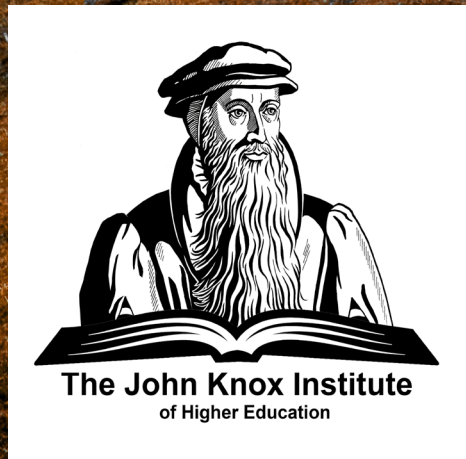


VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

# PASTORAL THEOLOGY

*by Rev. Harry Woods*

LECTURE #10  
Pastoral Visitation, part 1



## **John Knox Institute of Higher Education**

*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

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Rev Harry Woods recently retired as minister of Kilmorack & Strathglass Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) in Beaully, Scotland, after having served as a minister of the Gospel since 1982. He was the editor of the monthly denominational youth magazine, *The Explorer*; for eleven years and taught Apologetics and Pastoral Theology at the Free Church (Continuing) Seminary in Inverness for eighteen years. He is married to Mairi, and has three adult children and three grandchildren.

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VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

# PASTORAL THEOLOGY

by Rev. Harry Woods

Lecture #10

## Pastoral Visitation, part 1

Welcome again to the *Pastoral Theology* course. This is Lecture #10, and we're beginning looking at *Pastoral Visitation*. And today I want to begin with an introduction to that *Pastoral Visitation*.

### 1. Introduction to *Pastoral Visitation*

Now, I'm speaking specifically about *Pastoral Visitation*; I'm not speaking about the ministry of the Word, as such, preaching of the Word. I'm speaking about the other things that are closely connected with the pastoral work. As you begin your study of pastoral work, it is important to remember a couple of important points.

Firstly, we should remember that the standards that are set for pastoral work are goals to aspire to, and goals that, perhaps, we may not always achieve. But we are not seeking to match up ourselves to someone else. We have sat and have tried in our study of *Time Management* and the *Habits of Study* to work out how much we should do each day, and so on, and so, we are mindful of that as we engage in the work of *Pastoral Visitation*.

Secondly, and in many respects, more importantly, we have to beware of unrealistic models of pastoral work, and methodology from a previous generation. It's possible to learn a great deal about how to pastor your flock from something like Richard Baxter's<sup>1</sup> *The Reformed Pastor*, but some of the details about how he carried on pastoral work are either unworkable today, or fail to take account of the very different demands laid upon us as ministers. Men like Baxter often had servants, and they were working in an agrarian<sup>2</sup> economy, which is very different from the industrialized and computerized society of which you and I are a part. If you remember these things, you can be saved from the discouragement of seeing a great gulf between what men of a past generation were able to accomplish, and what you are able to accomplish.

Well, let us look at the aspects of pastoral work and *Pastoral Visitation*.

### 2. Prayer as an Essential Part of the Pastoral Life

In this regard, the first essential aspect is *Prayer*. Prayer ought to be an essential part of our pastoral life, and yet, sadly, it's often the first thing that goes when we are under pressure. We don't

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Baxter (1615–1691) was an English nonconformist church leader and theologian, who has been described as "the chief of English Protestant Schoolmen."

<sup>2</sup> Agrarian means that which relates to land, farming, and agricultural interests.

have time to pray, we think to ourselves. We have other things demanding our attention. We've got to avoid this tendency by maintaining a regular prayer life, regular habits of prayer, as this is part of our calling. We are called to the ministry of the Word and to prayer.

Well, if we focus on *Prayer* for a moment, there are many different types of prayer, and we should remember each of them as we get involved in this pastoral work. You think, for example of the mnemonic,<sup>3</sup> ACTS, and that reminds us that there is Adoration, and there is Confession, and there is Thanksgiving, and there is Supplication. There is a manner of prayer that is appropriate for any and every situation you may find yourself in. But consider particularly a pastor's prayer. We are to remember certain aspects as pastors.

We are to *pray without ceasing*. Now, that is true, it is applicable to every saint. But if that's the case, how much more to a pastor? We ought to pray before we begin a new pastoral duty, whether it is reading the Word of God, preaching a sermon, doing preparation in the study. We ought to pray before we begin any pastoral duty. That would include also visitation, and witnessing, and conducting a church court. We should pray before, during, and after preaching. And we should pray for help in public prayer.

