

Richard Baxter

A Christian Directory (1990) by Richard Baxter is a treasury of doxological counseling for souls seeking to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ. Though there is frequent repetition of themes in Baxter, this only makes it obvious that he has a well-formed theological map for counseling which nearly every topic gets processed through. I will summarize and combine some of the directives he gives to "bring the soul into subjection to God" as supreme King (76-9) and the directives he gives for hating sin (89-90) and delighting ourselves in God (138-42). Listed below are the common themes which run parallel in most of Baxter's doxological method.

1. The Scriptures are sufficient to show us how to please God in every topic of life.

2. Know, remember and delight in who the triune God is in his titles, attributes and perfections as the one whom we can trust, love, hope in. Meditate on each attribute carefully to understand why God can be trusted, loved and obeyed. For example, God is everywhere present; glorify him, since he is watching you.

3. Delight in God by seeing his glory revealed in created things and mankind, in his general and special providence, in Christ's person and work, in his promises and commands, in his covenant, in his church, in his ministers speaking of him, in his Word, in his worship and sacraments, by his Spirit, and in your hope of heavenly glory even though you may be suffering. All of life and all revealed truth assist in showing his glory and leading us to delight in him by faith. This delight makes us willing and eager to comply with any command or promise God.

4. Seeking delight or pleasure is a common trait among men. Showing men that there are better pleasures in God than in the world can banish sinful pleasures.

5. Know yourself, your weakness, your root sins, your proneness to love lesser pleasures, and watch and pray against any sin, realizing the terrible offense of all sin as it spits on the glory of God expressed in all his attributes, promises, rewards,

threats, creation, providence, commandments, work and example in Christ, Spirit, Word, worship, sacraments, and his church.

6. Know the devil is behind all seductions appealing to sinful desires for pleasure, confusing your knowledge of what is right, presenting obedience as burdensome or frightening with sufferings. See him offering you a trade in every sin: "Forsake God and his eternal blessings in exchange for a single temporary sinful pleasure."

7. Remember the effects of disobedience and the curse of sin, both in this life and in the eternal suffering to come. Look at the effects of disobedience in your life and in the lives of others; see what trials and destruction disobedience usually brings into the families and nations of the world.

8. Consider often the temporal blessings, pure delights and eternal benefits of obedience. Know the reason all men were created: to glorify God by displaying his attributes on them (patience, kindness, justice and wrath) and in them (saving mercy, grace, love and joy). Those who seek him will enjoy him forever in heaven.

In his later years, Baxter (1990, lvi) reflected on how his views had changed over the years of ministry and teaching.

My judgment is much more for frequent and serious meditation on the heavenly blessedness, than it was heretofore in my younger days. I then thought that a sermon on the attributes of God, and the joys of heaven, were not the most excellent; and was wont to say, 'Every body knoweth this, that God is great and good, and that heaven is a blessed place; I had rather hear how I may attain it.' And nothing pleased me so well as the doctrine of regeneration, and the marks of sincerity, because these subjects were suitable to me in that state. But now I had rather read, hear, or meditate on God and heaven, than on any other subject; for I perceive that it is the object that altereth and elevateth the mind, [for the mind will become like the object which it meditates on]; and that it is not only useful to our comfort, to be much in heaven in our believing thoughts, but that it must animate all our other duties, and fortify us against every temptation and sin; and that the love of

[God and heaven] is the poise, or spring, which setteth every wheel agoing, and must put us on to all the means [of grace]; and that a man is no more a Christian indeed, than he is heavenly.

. . . But now, though I am greatly convinced of the need of heart-acquaintance and employment, yet I see more need of a higher work; and that I should look oftener upon Christ, and God, and heaven, than upon my own heart. [In my heart] I can find distempers to trouble me, and some evidence of my peace; but it is above that I must find matter of delight and joy, and love and peace itself. Therefore I would have one thought at home, upon myself and my sins, and many thoughts above, upon the high, the amiable, and beautifying objects.

Here we observe the progress of the gospel in the soul of a minister. While in his early years Baxter had a more self-focused view of sanctification (study his own life and heart sins) and a preoccupation with how to obtain salvation and assurance, in his maturity he saw the source of salvation and sanctification in the glory of God himself. While meditating on his sin was relevant, meditating on God transformed him into God's likeness. Heavenly-mindedness and the love of God motivates all Christian duty and the diligent use of prayer, the Scriptures, the sacraments, fellowship, creation and providence as means to meditate on the attributes of God and the pleasures in God to be enjoyed in heaven. The attributes of God were the unifying theme of Baxter's theological method; sanctification was believing and delighting in God. Whether discussing sin or Christ, they were all defined in relation to the revelation of God's attributes.

