
PLANTING & WATERING (1 Corinthians 3:6)

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Dear Friends,

A tragically often repeated scenario

One frequently recurring set of events in evangelical churches is the quick collapse of a new pastorate with bright hopes and anticipation turning rapidly to recriminations, bitterness and anger or the bitter disintegration of what seemed a fruitful and settle long-term pastorate. What must we learn from such sad events?

What goes wrong? It is easy to say that the minister was arrogant and dictatorial and equally easy to say that the existing church leadership wanted a hard-working, multi-tasking puppet not a leader. Sometimes both parties have been unwise. The minister has not really bothered to understand how the decision making process in the church works. The church's leaders may simply assume the new minister knows, 'How we do things here!' As with marriage a lot of talking needs to be done before agreeing commitment. Sometimes the issue is personal immaturity and insecurity. A minister when challenged does not explain himself but goes on his high horse and claims ministerial authority for what he is doing. The church officers or members, when hearing of the minister's plans, don't look at the biblical nature and wisdom of what is proposed but simply dig their heels in.

What is all-too-often the result? Pastors develop a pattern in the ministries they exercise. They will start well but facing opposition will default to being dictatorial and writing off anyone who disagrees with them as 'unspiritual' maybe even 'unsaved.' Sometimes of course they will force the opposition out and continue in a depleted and damaged church. On other occasions they will not be able to live with the tension and unhappiness in the church and will move on. Churches often develop an unhealthy pattern in their relationships with their pastors and that is damaging long-term. I remember seeing one church's list of past pastors and secretaries. There were about a dozen ministers, none of whom served for more than ten years, and about four church secretaries, who served for an average of over twenty years. Some churches become hire-and-fire churches who never develop a deep relationship of loyalty and trust with a pastor and who sadly don't anticipate doing so or even desire to do so.

Why this matters so much I remember someone saying to me recently that they thought that while there have been some wonderful long-term ministries that most of us simply don't have the capacity to sustain one and that it is better for them and the church if ministers move regularly. Is this then something that simply leads to the desirable end that ministers move on regularly? I have a number of reservations here:-

1. People object that long-term ministry is hard to sustain Of course it is. Therefore you have to work and study hard and develop spiritually in order to sustain such a ministry. Get used to it and get on with it – there is nothing worth doing which doesn't involve hard work and commitment!
2. Long-term ministry is vital if relationships are to be developed and churches are to flourish spiritually Churches are not organisations which need a regular change of CEO with a new set of dynamic ideas which will transform and develop the church. Rather they are groups of people who need to develop strong and mutually up-building relationships. When ministers and people fail to do this they become spiritually malnourished and unhealthy. It may be worth noting that in the secular world, for example Sir Alex Ferguson's long-term success at Manchester United, the same pattern is frequently to be found.
3. We are forgetting the Holy Spirit My deep concern when a minister and church go through a short and unhappy pastorate is that this often leads to bad attitudes and a damaging environment for weak and vulnerable Christians. People rapidly lose sight of the key truth concerning churches and that is that their health is dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit within it. The context of the command (Ephesians 4: 30), 'And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.' Is of relationships (see Ephesians 4 verses 25 – 32) and preserving them by a loving a forgiving attitude and avoiding damaging them by wrong attitudes and words.

A number of churches and ministers are damaged long-term, and operate at a far lower level than they should, because the Holy Spirit is grieved by deeply sinful attitudes and words.

How can we do anything about this? In disagreements amongst Christians there are two ways we need to get things right:-

1. Orthodoxy = Right Belief We need to be right in what we believe and what we seek to live out in our church life. Some patterns of church life are biblical and others may not be. Some are absolutely central and cannot be compromised, with others reformation may be long-term and with others it is less a matter of obedience, or even wisdom than of taste and personal prejudice. Therefore when someone says to me: 'This is a matter of principle and hence there can be no compromise' they are often fooling themselves. The deity of Christ or justification by faith are at stake and I agree 'No compromise'! Details of church order or what hymnbook or bible version to use are at stake and I say, 'By all means compromise and keep the peace.'
2. Orthopraxis = Right Actions We need to believe and to do the right things in the right way and these convictions are to be pursued in a right way and with a right spirit. A pastor may feel it would be better if some people left the church and the people may feel the same about him but the question is how should they act and what are their attitudes to each other? The people concerned are brothers and sisters in Christ and we are to love them and to seek their good. To do otherwise grieves the Holy Spirit.

One of my great concerns is that we seem to be in a period of church history where pragmatism, often of an unhealthy and unbiblical kind has become a driving force in the church under the banner of 'effective leadership.' Other emphases on prayer, seeking the mind of Christ and preserving Christian love can be looked down upon as pietism. However if the activity of the Spirit is the key to the growth of the church there is nothing more practical than such pietism.