Al Martin<sup>4</sup> tells a story of a young divinity student, who was working his way through college in order to prepare for the ministry, of a great burden that he had with this text, "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). And he couldn't understand, how can I pray without ceasing? How can I pray all the time? And he spoke to his mother about it, and his mother asked him a question. He was doing laboring work at a building site at the time, and she asked him, "What are you doing during the day?" "Well," he said, "I'm mixing cement for the builders." And she said, "And what's involved in that?" He said, "Well, I've got to put three shovelfuls of sand, and two shovelfuls of gravel, and one shovelful of cement into the mixer, and get it ready for them. She said, "And what would happen if you got it wrong? What would happen if, instead of three, you did two, and instead of two, you did four?" "Well," he said, "there would be a disaster. The mortar, the cement would be no use." She said, "Well, here is your answer. You commit this work that you're doing to the Lord. You begin your work of measuring the aggregate of the sand and the cement to the Lord, and you concentrate on doing that work at the time. And when you have finished, you thank God for enabling you to do that work well. You are praying without ceasing," although it is not what you might say, "ceaseless" prayer.

And we should remember that, that when we are called to concentrate on something that takes our mind deep into the workings, perhaps of a language, or some business of pastoral counseling, we can commit the matter to the Lord, proceed to do it to the glory of God—"Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with [all] thy might," as to the Lord (Ecclesiastes 9:10)—and we are thereby praying without ceasing. Prayer is not to be seen simply as a duty, but as a spiritual benefit, and a constant reminder that whatever we are doing, we are doing it for the Lord, and we are doing it through the grace of the Spirit. So, we have *Prayer without Ceasing*.

Well, then we have *emergency prayer*, or sometimes called *ejaculatory prayer*. Some situations will take you by surprise. That is true whether you are on the ministry or not. A Christian sometimes is taken by surprise and doesn't have time for preparation to answer, and suchlike. Nehemiah is

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<sup>3</sup> A "mnemonic" (pronounced "ni-mä-nik") is a memory-enhancing tool or technique designed to help retain and recall information by associating it with easily remembered phrases, images, or structures.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Newton Martin (1934–2026) was an American Reformed Baptist and minister, who was originally called to a Christian and Missionary Alliance congregation in North Caldwell, New Jersey in 1962. He then became Calvinistic and in 1967 that congregation became Trinity Baptist Church, adopting the 1689 Baptist Confession, and he served there until 2008.

of help here. He was put on the spot<sup>5</sup> because he was offering the wine cup to his master, the king, Artaxerxes. And the significant thing is this, that he prayed to the Lord in the time that he was doing that, in the middle of his conversation with the king (Nehemiah 2:4). Again, when you think of Gideon. Gideon was afraid to go down and fight with the Midianites, and so, God encouraged him to creep down to the camp of the Midianites. And we are told that as he overheard what the Midianites were saying, he bowed his head and worshipped (Joshua 7:15).

You see, both of these examples show us that *prayer in impossible situations is possible*. This ought to be the natural response to any difficulties that we face, any trials, and anything unexpected that befalls us. We may have no time for reflection, but we can immediately do what the disciples did in the boat, when they thought it was sinking, “Lord, save us: we perish!” (Matthew 8:25).

Again, we have to remember that *prayer is not merely meditation, but communion*. It’s not enough simply to think about God, or think about the people you are praying for, or think about your preaching. You’ve got to not only think about these things, but seek the Lord’s help. Draw near to God; cast yourself upon the grace of the Spirit to uphold you and keep you.

Again, particularly with respect to ministers preaching the gospel, remember to *keep your prayers kingdom-centered*. Don’t focus in your pastoral prayers upon your own woes. Don’t come into the pulpit complaining about the difficulties and troubles that you have had in the previous week, before your people. Keep your prayers kingdom-centered. What do I mean by that? Keep them, focused on the concerns for and the promotion of the kingdom of God. Pastoral prayers ought to be concerned with the cause of Christ; with the growth of his body, the church; with the outreach of the kingdom to the Christless. You’ll notice, in the Acts of the Apostles, when the apostles were persecuted, they didn’t pray for protection, but for boldness, because their concerns were kingdom concerns. They wanted to preach the gospel, not run away. By God’s grace, you must learn to storm the strongholds of the godless, and through your public prayers, seek to teach your people to pray thus also.

And then, your *prayers should be specific*. It is important to engage in specific prayer—and I’m speaking particularly of prayer in the study, rather than in the pulpit—prayer for your people individually by name, even if you have to have a mental picture in mind of where your people sit in the congregation. Pray for them, each one. Pray for any particular concerns in the congregation. Is someone sick? Is someone in financial trouble? Does someone need help? Pray for them. Pray for the society that you are part of, and for the church at large. And you should encourage your people to do the same.

But I want to make a couple of qualifications with respect to the specific prayer. Firstly, the pastor’s prayer for the ordinary meetings for worship will, of necessity, be less specific, because he’s leading the congregation in prayer, and because he’s seeking to cover a wide area of concerns. And secondly, some matters—being either private or more sensitive—either ought not to be prayed for specifically in public, or should only be prayed about in the context of a members-only prayer meeting. Well, so much then for *Prayer as an Essential Part of the Pastor’s Pastoral Life*.