Baxter (86-8) unfolds theme 5 on the "intrinsic malignity of sin" in a way that will be useful in the map-making process. What is striking about his demonstration of the evil of sin is the knowledge of God's attributes which expose the foolishness of sin. His definitions of the evil of sin are essential in developing a comprehensive doxological counseling system which hates sin as an enemy to God's glory. God's glory must be supreme even in our definition of sin. God's glory must

be supreme in true repentance—in learning to hate sin and put sin to death.¹ I here reprint Baxter's forty principles in full.

1. Sin is (formally) the violation of the perfect, holy, righteous law of God.
2. It is a denial or contempt of the authority, or governing power, of God: as if we said, Thou shalt not be our Governor in this.
3. It is usurping the sovereign power to ourselves of governing ourselves, in that act: for when we refuse God's government, we set up ourselves in his stead; and so make gods of ourselves as to ourselves, as if we were self-sufficient, independent, and had right hereto.
4. It is a denying or contempt of the wisdom of God, as if he had unwisely made us a law which is unmeet to rule us.
5. It is a setting up of our folly in the place of God's wisdom, and preferring it before him; as if we were wiser to know how to govern ourselves, and to know what is fittest and best for us now to do, than God is.
6. It is a contempt of the goodness of God, as he is the maker of the law: as if he had not done that which is best, but that which may be corrected or contradicted, and there were some evil in it to be avoided.
7. It is a preferring our naughtiness before his goodness, as if we would do it better, or choose better what to do.
8. It is a contempt or denial of the holiness and purity of God, which sets him against sin, as light is against darkness.
9. It is a violation of God's propriety or dominion, robbing him of the use and service of that which is absolutely and totally his own.
10. It is a claiming of propriety in ourselves, as if we were our own, and might do with ourselves as we list.
11. It is a contempt of the gracious promises of God, by which he allured and bound us to obedience.
12. It is a contempt of the dreadful threatenings of God, by which he would have restrained us from evil.
13. It is a contempt or denial of the dreadful day of judgment, in which an account must be given of that sin.
14. It is a denying of God's veracity, and giving him the lie: as if he were not to be believed in all his predictions promises and threats.

¹Ralph Venning's book *The Sinfulness of Sin* (1993) provides another excellent treatment of this same theme in enlarged form with better categorization of sin's horrors under logical divisions.

15. It is a contempt of all the present mercies, (which are innumerable and great) by which God obligeth and encourageth us to obey.
16. It is a contempt of our own afflictions, and his chastisements of us, by which he would drive us from our sins.
17. It is a contempt of all the examples of his mercies on the obedient, and his terrible judgments on the disobedient, (men and devils) by which he warned us not to sin.
18. It is a contempt of the person, office, sufferings, and grace of Jesus Christ, who came to save us from our sins, and to destroy the works of the devil; being contrary to his bloodshed, authority, and healing work.
19. It is a contradicting, fighting against, and in that act prevailing against the sanctifying office and work of the Holy Ghost, that moveth us against sin, and to obedience.
20. It is a contempt of holiness, and a defacing, in that measure, the image of God upon the soul, or a rejecting it: a vilifying of all those graces which are contrary to the sin.
21. It is a pleasing of the devil, the enemy of God and us, and an obeying him before God.
22. It is the fault of a rational creature, that had reason given him to do better.
23. It is all willingly done and chosen by a free agent, that could not be [forced] to it.
24. It is a robbing God of the honour and pleasure which he should have had in our obedience; and the glory which we should bring him before the world.
25. It is a contempt of the omnipresence and omniscience of God, when we will sin against him before his face, when he stands over us, and seeth all that we do.
26. It is a contempt of the greatness and almightiness of God, that we dare to sin against him who is so great, and able to be avenged on us.
27. It is a wrong to the mercifulness of God, when we go out of the way of mercy, and put him to use the way of justice and severity, who delighteth not in the death of sinners, but rather that they obey, repent, and live.
28. It is a contempt of the attractive love of God, who should be the end, and felicity, and pleasure of the soul. As if all that love and goodness of God were not enough to draw or keep the heart to him, and to satisfy us and make us happy; or, he were not fit to be our delight. And it showeth the want of love to God; for if we loved him rightly we should willingly obey him.