Yours in the Lord,

Mike Plant

MIKE'S ITINERARY

April 6th and 13th Cannon Park (am)
April 20th Low Ham am and Henley pm

May 3rd + 4th Missionary Weekend Pontnewydd
May 18th Wheaton Aston Anniversary 2.30pm

Please note that after a week's holiday at the end of May I will be on sabbatical through to the end of August.

AN EXAMPLE HAVING A RIGHT SPIRIT

An area distinguished by bad attitudes, disputes and rancour has been how the gospel is to be preached when we know both that we are commanded to do so and that those to whom we preach are unable to come to Christ without being born again by the Holy Spirit. The prayer below was prayed by William Chalmers Burns who was instrumental in a revival in Robert Murray McCheyne's parish, when McCheyne was absent on a visit to Palestine and who also worked alongside Hudson Taylor as a missionary in China. His prayer indicates the need for correct belief and holding that belief correctly.

How hard it is to unite in just proportion the humbling doctrine of man's inability to come to Christ without regeneration, and the free gospel offer which is the moral means employed by God in conversion. Oh! Spirit of Jesus, my Saviour, lead me, a poor, ignorant, and self-conceited sinner, to the experience of this great mystery of grace, that I may know how I ought to declare thy glorious gospel to perishing fellow-sinners! Amen.

WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD!

I recently received an email:

I have a question that's been rumbling in the background of my thoughts for a while, and I thought I'd run it past you. I wondered if it would be a helpful subject for Planting and Watering, or something you could give me some advice on, or something for which you could point me in the direction of helpful reading. It may be a very simple thing to answer, because the question displays shocking ignorance on my part; but I strongly suspect that it's a question quite a few people could do with having addressed.

The question is basically: Who is the church gathering on a Sunday for?

My position is that when we meet on a Sunday this is the gathering of the church, i.e. the saints. It is the equivalent of the assembly of the righteous in the Psalms. It is God's family gathered to listen to and worship our Father and our head. This affects my approach to preaching at such gatherings. I see this as the time to try to bring to God's family a balanced

diet of his word. Because all of scripture points to Christ and because we won't put it into practice without the gospel, such preaching should contain the gospel, but won't be the same as a focused evangelistic address (or as the very narrow idea of gospel preaching that many have). I very definitely take into account the many unbelievers we, I'm glad to say, always have with us. I see 1 Cor 14 as showing a gathering for edification of the saints, but remembering unbelievers who may be present, and expecting that God can use messages for edification to convict and convert. I also will sometimes preach sermons that are wholly aimed at the unsaved in a direct way that is accessible to those who've never heard the gospel before. I also agree that such preaching is to the benefit of the saints. However, that does not answer the question about who the meeting is for and what should be preached.

My reason for the question is that it seems to me that many people don't think like this. An extreme example is a family who left the church here because they believed that the primary purpose of every morning service must be to convert the lost, and therefore a rigid 5-point pattern of preaching law, hell, the cross, faith and repentance, then assurance, must be followed at all times. Most are not like this, but their prayers for the service reflect that they think the main purpose is the conversion of the lost. I may have misunderstood, but the impression I got at the last prayer conference was that what we are doing on a Sunday is expected to be preaching for conversions.

There are some practical issues this relates to. e.g. the tendency to think that we're evangelising if we have gospel services, rather than recognising that most unsaved people never set foot in church; the demise of the evening service means that Sunday morning is the main (sometimes only) opportunity to shape the church and individuals by God's word; to what extent is Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones right that the preaching unbelievers need is very different from what believers need (see intro to OT Evangelistic Sermons)?

However, my main concern is one of principle: Biblically are we engaged in the gathering of the saints, who need to be fed on the whole counsel of God? Or are we putting on a public preaching event for unbelievers?

THE FOCUS OF OUR SUNDAY WORSHIP SERVICES

Introduction There are some subjects that are 'hot potatoes' and leave the person handling them in danger of being burned. This is clearly such a topic

but nonetheless it needs to be addressed – our church practice should reflect our biblical convictions not our pragmatism.

Writers on preaching recommend visualising those who will listen – as I visualise those who will read I am imagining two groups. One group are my friends with a background where the key figure is Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones. In reading they will suspect that if I take the viewpoint of my correspondent that I am seriously deficient in evangelistic zeal and have lost confidence in preaching as a means of conversion. The other group is predominantly younger and consists of those who I would be less likely to meet at the EMW Ministers' Conference or at the Banner of Truth Ministers' Conference than I would be to see them at the Evangelical Ministry Assembly or Proclamation Trust or Gospel Partnership events. They in reading will wonder why I am bothering to answer the question at all because surely what you do in gathering together is to teach and to edify? After all scripturally all of life is worship.

