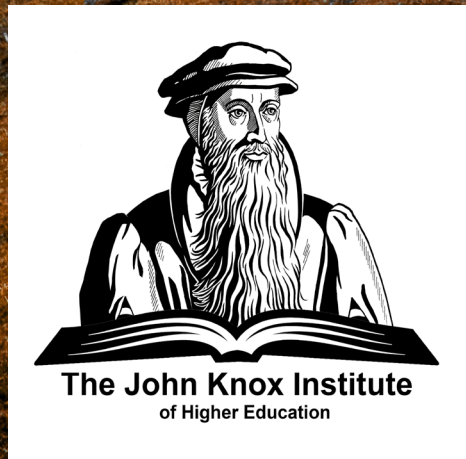


VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

PASTORAL THEOLOGY

by Rev. Harry Woods

LECTURE #12
Pastoral Visitation, part 3



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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PASTORAL THEOLOGY

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Lecture #12

Pastoral Visitation, part 3

Friends, we continue our study of *Pastoral Visitation*, and in this lecture, I want to deal with some *Special Circumstances* that we may encounter as we engage in that visitation.

1. The Death of Infants or Infant Disorders

The first thing I want us to notice is visiting those whose child has died, or whose child is mentally defective. What you will find when you come into this situation is often the parents are concerned about how the child can be saved, has he or she gone to heaven? And it's important that we have a clear biblical and Reformed view of this whole area of the death of infants, because we will be under considerable pressure to comfort the parents with what you think they might want to hear.

The *Westminster Confession*, the confession of our denomination, states that, "Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated, and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth: so also, are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word."¹ Now as we look at that statement from the *Confession*, it gives us an outline of the Reformed position on this matter. I want to mention seven things that can be gleaned from this statement.

1. First, Christ did not die for all. Infants are not saved because of a universal election. Hence, the statement, "Elect infants" and "other elect persons."

2. Secondly, all infants at conception are fallen in Adam. They are not innocent. They may not have done any sinful acts, but they are those who are sinners, they are those who were born in sin and shapen in iniquity. You will often hear people speak in a very sentimental way about these "little innocent babies," but we must remember that all the seed of Adam deserve God's wrath and curse.

3. The third thing is that election is God's sovereign choice, and infants need the same finished work of Christ as a confessing adult needs.

4. Fourthly, infants can be saved in infancy apart from the exercise of faith and repentance. You might ask, "What's the evidence for that?" Well, Jeremiah was called from the womb. John the Baptist leapt in the womb at the closeness of Jesus Christ in the womb of Mary.

5. Again, this is five, divine judgment is administered on the basis of sins committed in the body.

¹ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, (published 1646), chapter 10, paragraph 3.

6. And sixthly, those incapable of moral good or evil are not moral agents, although they are still sinners.

7. And lastly, therefore, all the elect who die in infancy or are mental defectives are saved.

Now, this has enormous consequences for the pastor, and it's important that you familiarize yourself with this Reformed view, because if you have to come into a situation of a child dying in infancy, or a child being born mentally defective, these questions will arise: "Is my child in heaven?" and "Can my child be saved?" and so on.

2. Visiting the Relatives of a Suicide

The second *Special Circumstance* that we look at is *Visiting the Relatives of a Suicide*. Suicide is difficult to talk about, and yet the bereaved, at times—those who have been bereaved because of a suicide—find little else to talk about. And so, it's difficult to talk about, and yet they talk, often nonstop, about it. They have many unanswered questions, most of which you will not be able to satisfy. What kind of questions?—"Could I have prevented this?" "Were there signs that I missed?" "Why did he or she do this?" "Why didn't I pay more attention to them?" All these things are legitimate questions, but they are unanswerable questions.

We notice that in all bereavement, all grieving, there is an element of guilt involved, but the guilt in those who are bereaved because of a suicide, the grief seems to grow rather than diminish. And when we think about it, suicide is an assault on God's sovereignty. Suicide is an assertion of man's autonomy—"I will do with my life what I want to do." But the Bible is clear: suicide is a sin. It is a self-murder; it is a breach of the Sixth Commandment.