29. It is a setting up of the sordid creature before the Creator, and dung before heaven, as if it were more worthy of our love and choice, and fitter to be our delight; and the pleasure of sin were better for us than the glory of heaven.

30. In all which it appeareth, that it is a practical atheism, in its degree; a taking down God, or denying him to be God: and a practical idolatry, setting up ourselves and other creatures in his stead.

31. It is a contempt of all the means of grace, which are all to bring us to obedience, and keep us or call us from our sins: prayer, sacraments, &c.

32. It is a contempt of the love and labours of the minister of Christ; a disobeying them, grieving them, and frustrating their hopes and the labours of their lives.

33. It is a debasing of reason, the superior faculty of the soul, and a setting up of the flesh or inferior faculties, like setting dogs to govern men, or the horse to rule the rider.

34. It is a blinding of reason, and a misusing of the noblest faculties of the soul, and frustrating them of the use and ends which they were made for: and so it is the disorder, monstrosity, sickness, or death of the soul.

35. It is, in its measure, the image of the devil upon the soul, who is the father of sin: and therefore the most odious deformity of the soul; and this where the Holy Ghost should dwell, and the image and delight of God should be.

36. It is the moral destruction not only of the soul, but of the whole creation, so far as the creatures are appointed as the means to bring or keep us unto God: for the means, as a means, is destroyed when it is not used to its end. A ship is useless if no one be carried in it. A watch, as such, is useless, when not used to show the hour of the day. All the world, as it is the book that should teach us the will of God, is cast by, when that use is cast by. Nay, sin useth the creature against God which should have been used for him.

37. It is a contradicting of our own confessions and professions; a wrongdoing of our consciences; a violation of our covenants and self-obligations to God.

38. It is a preferring of time before eternity, and regarding things of a transitory nature, and a moment's pleasure, before that which never shall have end.

39. It is a making a breach in the harmony and order of the world: as the dislocation or deformity of a particular member, is the trouble and deformity of all the body, because the [beauty] and welfare of the whole, containeth the

[beauty], proportion, and welfare of all the parts. And as the dislocation or breaking of one part in a watch of a clock, is against the use of all the [machinery]; so every man being part of the kingdom of God, doth by sin make a breach in the order of the whole; and also giveth an ill example to other parts, and makes himself unserviceable to the body; and dishonoureth the whole body with the blot of rebellion; and lets in judgment on the world; and kindleth a consuming fire in the place where he liveth; and is cruel and injurious to others.

40. Sin is not only preferring the body before the soul, but it is also an unmercifulness or cruelty against ourselves, both soul and body, and is so contrary to the true use of the indelible principle of self-love; for it is a wounding and abusing the soul and defiling the body in this life, and casting both on the wrath of God, and into the flames of hell hereafter, or a dangerous venturing them into the way of endless damnation and despair, and a contempt of those insufferable torments. All these parts of malignity and poison are intrinsical to sin, and found in the very nature of it.

Baxter scans the whole horizon of Christian theology and sees every part of every doctrine given as a remedy against sin. But sin holds all these doctrines in contempt, denying or refusing to take them up as the shield of faith. Sin is against God and against God's purpose for every doctrine to teach us to love and worship him. Today, many counselors and counselees are not gripped by the horror of sin, choosing dung over eternal pleasures in God. We would do well to apply Baxter to heart, so the overflow of counseling becomes a shattering blow to the unconditional positive regard for sinners living in sin. Counselors need to express the horror of sin to counselees as God sees sin, not simply becoming sensitized to "garden-variety sins." Counselees living in sin should have lost their assurance of salvation, and counselors would do well to question the reality of their conversion if they are not willing demonstrate the fruits of repentance by repenting of *sin against God and his revealed truth*. Baxter helps us to test the nature of repentance: are people sorry they got caught or horrified that God's glory has been trampled under foot? Are people afraid of how sin will consequently disrupt their comforts or trembling that they have treated God and his truth with such contempt?

Notice all the theological themes Baxter uses to compare and contrast with sin. While it is difficult for me to make his themes within my categories exclusive (since his themes connect to all my categories), I can group them together to show how they can be categorized under my applicational framework (in *italics*).

