

THE
Godly Home

RICHARD BAXTER

Edited by Randall J. Pederson

Introduction by J. I. Packer



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Introduction

J. I. Packer



If someone was planning to produce an encyclopedia, that is, an exhaustive work of reference, on some subject, or indeed, like the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, on all subjects together, how would you expect him to go about it? Surely, by recruiting a team of assistants, by ensuring access to a good library, by stocking up with some lavishly equipped computers, and by acquiring for comparative purposes copies of all those earlier works of reference that the new project was intended to outclass. How could one hope to do a good job otherwise?

Back in the eighteenth century, when a group of booksellers-publishers (in those days these two trades were one) engaged Samuel Johnson to produce a definitive English dictionary, they gave him money to hire and pay a team of researchers, to rent premises in which they could all work together, and to purchase what they needed for their task. The investment, we know, paid off. Johnson's dictionary was a landmark from the start and became the foundation on which all later English dictionaries were built.

When the Puritan Richard Baxter (1615–1691) produced his encyclopedia of the Christian life, however, the story was rather different.

In 1664 Baxter was a pastor out of a job. His ministry at Kidderminster in the English Midlands, where he had served (with a five-year absence as a Civil War chaplain) since 1641, and which had been marvelously fruitful in evangelism, nurture, and church community-building, had been terminated by the anti-Puritan Act of Uniformity in 1662. Since then he had resided in Acton, a few miles

outside London, living, it seems, on book royalties and rents from the small property he owned. He was married to a woman twenty years younger than himself who had some money of her own. His mind went back to urgings from the late Archbishop Usher that he should “write a directory for the several ranks of professed Christians” and to his own plan, formed some years before, of writing “a Family Directory,” which he began to compose. The project took him something like a year. He had no secretary, copyist, or pastoral peers to help him, and he was “far from my library and all my books, save an inconsiderable parcel which wandered with me, where I went.” But what came out of the hopper of his fantastically fertile and fast-moving mind was a treatise of a million and a quarter words that, when finally published in 1673, bore the following title:

A Christian Directory
Or
A Sum of Practical Theology, and Cases of Conscience
Directing Christians
How to Use their Knowledge and Faith;
How to Improve all Helps and Means, and to Perform all Duties;
How to Overcome Temptations, and to Escape or Mortify Every Sin;
In Four Parts.
I. Christian Ethics (or Private Duties)
II. Christian Economics (or Family Duties)
III. Christian Ecclesiastics (or Church Duties)
IV. Christian Politics (or Duties to our Rulers and Neighbors)

Do not treat this title as grandiose or inflated. In the days before dust jackets and blurbs, title pages were regularly fulsome, since it was only there that information as to what you would find in the book if you bought it could be given. Baxter’s title is a factual inventory of what he believed his book contained. It is worth noting that when it was reprinted in 1990, the dust jacket carried Timothy Keller’s estimate of it as “the greatest manual on Biblical counseling ever produced.”

Three points in particular need to be noted.

1. *Baxter’s scope.* The *Directory* announces itself as a *sum* of practical theology—that is, a *summa*, in the medieval sense, a single,

comprehensive presentation dealing with everything, “all helps and means,” “all duties,” “every sin”—in short, all that is involved with living before God as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Baxter’s exhaustiveness can be exhausting, but it would be foolish to criticize the monumentally thorough work for being too long. Its scope warrants its length. It is, in fact, a triumph of close-packed clarity; and it is, after all, a work of reference.

2. *Baxter’s method.* The *Directory* announces itself as a sum of *cases of conscience*. *Case* means here a specific uncertainty and trigger of inward debate as to where one stands with God and what one should do to know him and keep his favor, to please him and to show him honor and bring him glory. Baxter asks us to observe “that the resolving of practical cases of conscience, and the reducing of theoretical knowledge into serious Christian practice, and promoting a skillful facility in the faithful exercise of universal obedience, and holiness of heart and life, is the great work of this treatise.” Many of the externals of Baxter’s world have changed over the past three and a half centuries, but God and man and the principles of godliness remain just what they were, and the relevance of Baxter’s “cases” and case-oriented directions to our own relationships with God and our various neighbors will, I think, startle thoughtful readers. Within his seventeenth-century frame, Baxter is handling the things that abide.

3. *Baxter’s readership.* The title tells us that the *Directory* is for Christians as such—and more particularly, so Baxter says in his introductory remarks, for “the younger and more unfurnished and unexperienced sort of ministers” and “the more judicious masters of families, who may choose and read such parcels to their families, as at any time the case requireth.” But anyone who is prepared not to yield to twenty-first-century panic at seemingly seventeenth-century Anglo-Saxon, to let Baxter’s passionate persuadings do their work, and to allow each point to hit the conscience as it was meant to, will find here a glowing sense of God, unending food for thought, and constant incentives to self-assessment, self-humbling, and true repentance and reconsecration, to one’s own lasting benefit. Read, and you will see.