Suicide may be triggered. There may be emotional factors. There may be health factors. There may be domestic strife. There may be employment or financial crisis. There may be many things that bring about a sense of alienation from God or men, or may even have its roots in a religious cult. There have been times when there have been mass suicides because of the perverse teaching of a religious cult.

Where the attempt at suicide has been unsuccessful, it is referred to as a "parasuicide," and we may need to minister to those who have tried to take their own life but failed. Well, what we have to do when we are visiting with them, when we are pastoring them, is to try and focus on what triggered that attempt. Why did they try and take their own life? We have to seek to get beyond the superficial responses and get to the very heart of the matter. But what this parasuicide has to face is that they have exercised sinful autonomy. They have tried to take into their own hands what is the right of God. It is the Lord that gives and the Lord takes away.

But although we have to seek to expose the sinfulness of this attempted suicide, we have to show that there are biblical alternatives—alternatives of forgiveness in Christ, hope in Christ. It is a fearful thing to reflect upon a man and a woman who finds that the only answer to their situation is to take their own life. We must remember that "There is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared" (Psalm 130, verse 4). We must remember the words of 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Often, a parasuicide attempt has been a cry for help, and help should be given. We should be careful, if necessary, to call in professional medical care, mental care. Dealing with a parasuicide is obviously different from the aftermath of a proper suicide, but there are many things connected with dealing with both that are similar.

With a successful suicide, we have to deal with the grieving. That is the main focus of our *Pastoral Visitation*, and we should be there to offer comfort, the comfort of the gospel. We have to

be gentle. They are already loaded with guilt. They are already suffering a terrible loss. We cannot fudge the fact that suicide is a sin, and we shouldn't try to. We may be asked what this means for a person's destiny. Well, we have to be honest and say, "It is a sin, but we just don't know what the outcome will be, because we don't know what happened in that moment just before death." I've often suspected that people who have, say, thrown themselves off a building or off a bridge have had second thoughts on the way down, but it's too late, and we cannot say with confidence what happens between those moments of attempted suicide and the outcome.

There is nothing useful to be gathered by searching for reasons, "Why did he do this?" "Why did she do this?" Because ultimately, unless they have left a note behind, we cannot really with confidence say. When dealing with the grieving, we have to speak to them about God's goodness, about his ability to help and to deal with the crushing grief, but this will not be easy.

And then, when we're thinking about suicide, we have to face the fact that sometimes Christians commit suicide. And many deny that they were ever true Christians. They would say, "It's impossible for someone to commit this sin." But consider that suggestion. This attitude is based more on a medieval and Romanist view of a mortal sin, and it fails to recognize what the Bible plainly says, that all sin, except the sin against the Holy Ghost, is forgivable, and therefore, we have to realize that even suicide is a sin that is forgivable. Again, this attitude of some that Christians can't commit suicide ignores the fact that some suicides are the result of mental or physical illness. Even a saint can get depressed, or suffer a brain tumor, or simply succumb to the sin of anxiety that leads to such turmoil that they take their own life. Yes, it is true that suicide is a grievous sin, but it is a sin which the blood of Christ can cover.

We move on then to consider *Visiting the Elderly, the Spiritually Awakened, and the Sorrowing*.

3. Visiting the Elderly

Think of the *Elderly*. And when visiting them, I would suggest that we must be careful not to neglect them. Often, in the life of a congregation, when a person becomes so aged and infirm that they can no longer come and take their place amongst the gathered congregation, that they're forgotten. It is our responsibility as ministers not only to apply this to ourselves, but apply it to our people, that we do not forget them. We should visit them frequently, especially when they are infirm or housebound.

If these people are unsaved, they still need our ministration. The fading years of their life will be accompanied with fading dreams, fading ambitions. They will become more and more aware that they have failed in many aspects of their life. And so we must seek to minister to them by turning them away from self, and turning them to Jesus Christ.