1. *Sin is against the glory of the triune God: his self-sufficiency, omnipresence, omniscience, love, power, wisdom, goodness, holiness, kindness, sovereignty, truthfulness, justice.*
2. *Sin is against the work of the triune God in history, demonstrating his own glory: his creation, law, his revelation of the nature of sin (pleasing God's enemy, exalting the attributes of man over the glory of God), his promises for the future, his threats, present mercies, afflictions, judgments.*
3. *Sin is against the triune God's work in Christ for man's restored fellowship with God: Christ's offices, titles, sufferings, (not listed above by Baxter: also his resurrection, ascension, heavenly rule, sending the Spirit, Second Coming).*
4. *Sin is against the triune God's work by the Holy Spirit in man: revealing the glory of God in Christ in creation, providence, redemption and consummation, using his Word, his means of grace, his pastors and teachers, the members of his church body and man's own reason, will, conscience, soul and body.*
5. *Sin is against the triune God's glory displayed through his people to unbelievers: moral destruction of our purpose in the world to bring or keep us unto God.*

With this applicational framework defining the nature of sin, we expand the use of doctrine in counseling. Every doctrine can reveal the glory of God to us, or it can expose the contempt of God in any sin to us. Common definitions of sin as law-breaking, lovelessness, believing false promises (Piper 1995), or as idolatry, adultery, or as being "captured by a beast" (Welch and Shogren 1995, 38-49) give helpful perspectives on the nature of sin, but even these definitions can be thought of

in a fragmented way, isolated from the other categories of theology. Romans 1:25 defines sin as exchanging the truth of God for lies, validating Baxter's method of showing how any sin exchanges *all truths of the gospel* for lies. Sin exchanges the attributes of God for lies. Sin exchanges the work of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for lies. Sin exchanges the means of grace for lies. Sin is also imputed to man through Adam, thus original sin needs to be part of counseling definitions of sin too.

The *Westminster Larger Catechism* Q. 24 defines sin as "lack of conformity unto, or transgression of the law of God." Even this definition will appear fragmented when the law of God is not seen to reveal the glorious perfections of God's holiness. It is particularly the lack of conformity to the law which is liable to misunderstanding: conformity to the law means heart conformity to the attributes of God revealed in the law (1 John 2:3-5; all of 1 John). Believing or seeing the glory of God refracted by the Spirit through the law transforms us into the image of Christ the law-keeper (2 Cor 3:18).

Consider how any doctrine can reveal God's glory and man's sin. The incarnation of Christ reveals the glory of God: his faithfulness to his covenant promises, his fulfillment of prophecies, his meekness and tenderness, his humility and love, his divine power and sovereign timing. The incarnation of Christ conversely exposes the nature of sin: man's unfaithfulness to his promises, man's proud and self-glory-seeking heart, man's pursuit of revenge on his enemies, man's desire to control the timing of history in his own favor. Man lacks conformity to the attributes of God revealed in the incarnation.

I am proposing that the doctrine of sanctification connects to all doctrinal categories, rather than sanctification based on a fragmented use of the death and resurrection of Christ (WCF 1983, 166-7; *Larger Catechism* Q. 75). Sanctification is the Spirit's shining into our hearts the glory of Christ through all doctrines. The glory of Christ is his attributes. All things consist or hold together in Christ, including doctrinal categories drawn from Scripture (Col 1:17). The supremacy of Christ is our sanctification: his attributes *shine in our hearts through all the doctrines of Scripture and transform us into his image by the Spirit indwelling us with the attributes of the Godhead*. These same attributes revealed in any doctrine or any text of Scripture

also expose the attributes of sin's foolish, proud exchange of the truth of God for lies. When doctrines are seen with this double-edged purpose, counselors will avoid compartmentalizing some doctrines as useful for salvation (the cross) and some doctrines exposing sin (the law). Because seeing the glory of God simultaneously reveals our sinfulness (Isa 6; Luke 5:1-8; John 1:10-14, 3:14-21), every doctrine is useful for every sin problem! Sharpening my Piper illustration with Baxter's attributes of sin overlaid in Figure 18, we can illustrate sin on a map of the revelation of the glory of God. Sin exchanges all the glory of God revealed in all the doctrines of Scripture for created things and for lies. Sin is improper use of creation and improper use of revealed truth.