The present book is a slightly edited version of the opening

chapters of the *Christian Directory*, Part II, "Christian Economics," on marriage partnership, family worship, parents, and children. "Economics" here means not commerce as today but management. Godliness at home, in the life of the married couple and their family, is Baxter's theme, and he develops it with steady concentration and haunting power.

But one might ask, why reprint this material now? Why should anyone expect today's readers to take an interest in it? To this perfectly fair question a twofold answer must be given.

The first answer is that in the Western world at least, and increasingly elsewhere, the family is in deep trouble. Relentless pressures arising from the centralizations of urban life are eroding domestic relationships, so that their intrinsic primacy in human life is no longer being appreciated or lived out. Instead these pressures cut off husbands and wives from each other, cut off children from their parents and grandparents, and cut off the nuclear family from uncles, aunts, and next-door neighbors. And from being everyday life's focal center, a sustained source of warmth and joy ("there's no place like home") the home turns into a dormitory and snacking point from which family members scatter for most of most days. Awareness that this state of things is not happy is widespread, and on the principle of scratching where it itches, many blueprints for rebuilding the family get into print, particularly among Christian people, whose sense of family life being out of joint is most acute. In this situation, it would be mere chronological snobbery, to borrow C. S. Lewis's phrase, to assume that only contemporary treatments of Christian family life are worth reading. When the boat is leaking and taking in water fast, the time-honored word of wisdom has been, all hands to the pumps; and when healthy family life is under threat, the call should be, let all wise persons in this field speak and be heard. On this basis alone, we shall do well to listen to Richard Baxter.

The second answer, which follows on from this, is, quite simply that on this topic, no less than on many others, Richard Baxter was superb. Though a bachelor during his Kidderminster pastorate and still childless after two years of marriage (the marriage was permanently childless, which Baxter regretted), he knew very well what he

was talking about and was able to speak as a real authority on it. A well-read man with quick intelligence and a virtually photographic memory, an autodidact whose mental energy seemed endless, and a Puritan Christian whose God-centeredness, devotion, zeal, mastery of Scripture, and passion for holiness were truly awesome, he inherited from his predecessors in the Puritan pastorate a great deal of wisdom on home and family life, which his own pastoral acumen and insight enabled him first to absorb and then to surpass. Down-to-earth, humble humanity, thoughtful and prayerful care for those he served, and an abundance of common sense and shrewdness on people's motivations, personal and relational dynamics, and the short- and long-term consequences of actions had further equipped him for his hands-on years of parish ministry. Further he was effortlessly clearheaded, lucid in thought, and eloquent in speech, a master communicator on any subject. His talents were fully on display as he wrote about the tasks, ideals, and problems of Christian family life.

In typical Puritan style, Baxter viewed all human life, and here specifically all domestic life, through three grids: the grid of doctrine, that of duty, and that of promise. All three were sourced directly from Scripture. The *doctrine* grid set forth the purposes and goals of God, first in creation and then in redemption, for each person and for each department of his or her existence and activity. The *duty* grid spelled out the moral commands of God, his will of precept as Reformed theologians called it, as pointers to and as shaped by God's objective in each case. The *promise* grid deployed God's offers of help for faithful obedience, aimed at achieving his specific target in each case. In the chapters reprinted in this book, Baxter assumes that readers have a working knowledge of the relevant doctrine—namely, that the family is for God-honoring partnership and mutual service, for character-molding in and through love, and for the continuance of our race through the producing and nurturing of children; that sex is strictly for procreation, with affectionate playfulness and pleasure; and that every family should be a mini-church, with its male head as the pastor. (This is the standard Puritan view.) Baxter assumes also that we know how to plead and rely on the promises of God in relation to our hopes, fears, endeavors, and bafflements, a subject that he had already treated at length in *The Life of Faith* (1670). What he

concentrates on is the duty grid, stating and clarifying standards by which we humans are called to live. His thought moves rapidly, and he crisscrosses each area of duty many times, filling in all the angles, hammering each obligation home in the conscience. Readers will soon see why the editors of the first reprint of *Christian Directory*, in 1707, sixteen years after Baxter's death, spoke of it as "perhaps the best body of practical divinity that is extant in our own and any other tongue."

It is good, and a matter for thanksgiving, to have Baxter back in print on the domestic topics with which the following chapters deal, and it is to be hoped that in the ongoing contemporary conversation about them his contribution will be heard and heeded.

J. I. Packer

Chapter Three

Directions for the Holy Government of Families



The principal thing required for the right governing of families is the fitness of the governors and those governed, which was spoken of before in the directions for the constitution of the family. If persons, unfit for their relations, have joined themselves together in a family, their first duty is to repent of their former sin and rashness, to turn to God and seek after that fitness necessary for the right practice of their duties. In the governors of families, these three things are of greatest necessity: authority, skill, and holiness and readiness of will.

