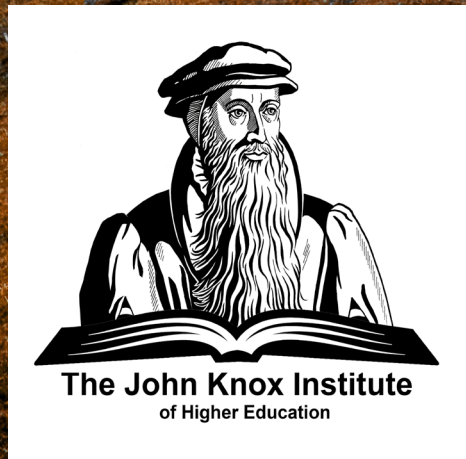


VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

PASTORAL THEOLOGY

by Rev. Harry Woods

LECTURE #11
Pastoral Visitation, part 2



John Knox Institute of Higher Education

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Rev Harry Woods recently retired as minister of Kilmorack & Strathglass Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) in Beaulie, 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

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Lecture #11

Pastoral Visitation, part 2

We continue our study of *Pastoral Visitation*, looking at some more specific pieces of advice and recommendations.

1. Visitation Should Be Systematic

If you carry out *Visitation* in your flock, it *Should Be Systematic*. That's the first thing that I would suggest.

How frequently should you visit your flock? Well, I would suggest, like the other areas of your study, that you prepare a schedule for regular visitation. Well the question that arises is, Well, what is "regular"? And that, quite frankly, will depend, to a large extent, on the size of the congregation you are ministering to. It's clear that a man that has a congregation of twenty or thirty people would be able to visit more frequently, more regularly the whole of the congregation than a man who has three or four hundred people. And so, there is no easy answer. "Regular," for many people, would be taken as twice a year, and perhaps that is a reasonable and minimal goal to aim for.

Again, in connection with this *systematic* approach, you need to make sure you keep records. You may do that by noting in a day diary who you have visited. You might mention, just briefly in a note form in the diary, when that the visit was made, some information about the family, the things that you discussed, issues that were raised. These can all be noted either in a diary or in a visiting notebook.

I recommend that you have cards made, if possible, with your details on one side how to contact you, and on the other side, a note basically to say, "I'm sorry I missed you. I called at such-and-such a time." Now, I'm aware that there may be circumstances where the last thing you want is to give personal details in visiting, but nevertheless, that shouldn't stop you from scribbling a note on a piece of paper, popping it through the letter box to tell the person that you've been to see them.

Again, like we discussed when we looked at our *Time Management*, you must not become a slave to your schedule. You may have a beautifully-structured visitation schedule, and you've got three visits this day, and two visits the next; you're going at six o'clock, or your going at two o'clock. Life isn't like that. You'll find that, at six o'clock, visitors come, or at two o'clock, a child needs to be picked up from school. There are many things that will interrupt your schedule. So what you must do is have a schedule, but keep it flexible. So if you miss visits one week, you can tag them onto the next week. And for that reason, I would suggest that it is better to have a few visits each week than try and do lots of visits in a number of days.

The suggestion that you're given with regards to schedules is the mnemonic,¹ KISS: "KeeP It Simple, Stupid." That's what we need to do—we need to keep it simple, so that if there's an alteration, it doesn't cause us to have to back to the computer and spend hours trying to reassess and rework your database.

Again, be prepared to respond to emergencies, because emergencies will arise. And your visitation, although it may be *systematic*, cannot foresee emergencies. Someone in the congregation may die. Someone may be rushed to hospital. Some child might have had an accident. And we have to read to respond to these emergencies. How are we to do that? Well, if able, we should visit right away—as soon as possible. But if we can't visit right away, we should try and contact the persons involved by phone, just to let them know that we are planning to come, that we are thinking of them, that we are praying for them.

2. Visitation Should Be Sensitive

Again, the second thing that we note in *Pastoral Visitation* is that the *Visitation Should be Sensitive*. There are some things that we can do to help that sensitivity. I mentioned earlier that we should keep records of our visits. Well, before the visit, consult those records. Don't be going out to a house and asking, "How is your husband," when you found out the last time that he died three years ago—that's just common sense. You have to consult any records you have.

But at a practical level, say you are thinking of going to visit in the evening. Think about the timing of the visit. As yourself, "What time do they usually have tea?" What time do they usually have their meal?" And don't go interrupting their meals. "What time do they get home from work?" These are just practical things.

