pastoral!

The pastor should visit in the homes of his people socially, but the pastoral visit is to inquire into the spiritual well being of the family.

Begin the visit with prayer and scripture reading. If there are children in the home, visit with each of them first, inquire if they are trusting Christ and seeking to obey him. Do they read their Bibles and pray? Are they wrestling with particular sins? How are they doing in their schoolwork? Be sure to ask them catechism questions. You might dismiss the children with a brief exhortation and prayer, before you begin talking with the adults.

As with the children, we should inquire of adults, are they making good use of the means of grace? Are they faithful in Bible reading and prayer? Does the father lead the family in family worship? Are they catechizing their children? What books have they read recently? Are they profiting from the sermons?

How are they spending the Lord's Day? What are their particular struggles and temptations? How well to they relate in the family (husband and wife; parents and children)? Do they have any concerns or questions about the church?

Conclude the visit with a brief scriptural exhortation and prayer.