




COMMENDATIONS

What do pastors do when visiting the sick? Such visits are crucial both eternally and pastorally. Brian Croft has written a marvellous piece to assist us. His work is theologically grounded, gospel centred and full of practical wisdom. I recommend it enthusiastically.

**Thomas R. Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison
Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Teaching
Pastor, Clifton Baptist Church**



I read Brian Croft's Visit the Sick with glad thanksgiving! Visitation is a timely and much-needed topic for pastors and Christians in our day. And Croft addresses it with sound thinking and very helpful suggestions. Visit the Sick sets out to provide sensitive, God-honouring and gospel-driven counsel to pastors and Christians. And it hits the mark. If you're like me, someone who feels ill-equipped to say the right words or do the right things at someone's sickbed, you'll delight in this book and give God great praise for moving Brian Croft to write it. May the Lord be pleased to move us to visit our people and by that means awaken legions!


**Thabiti Anyabwile, Senior Pastor, First Baptist
Church, Grand Cayman Island, and author, The
Faithful Preacher**

Every pastor—and many other church leaders as well—will visit the sick. Some feel that their visits are fruitful times of ministry; others feel very awkward. Very, very few, however, have the intuitive people skills and the pastoral expertise to do this successfully without some training. Brian Croft's book provides concise, wise and practical instruction for this

important aspect of ministry. Read it for yourself, study it as a staff or use it as a training resource for all those in your church who regularly visit the sick. It can help turn a routine responsibility into a time of effective ministry.

**Donald Whitney, Associate Professor of Biblical
Spirituality, The Southern Baptist Theological
Seminary; President, The Center of Biblical
Spirituality; and author, Spiritual Disciplines of the
Christian Life**

Visit the Sick is an excellent and much-needed resource today when the actual practice of 'shepherding souls' is so often neglected. Many younger pastors (and not so young ones as well) have never received the sort of very practical guidance which Brian Croft gives in this book. This book has the potential to be a great blessing to pastors and those they shepherd. It will now be a recommended text in my Pastoral Ministries class and I heartily commend it to others.



**Ray Van Neste, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Christian
Studies; Director, R. C. Ryan Center for Biblical
Studies, Union University; and elder, Cornerstone
Community Church**

One of the primary reasons why so many Christians fail to heed Jesus' instruction to visit the sick is that they feel ill-prepared. What should I say? How long should I stay? Why should I go? What should I pray? What if the person is dying? What if he or she is not a Christian? Those are just a few of the many apprehensions people have about visiting the sick. In this very readable book, Brian Croft provides us with practical assistance that should eliminate feelings of inadequacy and motivate the reader to fulfil Christ's commission, 'I was sick and you visited me.' A biblically based, highly practical manual



for Christian care-givers, this insightful book can be read in just a few minutes but its down-to-earth counsel will equip you to confidently visit the sick for years to come.

Bob Russell, former Senior Pastor, Southeast Christian Church, Louisville, Kentucky

One of the most vital aspects of pastoral ministry is seizing teachable moments in which the gospel of Christ can have its maximum impact. Times of suffering from sickness have the power to prepare the heart for the seed of the Word as few other things can. Brian Croft has done an excellent job of showing how the pastor can make the Word of God central in his ministry to the sick and dying. He does so with specific and practical counsel, and with words saturated with Scripture. I heartily commend this work as a benefit to the fruitful ministry of the gospel.

Dr Andrew Davis, Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church, Durham, North Carolina, and author, An Approach To Extended Memorization of Scripture

Brian Croft has served us all well in providing a succinct, thoughtful training manual for hospital visitation. Church member, let this book equip you to become more useful to those in your church who are ailing. Young pastor, gain from Brian's practical wisdom. Let him train you to love and serve your congregation in a way that will adorn your preaching (and help you avoid awkward mistakes). Seasoned pastor, let this book remind you of the privilege it is to serve and encourage the sick in a fallen world. I plan to read it together with my elders, and hope to make it available to my congregation as an equipping tool.

Paul Alexander, Senior Pastor, Fox Valley Bible Church, St Charles, Illinois, and co-author, The Deliberate Church

Brian has given us a practical and theological guide to caring for our congregations. It is a must-read for those interested in a theology for visiting the sick.

Dr George D. Barnett, Ministry Resource Consultant, Georgia Baptist Convention

Seldom does one encounter pastoral resources of a practical nature that are richly biblical and theologically grounded. But Brian Croft's excellent guide to pastoral visitation of the sick and ailing is exactly that. By placing his wise and perceptive practical counsel within the framework of key biblical teaching and central theological conviction, he provides more than a mere 'how to' guide for pastoral visitation. Thankfully, he also offers the gospel of grace and power needed for the kind of practical help that truly brings honour to God and leads people to Christ. Filled with wisdom and rooted in theology, this resource offers the blend so needed in the church today.