What about the fact that some families might have a Friday night as a family night, or they have visitors? Well, stay away and give them their space. There's plenty of time that you can visit and leave your people without an interrupted evening.

During the visit, when we actually carry it out, don't stay too long or talk too much. Part of good pastoral visiting is listening to the flock, is not tiring out the people. I know of some men and they will turn up at the door at ten o'clock in the evening, and perhaps stay until one or two in the morning, and yet perhaps the head of the family has to get up early to go to work. Well that is just foolish. And so, we have to learn not to stay too long, and not to talk too much.

There are times in visitation when silence is the appropriate response, or when tears are sufficient to show our care. One important thing is, when we are visiting those who are unconverted, do not comfort them as though they were already saved. You need to be calling them to Christ. Much error has been caused by speaking to people, who, simply because they come to church, are assumed to be Christians, and so, we give them the comfort and the consolation rightly due to Christians, while all the while they are rebels against the Savior and need to repent.

Another area of *sensitivity* is this, you may, as you visit your people, discover a shocking things. You may find out things about the family, or about the people you are visiting that are just shocking. You have to deal with these things as a sinner saved by grace. As you hear those things, don't sit judgmentally, but rather, say, as it were, in your heart, "There, but by the grace of God, go I."² And so, we must remember that we are not coming visiting as mortals of morality or purity, or spirituality. We're coming as sinners saved by grace.

¹ "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.

² This means to recognize that you could be in the same unfortunate circumstances yourself, if not for God's intervention.

And after the visit—again, we’re dealing with *sensitivity* in visitation—keep confidences. If you have been told something in private, keep it in private. And there are times when you will not even discuss what you have been told with your wife. And if you need, as a result of some confidence that has been given you, make sure the advice you seek, you seek it only from those that you can trust not to blab³ about it elsewhere.

3. The Manner of Visitation

So, *Visitation Should Be Systematic*, *Visitation Should be Sensitive*, but what about the *Manner of Visitation*? How is it to be done? Well, a lot of this is just common sense. But let me give you a number of things.

The first is act naturally. Don’t put on a ministerial air. Don’t put on the impression that you should be respected because you’re the minister. Respect is earned, and many a man who is a minister would not have respect from others. It is true that the authority of the office engenders respect, but a pastor’s life needs to reflect what the office calls for.

Again, we’re thinking about the *Manner of Visitation*, what do we do when we come into the home? Well, I would suggest that you don’t sit down until you’re asked to—that’s just a piece of common courtesy. There may be cultural differences, and you will know what to do in those circumstances, but you sit when you’re asked. You’re a guest in the home of your people, and you’re not to dominate those in the home. You’re not to lord it over them.

What about children around you when you visit? Well, there are some who cannot be bothered with children. Sadly, some ministers would give them a scolding and send them away, so as they’re not bothered by them. Well, don’t ignore them. Don’t be sharp with them. Remember how Christ himself dealt with children. Communicate with the children. Speak to the children. Ask their names. Show genuine affection for them. Be careful, of course, of being over-familiar. We’re not saying that that is what you should do. But encourage them to ask you questions. Draw attention to little things that will matter to them. Does the little girl have a new dress? Does the little boy have a new toy? Speak to them about these things. And so, win their affection and win their trust. It might be helpful in some circumstances to get the dates of birth of the children, and just as a way of a little token of affection, to make sure that you send them a birthday card at the appropriate time.

Again, always act courteously. You will get circumstances where people are rude and offensive to you. They will, perhaps, lose their temper with you, and you have to, at all times, seek to be tender and courteous with them. You’ve got to deal with them in this manner, even when you are dealing with sin. They may have backslidden. They may have offended in some particular way, and we have to confront them with that, and yet we are not to do it with a judgmental and censorious attitude. We are to be courteous.

Another practical thing—and this is something we tend to forget about—watch your body language. If you come into a house, and you perch right on the end of a seat, so that you’re not sitting back and making yourself comfortable, what does that say? It’s saying you’re desperate to get away. And so, don’t sit on the edge of the seat. Make yourself comfortable. Don’t be overly familiar with anyone, especially in the area of physical contact. Be a pastor, and yet deal in an appropriate way with those you are dealing with. Don’t invade their personal space, and so on.