Laying a foundation for considering the subject

I think it is actually extremely important to admit that we do not come to a question like this in a historical or cultural vacuum. For nearly 2000 years Christianity has shaped the culture in which we live in Western Europe. Even today, because the debate will involve the United States as well as Europe, there may be a very high level of church attendance in areas where this question is discussed. Because church attendance was linked to social acceptability, and because it gave an opportunity to meet together socially, many people who were unconverted would regularly attend church. Christians would mainly attend two services and non-Christians would attend the evening service. Hence often the evening service was the 'gospel service'. Linked to this was the parish system and the assumptions of Christendom that those to whom we preach are nominally Christian and preaching should bring them to personal commitment and faith.

Of course we have seen significant changes since that pattern existed although 40 years ago I can remember attending thriving churches which operated on the believers in the morning and gospel at night principle and must have continued doing so for some years. However now, particularly in the South of England, we find churches with thriving morning congregations who are seriously discussing whether a second service is viable as it is attended by so few, including Christians, church members and church officers.

Culturally too, the church in the UK is vastly more cosmopolitan than it was even 20 years ago. Many

evangelical churches in the inner-city would have vanished if they were not largely attended by Africans, Asians and West-Indians. Many of these have a background where the church normally only has one service. Africans attending Cannon Park assumed that we simply repeated the morning service and sermon at night and therefore didn't think of attending twice. In a context where you only have one service the discussion about whether one of two services should be a 'gospel' service simply doesn't make sense.

What are we doing when we meet together? It seems to me that there are actually two questions we need to consider as we meet Sunday by Sunday. One is 'what is our focus?', and the other is 'what is the meeting actually meant to be?' One position on the latter question, strongly advocated by Moore College and well presented by Vaughan Roberts, is that all of life is worship and therefore our gatherings are not peculiarly worship at all. Supporting evidence is cited from texts like Romans 12: 1, 'by the mercies of God ... present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.' The cultic worship of God in the Old Testament period is now seen as done away with so Christians meet to edify and to do what is best – on this basis we might well decide that a reasonable focus would be evangelism in our public gatherings.

I am still thinking many matters through and I apologise that I am not more settled in some of my thinking. I recommend Don Carson's 'Worship under the Word,' in *Worship by the Book* which he edited, as a thoughtful response to the Moore College view. Firstly, I find it hard to believe that the Lord's Day in the New Testament doesn't share some of the Sabbath characteristics from the Old Testament. It just seems so blindingly obvious that we keep one day in seven aside for God in Old and New Covenant times and it is very hard not to see a continuity.

Secondly gathering together has great significance in Old and New Testament. My correspondent writes:

My position is that when we meet on a Sunday this is the gathering of the church, i.e. the saints. It is the equivalent of the assembly of the righteous in the Psalms. It is God's family gathered to listen to and worship our Father and our head.

In the Old Testament the gatherings of God's people flowed from the Sinai experience and in the New Testament the book of Hebrews takes up this theme of meeting with God particularly in chapters 10 and 12. However the recurrent point is that God is present with his people as they gather to worship

him. Don Carson writes: 'The local church is not so much part of this church (see Hebrews 12: 22 – 24) as the manifestation of it, the outcropping of it. Every church is simply the church.'

Thirdly, it is biblical and correct to use the terminology of 'worship' for God's people as they gather together to praise God and seek his face. We can see this is in Acts 13: 1 + 2 where the prophets and teachers gather and, 'were worshiping the Lord and fasting.'

Now if our gathering is to meet with God, as he has graciously revealed himself to his New Covenant People then clearly that will have impact on the nature of our preaching and my correspondent draws the conclusion:

This affects my approach to preaching at such gatherings. I see this as the time to try to bring to God's family a balanced diet of his word. Because all of scripture points to Christ and because we won't put it into practice without the gospel, such preaching should contain the gospel, but won't be the same as a focused evangelistic address

It is this issue which I will take up in our next issue.

A PERSONAL SPIRITUAL IMBALANCE

In the section in my Prayer Diary which deals with Confession of Sin there are a number of points noted. One which has made me think hard recently is the line which reads: *CLAIM 1 JOHN 1:9 AND 1 CORINTHIANS 10:13.*

What hit me is that of these precious New Testament promises it is 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', which I most frequently claim. Aware of my sin I daily claim God's gracious promises of forgiveness in Christ. One of the joys of heaven will be having no sin to confess, but we are not there yet and pardon is essential.

It concerns me that 1 Corinthians 10: 13 is equally a matter of God's faithfulness to sinful but believing men and women. 'No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is FAITHFUL, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.' My concern is that if I am more concerned about forgiveness than I am about avoiding sin and having confidence in the Lord's ability to enable me to do so then something is wrong! I need a renewed confidence in God's faithfulness to me a sinner which will enable me to resist temptation as well as confidently claiming forgiveness when I sin.