Some sins, again, are more common amongst the elderly. They are often self-focused. We ought not to be too hard upon them, because they are with themselves all day. Little things have a big impact on an infirmed and housebound elderly person. We note that they are often anxious. If you think of the last chapter of Ecclesiastes 11 describing old age, they are easily startled, they're easily made afraid, they are anxious, they're concerned. Sometimes they can become bitter in their old age, and I'm speaking here also about Christians—bitter and cynical. Do you remember how, in the Book of Ruth, when Ruth and Naomi came back from Moab, the people in Bethlehem say, "This is Naomi," she says, "Call me not Naomi," but, "call me Mara:" for the Lord has dealt bitterly against me (Ruth 1:20). You see that frustration, that bitterness, even cynicism. And so, we have to do what we can to turn their attention, their minds away from themselves, away from their infirmities, away from the circumstances they find themselves in, and turn them back to Christ.

We must remember that there are many ways we can minister to them. We can minister to them, not simply by visiting, and being with them, and speaking spiritual with them, but we can also arrange to have worship with them, and read the Bible with them, pray with them. We can take tapes or CDs, or books to them, and help them to hear the preached Word. We must be kindly affectionate towards them. We should show little acts of kindness to them, sending them a postcard when we're on holiday, doing little shopping trips for them, or taking them shopping. Often they are housebound, and they have no opportunity to get out of the house. Give them a little gift. Have them in occasionally for a cup of tea or a meal.

Remember that these, especially the elderly saints, you may be able to learn a great deal from them. Generally they are more experienced, and often they are more spiritual than we are.

So here are some suggestions for *Visiting the Elderly*.

4. Visiting Those Who Are Spiritually Awakened

Then, *Visiting Those Who Seem to Be Spiritually Awakened*, and I say “seem to be spiritually awakened,” because we cannot judge the thoughts and intents of the heart. Only God knows truly what truly is inside a person.

Well, what is it to be “spiritually awakened”? It is to have an increased concern in and attendance upon the things of God. We cannot be infallible in that, as I've said, but nevertheless, when we think that such a person has this increase in concern in the things of God and attendance upon them, we should see them as soon as we can. We should seek to help them into the kingdom. We should seek immediately to do so, but although we must seek to help them immediately, we must be careful not to give peace, spiritual peace, prematurely. We must seek to address the need of their sins being forgiven, the need of repentance and faith, the need of the Holy Spirit to enlighten them in the knowledge of Christ, and so, lead them to the Savior.

We should seek to see them privately, because many, especially older people, are unwilling to speak about spiritual matters in company, and we should respect that and speak with them privately. We should try and know the answers that they are likely to ask. What kind of questions does a spiritually-awakened person often ask? “What is the unpardonable sin? and have I committed it?” We need to know the answer to that. We have to be ready to deal with them if they say, “Am I too old to be saved?” or, “Am I too young to be saved?”

What about those who have come to the end of their life and they're despairing? Well, we have to hold out the way of salvation to them. We have to show them that there is life to be had in Christ—there is a hell to be shunned, and there is a crown to be won; a heaven to be gained, a hell to be shunned.

They may be discouraged—“I've tried, I've tried to come to Jesus,” and here, we have to gently expose to them that they're trying to make themselves worthy of Christ saving them, and they have to be brought to an end of themselves. They have to be brought to that position where they cast themselves upon the Lord alone for mercy.

Some might say, “Am I reprobate? Has God cast me off forever?” And the encouragement to give there is this, that the reprobate have no concerns about their spiritual condition; that if they are asking this question, the right response is to cast themselves upon the mercy of God in Christ, because there is nowhere else they can go, if they are to be saved.

We have to be patient with them, just as the Lord is patient with us. Imagine what would have happened if the Lord had turned away from us the first time that we were awakened with a guilty conscience and never fled to Christ. The Lord is patient, longsuffering, slow to wrath, abundant in

mercy. We have to seek to be like our Father in heaven in this matter. We have to remember how long it took us to wrestle with unbelief and our lack of assurance.

We have suitable literature for them. We should especially, however, encourage them to read the Bible, encourage them to read the Scriptures. Now some men say, “Oh, tell them to begin with John’s Gospel,” or, “Tell them to begin in the New Testament.” In my ignorance, when I was brought to Christ, I was given a Bible, and I just started at Genesis and read through. I didn’t know that that’s not how you should approach it. Is it wrong? Well, only the Lord knows. But if they are reading the Bible, they are discovering the mind of God.

And be much in prayer for them. You can’t make them Christians. There are times when people seem so near to the kingdom, you feel that you would cut off a right hand or pluck out a right eye if only you could get them into the kingdom, but we can’t. And so, we should be much in prayer for them, because only the Lord can save them.