Again, when in a visit, we have to pray, pray pastorally. Pray mentioning those things you have discussed with the folks you have been visiting. Is there a problem in the family? Pray for that problem. Is there a child that is sick? Pray for that child. Is there an operation pending? Pray that

³ “Blab” is a slang word that means to reveal something by talking openly or indiscreetly.

God would be gracious to them in that operation.

It is wise, in certain homes—and, again, you will learn this by discernment—wise to ask if they mind if you pray. There are some people who don't want you to pray. You may be visiting people who are not professing Christians, people who are maybe even unchurched. Then ask, "Do you mind if I pray for you?"

When you conduct worship, again, use your discretion. There are some circumstances where folks that you visit want you to read the Bible and pray; other places where this is not so. But if you are going to read a portion of the Word, choose the portion wisely, and choose a brief portion.

And when it comes to the time of leaving the pastoral visit, sometimes this can be very difficult, and some ministers find it awkward to excuse themselves. Well, leave the prayer to the end of the visit. And once you have made a habit of standing to pray in the home, because you're already on your feet, and you don't have to be afraid to say, "Well, it's time I have to go. I have other things I have to attend to."

So here is some advice on *The Manner of Visitation*.

4. Dangers to Avoid

What are some of the *Dangers to Avoid*?

We have to avoid lording it over the flock. We are pastors. We are not those who are taskmasters.

We have to avoid dealing with money if at all possible, when we are engaged in visitation, because that instantly will raise matters and possibility of misunderstanding and of trust.

We've got to avoid trying to be psychologists and psychiatrists. We may be visiting someone who has mental health issues. Well, we're not able, we're not qualified to deal with all the aspects of mental health. The best we can do, I would suggest, is read thoroughly a book like, *Spiritual Depression*, by Martyn Lloyd-Jones,⁴ and that will help us to have a pastoral approach to these matters.

Practically, we should beware of dangerous urban visitation. We should never send people out in areas that are questionable with regards to safety at nighttime. We should always visit during the day, or we should always visit in pairs; and we should never send young women out on their own to doors, as a general rule.

Again, an area to avoid, a danger to avoid in *Pastoral Visitation*, is to avoid sexually provocative or dangerous situations. We need to keep our reputation above reproach. We may be tempted, either in ourselves or by someone else, to make sexual advances in a situation of spiritual intimacy. We have to remember that when we're dealing with someone about their spiritual condition, we are very close to them. We're dealing with matters that they perhaps discuss with no one else, and there is that danger of becoming too close.

Again, we may be dealing with a woman who is emotionally sensitive or in a vulnerable state. We have to be careful. It is better in those situations, either to go with an elder, or if you have a wife, take your wife with you. If you think about visiting a single woman alone, I would advise that strongly. And again, we've got to beware of predatory women who will seek to destroy you, who will seek to seduce you and allure you. And the Book of Proverbs tells us about that, about the type of woman who sits at the corner of the street, as it were, to entice you (Proverbs 6). We must not bury our heads in the sand, and we must beware of these dangers.

⁴ David Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899–1981) was a Welsh Congregationalist minister and medical doctor, influential in the Calvinist wing of the British evangelical movement of the 20th century. He served as minister of Westminster Chapel in London for almost 30 years.

5. Visiting the Sick and the Dying

I want to consider next, *Visiting the Sick and the Dying*. By “sick,” I mean people who are physically or mentally effected. They might be in hospital, they might not be in hospital. As a general rule, the elderly always appreciate a visit. But I’m speaking here particularly about those we would describe as being sick.

One of the things that you have to do is to ask your congregation to keep you informed. Because one of the sad things that you will discover as a minister is that often you are the last to know that Mrs. So-and-so is in hospital, or that Mr. So-and-so has died. You might think, “Surely that’s not possible”—sadly, it is. You might never be told. It’s not necessarily carelessness on the part of the congregation, but they might think, “Well, so-and-so will have told them.” So, tell your flock to keep you informed.

If you’re visiting someone who is sick, keep your visit short—five to ten minutes. Make your visits regular, but keep them brief. And if the people are not in a critical condition, then perhaps yes, spend some more time with them. But use your common sense—if you see them nodding off to sleep, it’s time to go.

Again, be tender and compassionate, because they’ll be sensitive, and will reflect upon what you say to them, because they’re in that vulnerable state.