Bruce A. Ware, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and author, God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thanks to:

The many faithful labourers who read over this manuscript and gave their helpful input. Your comments and counsel were of immense value. I want especially to thank the tireless labour of my fellow labourers in the gospel: Scott, Adam, Greg and Matt, whose time and gifts towards this project I could never repay.

Day One Publications, for seeing the value in this work, and especially Jim Holmes, for your excitement and encouragement through the process.

Heather Peterson, for sharing your amazing gift of editing by serving me on this project. It has been a joy to work with you.

The faithful saints of Auburndale Baptist Church, for allowing me the gift of your fellowship, the encouragement of your love, and your endless support of my labour in the Word for the sake of your souls. I gain great joy from watching God further the gospel and build his church through your desire for, submission to and worship of him.

Mark Dever, not only for writing the Foreword, but also for the many years of invaluable investment, teaching, instruction and guidance you have given me.

Don Whitney, for your wisdom, counsel and guidance throughout the writing of this book. Learning from you in this way has been a precious gift.

My father, for your endless encouragement in this project, as well as for your powerful and selfless example to me my whole life of what it means to care not just for the physical but also for the spiritual needs of others.

My children: Samuel, Abby, Isabelle and Claire. What unspeakable joy you bring me by your love, care and affection! You remain a daily example to me of God's undeserved goodness and grace.

My wife: you remain the most compelling example of this book by your unconditional care of me. Apart from my Saviour, there is no one I love more than you.

Our sovereign, eternal God and King Jesus, who pardons all our iniquities, heals all our diseases (Ps. 103:3), and in his infinite wisdom and mystery displays himself most powerfully in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9).





CONTENTS

FOREWORD	12
PREFACE	14
INTRODUCTION	16
1 BIBLICAL CONSIDERATIONS	18
2 THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS	30
3 PASTORAL CONSIDERATIONS	40
4 PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS	48
5 CONCLUSION	54
AFTERWORD	58
A NOTE TO PASTORS	60
APPENDIX 1 CHECKLIST	66
APPENDIX 2 SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION	68
APPENDIX 3 FAQ	74
APPENDIX 4 'SICKNESS' BY J. C. RYLE (ABRIDGED VERSION)	80
FURTHER INFORMATION AND HELP	91
ENDNOTES	92



➔ Visit the sick

FOREWORD

I remember the first time when I did hospital visitation. I was twenty-one or twenty-two. I had just begun to work in a church, and the senior pastor asked me to go and visit some older members in the hospital. And let me make it clear: these were ‘older members’ who had been born in the previous century! I didn’t know any of them. They certainly wouldn’t know me. What would I have to give them? What could I contribute to them? The deep and self-conscious awkwardness of feeling useless came over me.

God was very kind to me on that first day of visitation. And over the weeks and months to come, I made many more visits to that hospital and others on the north shore of Boston. Oh, how I wish that this little book had existed then! What frustration and embarrassment it might have saved me! How it would have served those I was trying to encourage!

Brian Croft is well qualified to help the pastor in this way. He himself is a faithful pastor, accustomed to visiting the sick in hospital. I’ve known Brian for a number of years. His father, Bill Croft, is a physician and a wonderful Christian man. So Brian has grown up among those concerned for the sick. His brother, Scott Croft, has served on staff with me at the Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington and is currently serving as the chairman of our elders. Scott has been an encouragement to, instructor to and student of Brian. Brian’s sister, Beth Spraul, is a member of my congregation and has served in hospital chaplaincies. So, from many angles, Brian is a man well qualified to advise us in these matters.

In this little volume, Brian helps us to think straightforwardly and faithfully about God’s truth and God’s people. His advice is as sound as it is simple. Some parts of this book may be about matters you’ve already worked out. But isn’t it better to be told something twice than not at all? Let Brian’s be that reinforcing

Foreword ➔

voice. And don’t be surprised if you read some things that you hadn’t thought of before. Read this book, and let Brian help you help others.

Mark Dever

Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC



PREFACE

We are victims of our own culture. The twenty-first century has brought with it demands, pressures and deadlines that have left us feeling as if our lives are often spinning out of control. We have all felt the tension of trying to balance time with God, work, family, church, school, social occasions, house repairs, personal errands and sleep, all of which need our daily attention. Unfortunately, we often come to the end of the day exhausted, wondering where the time went. Our day becomes reminiscent of the hamster running in his wheel—busy, but going nowhere. It is this tension that leads to the neglect of certain essential responsibilities in the life of a Christian. One of those essential tasks is the visiting and care of the sick within our churches.

