



## Depression, Anxiety, and the Christian Life: Practical Wisdom from Richard Baxter

By Michael S. Lundy and J. I. Packer. Wheaton: Zondervan, 2018.  
ISBN-13 978-1-4335-4206-0 (pbk)

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Published online: 25 October 2019

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I have always wanted to review a work written by a Puritan, but since we are a few centuries apart, I thought I may never have the chance. Now, my wish has come true thanks to both Drs. J. I. Packer and Michael Lundy's updated and revised work from selections of Richard Baxter's *A Christian Directory*, particularly on the subjects of depression and anxiety. For those familiar with Baxter's writings, he supplied the church with such a magnitude of pastoral works; hence, it is fitting that Lundy and Packer give this small but potent dose of Baxter's pastoral wisdom to us to contemplate on its own. For those unfamiliar with Baxter's life and work, a short summary will help. Richard Baxter (1615–1691) served as a minister in several congregations in England, most notably at Kidderminster. As a Puritan, he was known for his non-conformist stance in the Church of England, but among these parishioners he was known for his pastoral care practices and extensive writing on the subject. He was prolific enough in this written works that King Charles I once was heard to refer to him as 'scribbling Dick.' His importance for pastoral care practices today cannot be overlooked as a forerunner of some modern mental health practices. Readers of this updated version of his works can easily see much of his observations mirror those in the current DSM for anxiety and depression. For those religiously persuaded or not, Baxter can give some needed insights gained from years of observing the human experience.

As our society continues to press forward, ever needing rest and peace of mind, the wise words from, not only Baxter, but the contributions of Lundy, a physician, and Packer, a theologian, are invaluable for the Christian community and society at large. The authors assert that as many as two-thirds of North Americans will seek treatment for depression and anxiety in their lifetimes. This is hardly astounding as fewer and fewer rely on soul care practices essential to church life in favor for

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pharmaceuticals. This is not to say we negate medicines that can help restore chemical balance in our brains, but we also should not wholly rely on medicating symptoms without getting to the root of the problem. Packer and Lundy seek to help us rediscover that type of care so clearly offered by Baxter.

The book is divided in two major sections: an introduction to Richard Baxter and his counsel on depression. Each of these larger sections contain chapters on Baxter as a ‘spiritual physician’ and his place in our time as well as two chapters in the second section covering his advice for those suffering from anxiety and depression. Also, an appendix is included in this work covering Baxter’s understanding of the duty of physicians.

Chapter one, written by Dr. Packer, unpacks the life of Richard Baxter including his entrance into ministry as well as his written pastoral contributions, mostly notably *A Christian Directory*. Packer further reveals some of the major premises of the *Directory*, and he also works diligently to explain the importance of such work for today’s depressed individuals. In chapter two, Dr. Lundy explains the importance of Baxter’s approach for the medical community and how the physical is profoundly impacted by the emotional and spiritual. Dr. Lundy gives evidence of his own understanding of this emotional physical connection in stories from his own medical training at Tulane University. His primary aim being to offer a defense of Baxter’s method of soul care as a means of diagnosing depression or anxiety while also offering a filter for modern readers to appreciate Baxter as a man of his own time. Lundy’s explanation of Baxter’s time and ours revolves around the use of terms that could confuse readers not familiar with seventeenth century parlance. This is important to the second section of the book which discussed Baxter’s wisdom from the *Directory* in greater detail. Lundy finishes this first section with several pages on Baxter’s pastoral wisdom and the sources of this wisdom. As we might suspect, this wisdom was derived from God ultimately. Puritans like Baxter were willing to use knowledge from medical treatment and moral philosophy as well, recognizing that all true knowledge and wisdom comes from God, no matter what the earthly source may be.

In section two, Lundy presents an updated and abridged version of Baxter’s pastoral advice for those suffering from depression, anxiety, and grief. While we can get lost in the terms used several hundred years ago, what is most striking is the connection that Baxter’s diagnosis of certain problems has with our modern diagnosis of anxiety and depression, especially as it concerns the observation of symptoms. Much of what I can observe from Baxter on this subject is similar to what can be seen in the DSM 5 as symptoms of anxiety and depression (which Baxter called ‘melancholy’). After Baxter introduces symptoms, he then gives twenty-one ‘directions’ to treat ‘melancholy’ from resetting the mind toward God to medicinal treatment by a physician. This shows the Puritans were willing to use every tool at their disposal to help the souls of those they pastored. The final chapter of section two concerns Baxter’s original work “The Cure of Melancholy and Overmuch Sorrow, by Faith.” This chapter begins with the causes of sorrow ranging from physical pain to deliberate sin. It ends with more than several pages related to the cure of sorrow. In a final appendix, Baxter directions to physicians are presented, not to instruct them about their jobs but to provide direction for what God requires of them.

In the final analysis of this work, it is helpful to make the wisdom of the Puritans more accessible today with updated and abridged versions. These teachings in smaller installments give a good grasp of God's work in our forebears for the good of the church. I have long been conscious that works like this one are needed for the modern person and now we have it. The reader should not expect a commentary of Baxter's work but only an updated presentation of it. I believe it is the strength of the book which allows Baxter to speak for himself as much as possible with only moderate explanation of archaic terms. The book accomplishes this aim.

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