First, a *general direction*: Let governors maintain their authority in their families. For if that is lost, and you are despised by those you should rule, your word will be nothing to them; you do but ride without a bridle; your power of governing is gone when your authority is lost. You must first understand the nature, use, and extent of your authority; for as your relations are different to your wife and to your children, so also is your authority. Your authority over your wife is such as is necessary to the order of your family, the safe and prudent management of your affairs, and your comfortable cohabitation. The power of love and complicated interest must be more than magisterial commands. Your authority over your children is great, yet only such as, joined¹ with love, is needful for their good education and happiness.²

¹*Conjunct.*

²*Felicity.*

Direction 1: Let your family understand that your authority is from God, who is the God of order, and that in obedience to him they are obliged to obey you. There is no power but from God; and there is none that the intelligent creature can so much reverence as that which is from God. All bonds are easily broken and cast away (by the soul at least, if not the body), which are not perceived to be divine. An enlightened conscience will say to ambitious usurpers, “I know God and his Son Jesus, but who are you?”

Direction 2: The more God appears to be with you, in your knowledge, holiness, and blameless life, the greater will your authority be in the eyes of your inferiors³ who fear God. Sin will make you contemptible and vile; and holiness, being the image of God, will make you honorable. In the eyes of the faithful, “a vile person is despised, but [the faithful man] honors those who fear the LORD” Ps. 15:4. “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people” (Prov. 14:34). “Those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed” (1 Sam. 2:30). Those who give themselves to “dishonorable passions” and relations⁴ (Rom. 1:26) will seem vile when they have made themselves so. Eli’s sons were “blaspheming God” and made themselves vile by their sin (1 Sam. 3:13). I know men should discern and honor a person placed in authority by God, though they are morally and naturally vile; but this is so hard that it is seldom well done. God is so severe against proud offenders that he usually punishes them by making them vile in the eyes of others; at least, when they are dead, and men dare freely speak of them, their names will rot (Prov. 10:7). The instances of the greatest emperors in the world, both Persian, Roman, and Turkish, do tell us that if (by whoredom, drunkenness, gluttony, pride, and especially persecution) they will make themselves vile, God will permit them, by uncovering their nakedness, to become the shame and scorn of men. Shall a wicked master of a family think to maintain his authority over others while he rebels against the authority of God?

Direction 3: Do not show your natural weakness by passions or imprudent words or deeds. For if they show contempt to your

³Not inferior in value or importance, but subordinate to another’s authority.

⁴*Conversations.*

family,⁵ a little thing will draw them further, to despise your words. There is naturally in man so high an esteem of reason that men are hardly persuaded that they should rebel against reason to be governed, for order's sake, by folly. They are likely to think that reason should bear rule; therefore, any silly or weak expressions or inordinate passions or imprudent actions are likely to make you contemptible in the eyes of inferiors.

Direction 4: Do not lose your authority by not using it. If you suffer children a little while to be in control⁶ and to have and say and do what they will, your government will be but a name or image. A moderate course between a lordly rigor and a soft subjection or neglect of exercising the power of your place will best preserve you from your inferiors' contempt.

Direction 5: Do not lose your authority by too much familiarity. If you make your children playfellows or equals and talk to them and allow them to talk to you as your companions, they will quickly grow upon you and hold their custom. Though another may govern them, they will scarce endure to be governed by you but will scorn to be subject where they have once been equal.

Second, a *general direction*: Labor for prudence and skillfulness in governing. Whoever undertakes to be the master of a family undertakes to be their governor; and it is no small sin or folly to undertake such a place as you are utterly unfit for when it is a matter of so great importance. You could discern this in a case that is not your own, as if a man undertakes to be a schoolmaster who cannot read or write or to be a physician who knows neither diseases nor their remedies or to be a ship's pilot who cannot tell how to do a pilot's work. Why cannot you much more discern it in your own case?

Direction 1: To get the skill of holy governing, it is needful that you be studied in the Word of God. Therefore, God commands the king that "he shall read in it all the days of his life" (Deut. 17:18–19), and it must "not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night" (Josh. 1:8). All parents must be able to "teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise" (Deut. 6:6–7; 11:18–19). All government of men

⁵Persons.

⁶To have the head.

is subservient to the government of God and is to promote obedience to his laws. It is necessary that we understand the laws to which all laws and precepts must give place and serve.

Direction 2: Understand the different tempers of your inferiors, and deal with them as they are and as they can bear, and not with all alike. Some are more intelligent and some less so. Some are tender, and some have more hardened, impudent dispositions. Some will be best wrought upon by love and gentleness; and some have need of sharpness and severity. Prudence must fit your dealings to their dispositions.