My goal with this book is to instruct and motivate us to recapture this God-honouring practice and to do so by reaching for a standard that, frankly, is beyond us today. This means that we must be taught by those who lived at a different time within a different culture. We must learn from those who modelled an astounding dedication to this call. We must learn from their accounts and convictions. We must be instructed by our heroes from church history.

Perhaps the greatest historical example of visiting the afflicted was the seventeenth-century Puritan pastor Richard Baxter. Baxter had an amazing strategy of visiting not just the sick but everyone in his congregation throughout Kidderminster regularly and faithfully. In the midst of his much-disciplined routine, Baxter developed a certain sensitivity to those in his congregation who were sick and homebound. He wrote in *The Reformed Pastor*, ‘We must be diligent in visiting the sick, and helping them to prepare either for a fruitful life, or a happy death.’¹

Many others in Baxter’s time and since were found to be diligent in this task, yet as society made its turn into the twentieth century, the local church and its priorities began to change. Somewhere in the midst of industrialized nations and changing

churches, the care for the sick began gradually to diminish. It is for this reason that we must go back beyond the twentieth century to seek a historical model if we are to recapture caring for the sick in a way that most glorifies God in our modern day.

There are, however, a few challenges to this approach. It would be difficult on several levels for a pastor today to achieve the standard of care that Baxter and other Puritans maintained. My solution is to take their principles and try to paint a picture of what they would realistically look like today. We must also recognize that Baxter, Spurgeon and other Puritan-like pastors would have absolutely no category to relate to the hyper-sensitive, self-consumed mindset we find rampant in our twenty-first-century culture. Some adjustments are therefore necessary, especially in regard to the practicality of visiting hospitals, nursing homes, rehabilitation centres and the homes of those who are saturated in our secular environment today.

The application found in this book is the result of my humble attempt to balance the example of these heroes of church history with those necessary adjustments. I pray that your labour in reading this (and mine in writing) will not be in vain. May we have an awakening towards the care and fellowship of those often forgotten in our congregations. Ultimately, may this work lead to a rediscovery of what the Bible portrays as a true Christian community embodying a visual picture of the gospel.

I owe a significant debt to the faithful elderly saints of Auburndale Baptist Church. Thank you so much for your example of faith and unshakable hope in the gospel throughout your numerous sicknesses and sufferings. No one has taught me more about the sufficiency of our Saviour than so many of you. Thank you, not only for the gift of allowing me to care for you through your sicknesses, but also for your clear and powerful portrayal of Christ in the midst of them by your joy.

Brian Croft

Auburndale Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky



➔ Visit the sick

INTRODUCTION

Before considering the practical aspects of visiting the sick, you may need to be more convinced that this task is important not only for pastors but also for all members of the local church. Let us therefore take a moment to consider the reasons why this should be a priority in our lives as Christians and is worthy of our attention.

First of all, visiting the sick is biblical. The apostle James exhorts those who are sick to call for the elders of the church to pray over them (James 5:14). Christians are also encouraged to pray in a like manner (James 5:16). It was Jesus who taught the care for the sick as a primary way to love him and our brother (Matt. 25:36,40) and who led by example (Mark 1:31). The apostles followed this pattern of caring for the sick (Acts 3:7; 28:8). The widows were especially to be cared for (1 Tim. 5:3–10). Caring for the sick is part of caring for souls, something for which leaders will give an account (Heb. 13:17). In my quick referencing of these passages, it needs to be acknowledged that they have a specific purpose and meaning within the context of their writing. However, we can still glean helpful principles from them to apply to this task. Jesus and the apostles cared about the sick and afflicted. They exhorted others to do so too.

Visiting the sick also gives a tremendous opportunity to minister to and to love our fellow Christians. Charles Spurgeon wisely stated, ‘I venture to say that the greatest earthly blessing that God can give to any of us is health, with the exception of sickness. Sickness has frequently been of more use to the saints of God than health has.’² There is a spiritual attentiveness that accompanies sickness that easily fizzles in health. As we look for ways to care for one another as Christians, may we seize those moments that God in his kindness provides.

We must also be convinced that this is the calling not only of pastors and leaders in the church, but of all in the church:

Introduction ➔

pastors, deacons and teachers; singles and married people; men and women; and families as well. We must see this as similar to the early church’s dedication to provide for the needs of the church (Acts 2 and 4): as the calling and responsibility of all covenant members of a local church to one another. It is important that we do not underestimate the impact that visiting those who are sick and afflicted can have on each of us. The nineteenth-century Scottish pastor David Dickson wrote, ‘On the bed of sickness the Lord ripens his people for glory, and to the elder himself it is often a scene of instruction and revival.’³ God will not only sanctify the sick through sickness, but he will also teach and encourage the healthy through the same means. May each of us therefore mature in our love for God and for one another and see the benefit, as well as the call, upon each of our lives to care for the sick. Let us begin by considering the biblical evidence on this matter.