### **3. Pastoral Visitation**

I want us to move on and begin considering visitation proper. What is *Pastoral Visitation*? Well, it is an important part or aspect of shepherding God’s flock. We have to know our sheep, and

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<sup>5</sup> “Put on the spot” means being forced into an uncomfortable or embarrassing situation.

this knowledge of our sheep is done primarily through *Pastoral Visitation*. Jay Adams,<sup>6</sup> in his book *Shepherding God's Flock*, has much to say on this matter. Much of what he says is very helpful. But there is some that is less relevant, or seems less relevant, to the situation that most of us find ourselves in. There is an assumption in Adams's work that the pastor will be working in a fairly large urban congregation, whereas many of you will be called to small, rural congregations with relatively little help. However, much can be learned from what he has to say. He emphasizes the importance of a correct understanding of what *Pastoral Visitation* actually is. He says there is a tendency to think of it just like a house call, just pop in for some chat. But he is saying we should see this house call as part of our pastoral concern and care. This is what is at the heart of *Pastoral Visitation*. He does make the point, however, that the house call is a necessary part of *Pastoral Visitation*. So when we are coming to visit the flock, we are coming with a particular goal in mind, and that is to care for and assess the spiritual condition and needs of our people.

Let's consider *the necessity of Pastoral Visitation*. I've come across some men that consider *Pastoral Visitation* as a necessary burden, or even as something that they have little enthusiasm for. They see it as an interference and distraction from their precious study time. But dear friends, that view tends to focus upon the desires of the preacher, and ignores the needs of the congregation. Well, let us consider that we are called, not just to be students of the Word, but to pastor the flock over which Christ has made us undershepherds. We are called to bring the truth to bear upon the hearts and minds of our people, and the best way to do that is to know them, and to have some idea of what they feel and what they think. And to do this, we need to visit them in their own homes. This work is indispensable. We cannot do *Pastoral Visitation* without having this approach.

What about the *practical usefulness of visitation*? Well, there are a number of reasons why visiting our people is useful. Let me just mention six of these.

Firstly, you'll increase your interest in them as individuals, and you will grow in affection for them. They're no longer just a name on the communion roles. They're no longer just people sitting in front of you. They are people. You know them, their surroundings and family, and suchlike.

Secondly, your people will grow to love you as someone who has a genuine care for them. Men can tell whether you are simply ticking boxes<sup>7</sup> and fulfilling a duty, and they see that in your visitation.

Thirdly, you'll learn about their spiritual wants, their spiritual trials and temptations, their fears, their joys, their sorrows, their anxieties. You'll learn about these things, and that is of great significance, because, as we will see, it will help you to minister more appropriately to them.

Fourthly, you'll be able to give personal words of counsel, comfort, instruction, and rebuke. In the general preaching of the Word, we may give all of these, but in particular cases, with particular knowledge of particular temptations or sins, we can give specific encouragement, significant words of counsel.

Again, just as at very practical level, if you visit your people, you will gather valuable ideas for preaching that will help you to think, what should I preach on? Is there a series that this person and other persons needs to hear to help them to grow in grace. Not only will we gather ideas valuable for our preaching, but hearing and discussing these things with our people will stimulate and motivate our preaching.

And sixthly, if you're not a particularly great preacher—and some preachers can be quite

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<sup>6</sup> Jay Edward Adams (1929–2020) was an American Reformed theologian and author, known for developing approach known as nouthetic counseling (from the Greek word, "noutheteo," to confront or admonish).

<sup>7</sup> "Ticking boxes" means checking of items on a list of things you had to do.

mediocre<sup>8</sup>—if you are a faithful visitor of your congregation, dealing with them at this pastoral level, you will find that this will make up a great deal for your lack of other preaching talents.

### **3. The Purpose of Pastoral Visitation**

What is the purpose then for *Pastoral Visitation*? Well, it can be seen from what I've already said that visiting the congregation, visiting the flock, is useful for providing insight into their spiritual condition; for evangelizing the unconverted among them; for giving personal edification to the individual members of the flock; for building up relationships and winning hearts and minds. And in doing this, you will be following the biblical example mentioned.

It is also clear that the ultimate purpose of visiting is spiritual. If our visiting fails in this, we are simply engaging in social niceties.<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that you ought not to engage in small talk<sup>10</sup> with your people, and that is always a secondary matter. The focus should be spiritual. Your purpose and care for your people is not simply to make your people think that you're a nice man. You must learn to be courageous when facing difficult visits, and not allow yourself to skirt around<sup>11</sup> the problem to be dealt with.

So much, then, for this introduction to *Pastoral Visitation*. We'll take this up more specifically in our next lecture. Thank you.

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<sup>8</sup> Mediocre means to be of middle quality, of a moderate or low degree of quality value, or ability.

<sup>9</sup> "Social niceties" means polite acts, words, or behaviors to show courtesy or respect.

<sup>10</sup> "Small talk" is light, informal conversation focused on trivial topics like weather or current events.

<sup>11</sup> "Skirt around" means to talk about other things to avoid a difficult subject.