Direction 3: You must recognize difference between their different faults, and accordingly suit your reprehensions. They must be most severely rebuked who have most willfulness and those who are faulty in matters of greatest weight. Some faults are so much through mere disability and unavoidable frailty of the flesh that there is but little of the will appearing in them. These must be more gently handled, as deserving more compassion than reproof. Some are habitual vices, and the whole nature is more depraved than in others. These must have more than a particular correction. They must be held to such a course of life as may be most effectual to destroy and change those habits. Some are upright at heart in the main and most momentous things but are guilty of some actual faults, and of these, some more seldom and some more frequent. If you do not prudently diversify your rebukes according to their faults, you will harden them and miss your ends; for there is a family justice that must not be overthrown unless you will overthrow your families, just as there is a more public justice necessary to the public good.

Direction 4: Be a good husband to your wife and a good father to your children, and let love have dominion in your governing, that your inferiors may easily find that it is in their interest to obey you. For interest and self-love are the natural rulers of the world. The most effectual way to procure obedience or any good is to make men perceive that it is for their own good and to engage in self-love, that they may see that the benefit is likely to be their own. If you do them no good but are sour and discourteous and closehanded to them, few will be ruled.

Direction 5: If you would be skillful in governing others, learn first to command yourselves. Can you ever expect to have others more at your will and government than yourselves? Is he fit to rule his family in the fear of God and a holy life who is unholy and fears not God himself? Or is he fit to keep them from passion, drunkenness, gluttony, lust, or any way of sensuality who cannot keep himself from it? Will not inferiors despise such reproofs, which are contradicted in your own lives? You know this is true of wicked preachers; is it not as true of other governors?

Third, a *general direction*: You must be holy persons if you would be holy governors of your families. Men's actions follow the bent of their dispositions. They will do as they are. An enemy of God will not govern a family for God; nor will an enemy of holiness (nor a stranger to it) set up a holy order in his house and in a holy manner manage his affairs. I know it is cheaper and easier to the flesh to call others to mortification and holiness of life than to bring ourselves to it; but yet when it is not a bare command or wish that is necessary but a course of holy and industrious government, unholy persons (though some of them may go far) have not the ends and principles that such a work requires.

Direction 1: To this end, be sure that your own souls are entirely subjected unto God and that you more accurately obey his laws than you expect any inferior should obey your commands. If you dare disobey God, why should they fear disobeying you? Can you more severely revenge disobedience, or more bountifully reward obedience, than God can? Are you greater and better than God is?

Direction 2: Be sure that you lay up your treasure in heaven, and make the enjoyment of God in glory to be the ultimate commanding end, both of the affairs and government of your family and of all things else with which you are entrusted. Devote yourselves and all to God, and do all for him; do all as passengers to another world whose business on earth is to provide for heaven and promote their everlasting interest. If thus you are separated unto God, you are sanctified; and then you will separate all that you have to his use and service, and this, with his acceptance, will sanctify all.

Direction 3: Maintain God's authority in your family more carefully than your own. Your own is but for his. More sharply rebuke

or correct those who wrong and dishonor God than those who wrong and dishonor you. Remember Eli's sad example. Do not make a small matter of any sins, especially great sins, of your children. It is an odious thing to slight God's cause when you are fiercely passionate for the loss of some small commodity of your own. God's honor must be greatest in your family. His service must have the preeminence of yours. Sin against him must be the most intolerable offense.

Direction 4: Let spiritual love to your family be predominant, and let your care be greatest for the saving of their souls, and your compassion greatest in their spiritual miseries. Be careful to provide them a portion in heaven and to save them from whatsoever would deprive them of it. Never prefer transitory riches⁷ before their everlasting riches. Never be so cumbered about many things as to forget that one thing is necessary. Choose for yourselves and your children the better part (Luke 10:42).

Direction 5: Let your family neither be kept in idleness and flesh-pleasing, nor yet overwhelmed with such multitude of business as shall take up and distract their minds, diverting them from and unfitting them for holy things. Where God lays on you a necessity of excessive labors, it must patiently and cheerfully be undergone; but when you draw them unnecessarily on yourselves for the love of riches, you do but become the tempters and tormentors of yourselves and others, forgetting the terrible examples of those who have fallen from Christ and are pierced with many sorrows (1 Tim. 6:10).

Direction 6: As much as possible, settle a constant order for all your businesses, that every work may know its time, and confusion may not shut out godliness. It is a great assistance in every calling to do all in a set and constant order; it makes it easy, removes impediments, and promotes success. Distraction in your business causes a distraction in your minds in holy duty. Some callings can hardly be cast into any order or method, but others may, if prudence and diligence are used. God's service will be better done, and your work will be better done, to the quiet of your own minds. Foresight and skillfulness will save you an abundance of labor and vexation.

⁷*Pelf of earth.*