So, as we visit *Those Who Are Spiritually Awakened*, let us remember these things.

5. Visiting the Sorrowing

The fifth thing that I want us to consider is *Visiting the Sorrowing*. It was part of Christ’s ministry to comfort those that mourn, and it should be part of our ministry also. There are many causes why those under our care are mourning. There’s death visiting the household, or even looming over themselves; terminal illnesses; family problems; marriage breakups; unemployment; financial difficulties.

When we hear of someone being in trouble, we should not wait to ask to visit them, but we should go at once with the comforts of the gospel. We should take these opportunities when people are sorrowing to speak on spiritual matters. These people will likely be more aware of the frailty and transience of life. If they are going through troubles and sorrows that show them the emptiness of life, the vanity of life, then they will be aware that there must be more to life than these things, and so we speak to them of spiritual matters. It’s an opportunity to speak to them about things that matter and things that endure.

Remember what I said earlier, when we were speaking about not speaking too much, the Word of God tells us to “Weep with them that weep” (Romans 12:15), and there are times when all we can do when visiting the sorrowing is simply weep with them. And we should not be ashamed of that. We should be ready to weep with the weeping in our congregation, and to sorrow with the sorrowing.

When we consider those who are sorrowing, there is one especially sensitive matter that gives rise to sorrow, and that is the situation where there has been a miscarriage of a child. In the case of a stillbirth, or of a child’s death after birth, there is usually a funeral, and so, there is that opportunity to deal with an infant corpse, and to grieve in a way that gives a deal of closure. But parents of a miscarriage, we must remember, are not sorrowing simply because they’ve had an unfortunate mishap—they have lost a child. They have lost an infant. And if we believe that children are, from the moment of conception, a person, then they have lost a little person, and we must seek to help them with comfort. We should visit them as soon as possible. We should be careful in what we say to them. They’re very sensitive. Sometimes people can be so insensitive, one woman saying to another, “Oh, don’t worry, you can always have another one.” Would we put up with that sort of thing if we lost a child? Well, they have lost a child, these people who are suffering the results of a miscarriage. So we don’t brush off their sorrow as unwarranted; we realize that they are grieving the loss of a child.

6. The Matter of Depression.

I want to conclude with mentioning, not dealing with, but mentioning *The Matter of Depression*. If we have someone in the congregation who is suffering from genuine depression—and I’m not speaking about melancholia, simply feeling down; we all feel down; and the word “depression” is used far too often for something that is not depression in a clinical sense—we’re talking about clinical depression. Well, if we have someone, we’ve got to be prepared to minister to them in the long haul.² There’s no easy fix for these people. Ministers are not professionals in these matters, and therefore, we’ve got to tread gently. We must be ready to advise them to seek medical help. You see, depressed people, truly depressed people, can sap a minister’s time and energy and spiritual strength, because they are high demand people. They require constant maintenance. They require constant attention.

Now, this is a vast subject, and I’m not going to suggest that I can deal with it, but I would draw your attention to papers or sermons on SermonAudio.com by the Reverend David Murray,³ or Martyn Lloyd-Jones’s⁴ book, *Spiritual Depression*, or, one of the old Puritan classics, *A Lifting Up for the Downcast*,⁵ and these will be of great help and assistance if you have to deal with someone who’s depressed.

And so, you see, there are a number of *Specific Circumstances of Visitation*—when a child has died, or is mentally defective; where you’re visiting the relatives of a suicide; visiting the sorrowing, or the depressed; or dealing with the elderly and those who are depressed. Well, these are all the comments I have on these *Special Circumstances*. Thank you.

² “The long haul” means over a long period of time.

³ Dr. David P. Murray is Professor of Old Testament and Practical Theology at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary since 2007. He served as pastor for 12 years in the Scottish Highlands, and authored the book, *Christians Get Depressed Too*. He is the primary speaker for The Cross Fellowship, speaking at a wide range of churches around the world. Born in Scotland, he holds his PhD from the Vrije Univeriteit Amsterdam.

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 *A Lifting Up for the Downcast*, written by William Bridge (c. 1600–1670), English non-conformist Protestant minister.