Try and see them on their own, if you can. This sometimes is difficult, visiting in hospital with the family around. And it may be that there are things you need to discuss with the individual, especially if they’re in a life-critical condition. And that is the time for clear, direct talking, as to the spiritual condition and state of the person. These people are more likely to open up to you in private. Try to talk to them about their spiritual and mental condition. Are they afraid? Do they feel guilty? Do they have a true hope in Christ, or is their hope false, based on something that they have done? Are they despairing, or are they hopeful? Try and ascertain these things as you discuss them. Read the Bible with them, because the Word of God is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16). The Word of God is of more importance to those that we speak to than our very words themselves.

There may be times when we can preach a little sermon to them. I had a situation in a congregation where an elder contracted a condition called Guillain-Barré syndrome, and it was the most frightening of syndromes. It’s a creeping paralysis that starts on the outer limbs and creeps in him until, at last, when it reaches the core of the body, they need to be put on life support. And this happened with this man, and he could sense this paralysis. He was a Christian man, a good man, and so, I regularly visited him. I went in every Sunday afternoon after the morning service, and I basically preached and discussed with him what I preached in the morning. And so, that sometimes is useful. Where you have believing people in an incapacitated situation.

Make much use of prayer when visiting the sick. But what if they’re asleep, or what if they’re unconscious? You would be surprised at how much an unconscious person can hear, and how many people who seem to be asleep are not asleep. And so, pray for them, whether they are asleep or not, whether you have had a conversation with them or not, as you are leaving, pray for them. Seek their salvation if they’re unsaved, especially if the illness is life-threatening.

Minister to those who are present, if you can’t see them on your own. Visit the other visitors who are there—family, friends, carers, staff.

Remember, with respect to taking literature to people who are sick, that it is important to appreciate that those who are in hospital, or in a sickbed, find it difficult to concentrate. So have a series of little booklets or little tracts that you can give them, or an easy, perhaps, magazine with

little articles in it, rather than giving them Owen⁵ on the doctrine of sin, or something like that.

Again, visit with the dying frequently. There are cases where you might visit for five or ten minutes every week, and near the end of life, even daily. Just use your common sense on this.

And sometimes it's good to gather the saints around. Arrange to take maybe four or five Christian friends with you to have worship with a sick person.

6. Some Important Things to Consider when Visiting in a Hospital

Here, to conclude, are *Some Important Things to Consider* if you are *Visiting in a Hospital*. Now circumstances may be very different in other countries, but here, in the UK, these would be applicable.

Never enter a ward outside of visiting hours without the permission from the person in charge. You're giving recognition to their authority.

Inform the person in charge who you are, and who you desire to visit. That's only just common sense. But again, you're not just barging into a ward without any leave to do so.

Don't complain if the person in charge asks you to wait for ten or fifteen minutes before you enter the ward. Patients may be being tended to; they may be showering, or something like that.

Don't stay too long or talk too much with a patient who has recently had an operation.

Don't probe into the nature of a patient's illness, because you may find that it's very embarrassing for you to hear exactly what they have or what has been done.

Don't discuss a patient's condition with others around the bed, even although the patient seems to be sleeping, because they often can hear exactly what you are saying. And if you are saying, "Well, I don't have much hope for so-and-so," well, that's not exactly going to be an encouragement to them.

Keep any information you have about the patient's condition confidential.

Try not to be the bearer of bad news to a patient, because that can seriously affect the patient's recovery.

Never indicate to a patient that they look terrible, that they look very ill, because, again, that is not encouraging.

Don't sit on the bed. It used to be a common practice that you sat on the bed, but nowadays you shouldn't sit on the bed.

If you are visiting someone, and you are asked to use personal protection equipment, then use it, and remember to wash your hands before and after the visit.

And then, on a practical level, you may have a husband or a wife, or a daughter or a son, and they are having to travel miles to get to the hospital to visit their mother, or their father, or whatever. I would suggest that you offer to take relatives anytime that you are going to visit yourself. I know this may contradict what I've said about trying to speak to them on their own, but at a practical level, you may save them hours of time in travel and inconvenience, and so, you will win their hearts if you show that your care is not just for your own flock, but any who are connected with them.

I hope these suggestions and recommendations will be of help to you. And, God willing, next lecture, we will look at some specific situations for *Pastoral Visitation*. Thank you.

⁵ John Owen (1616–1683, was an English Puritan Nonconformist church leader, theologian, and vice-chancellor of the University of Oxford. One of the most prominent theologians in England during his lifetime, Owen was a prolific author and poet, still widely read by Reformed Christians today, and is known for his writings on sin.