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# PLANTING & WATERING (1 Corinthians 3:6)

## EFCC Leadership Newsletter (No. 68) – May 2014

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Dear Friends,

### **Sabbatical/Study Leave (whatever you want to call it!) here I come!**

I am very grateful to the EFCC Committee and Trust Board for encouraging me to have a period of Study Leave from 1<sup>st</sup> June to 31<sup>st</sup> August. I've had a heavy last couple of years and the opportunity to recharge my batteries personally, academically and spiritually is something I really appreciate having the opportunity to do. I am always grateful that people pray for me and obviously it is helpful if I let you know what to pray for. So here are some thoughts:

1. **Pray for my walk with God** I have noticed that times of comparative ease, particularly when I've been under a great deal of stress previously, can be danger times for me. So pray I walk with God and deepen my fellowship with him during this period. Ultimately nothing matters more than this.
2. **Pray for my studies** I have been getting together the books I will need to examine a subject which I think will be helpful to me and God-willing to others. Jack Miller was an influential American Presbyterian in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century who greatly influenced, among many others, Tim Keller. Some of his teaching on the subject of our sonship and the privileges that go with it have become controversial but I think that to make a biblical assessment of his teaching will be spiritually helpful to me and hopefully to others. I will also want to take time to thoroughly reassess my ministry and how that can be most value in the years I have remaining.
3. **Pray for Margaret** While I am on Sabbatical Margaret is seeking to step back from some of her responsibilities so pray for her that this will be a valuable and refreshing time for her also.
4. **Pray for Anthony and David at the Office** However hard we try to pick up any slack it is inevitable that when the only other full-time worker is absent that it will put additional strain on the office. They already have a heavy workload so uphold them.
5. **Pray for Bill Calder and Jackie Brown and the Regional Secretaries** Bill as Committee Chairman and Jackie as Vice-Chairman will pick up on some of the matters I might be involved with if I was around and obviously do so on top of their other responsibilities.
6. **Pray for Gwynne Evans and the other Trust Board Directors** I am currently the only director employed full-time by EFCC and therefore tasks I might do will need to be picked up by others who have other responsibilities. There is a great deal of work generated by the Trust Board and we need to be grateful for their continued commitment to the work with some extra strains generated by my absence.

Can I encourage churches to consider seriously granting their ministers a sabbatical at agreed intervals during their working life. Don't just do so if they are struggling with the work and you think that they are close to a breakdown, because that is the worst possible time. Plan it well in advance and either use a facility like having a sabbatical term with the Cheshunt Foundation or something more informal to refresh and encourage your minister. I have found a well planned sabbatical a great blessing and encouragement and I think the church benefitted as well.

I think there can be suspicions about Sabbaticals from those who are in jobs where nothing like that is on offer! Sabbaticals are not holidays but planned periods of refreshment and recuperation which involve doing something else rather than nothing! For example I produced my book, 'Before the Throne of God Above' on my last sabbatical about 15 years ago. While I had done some previous study on the subject it was only having time out from my normal ministry that enable me to focus and narrow down the subject appropriately and to do the reading necessary to producing something worth publishing. That last sabbatical also enabled the basis of a sermon series on the one-another texts in the New Testament to be produced and I also managed to tackle some books I would never otherwise have managed to set aside the time to read.

So pray for me and think of your own minister.

Yours in the Lord,

*Mike Plant*

**MY NORMAL ITEM 'MIKE'S ITINERARY' IS REDUNDANT AS I'M ON SABBATICAL!**

## HOLDING CONTROVERSIAL VIEWS WITHOUT DAMAGING THE CHURCH

**How the Problem Arises** Sometimes a minister may arrive at a church and find that a view he holds is controversial in the church situation he is now in. Maybe discussions prior to the call should have unearthed the problem and obviously we ought to be very open and upfront if asked directly about such views. Sometimes however, the full extent of the tensions over the issue is only realized when the minister is already well into this ministry and it may be that he is then amazed to find that the problem exists at all. I have known of situations where preaching on a prophetic book suddenly unearthed that previous ministry had been very definitely premillennial and that the present minister's views of the future and of Israel do not agree with those of the majority of the congregation. Sometimes of course a minister changes his mind on an area of teaching and finds that his new view is controversial in a situation where he previously taught another one which is generally held to in the Congregation. However it occurs, what we are left with is that a minister may find himself holding to views that could cause division and difficulty. Let's take it they are not views that prevent a minister continuing as pastor of the church – what is he to do?

**What Views Fall into the Controversial Category?** What is included here varies from time to time. Often in the past in a largely liberal Congregational Union it was the gospel that was the 'controversial' belief the new minister held to. I remember reading in a chapel history that the idea that infant baptism was not to be indiscriminate but was for the children of believers was controversial for a while. Over a period of times the beliefs that qualify as controversial may vary because there are always 'fashions' in Evangelical Theology. For example in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the premillennial view of the second coming held by people like Robert Murray McCheyne and Andrew Bonar was a considerable novelty. In the 1960s and 1970s it was often questions about Calvinism or the Charismatic gifts that proved controversial in churches although nowadays those matters are often flagged up in advance as people are so aware of them. Additionally both an appreciation of the Reformers and Puritans, and an enjoyment of 'sound' modern hymnology have spread widely amongst evangelicals so the views just aren't as surprising any more. At all times, issues that cause division are those that some Christians take for granted are held by all 'true' evangelical Christians and others haven't cottoned on to and therefore disagree about.

**How should we handle Such Views?** Suppose I have become come to new views about say, six-day creationism or Calvinism and the church I am in doesn't really hold with where I now stand – what do I do?

1. Don't immediately preach on this subject As with all matters it is best to assimilate and balance out how important and how all-pervasive this matter is. In a year or so you will see things far more clearly and preach far

more helpfully when you touch on these things.

2. Don't allow these matters to divide you from others Because these matters are potentially divisive can I first suggest we take a grip on ourselves before allowing them to become sources of division and remind ourselves that we accept others because Christ has accepted them, see Romans 15: 7, and not because they agree with us over every jot and tittle! In other words they are not fellowship issues and we must not make them so. There is also a distinction between truths essential to the gospel and truths which are helpful to think through and express clearly. There is a further distinction here between matters which permeate everything we believe and others that are more peripheral – helpful truths but not those necessary for gospel clarity.
3. Distinguish between settled unbelief and lack of information I came to see the Calvinism of the Savoy Declaration as expressing pretty accurately what the Bible taught when I was in my early twenties. Before that I'd never heard the differing positions on the subject explained and expounded. I was not Calvinist before but I wasn't decided anti-Calvinist either! Some people are amenable to reasoning from Scripture and let's do that before we write them off as being against us.
4. Work Out What Are Peripheral Matters My beliefs concerning six day creationism are firmly in this category and what I say will often be dictated by who I am speaking to and what I hope to achieve. With unbelievers I believe we are to challenge the frequently held belief that the theory of evolution does away with the need for God. I am grateful to those like John Lennox who have so well amassed the evidence that challenges the unbeliever in the very area where he thinks he is strongest. I would encourage Christians to stick with this and try to convince them that the attempt to advocate 'a' theory of creationism, which unbelievers may feel they need to accept in order to accept the gospel, is unwise and unhelpful. I am not saying it is not helpful for believers to seek clarity here but that unbelievers do not need full clarity for appropriate gospel response and it will be profoundly unhelpful to them to be made to believe that they do need such clarity.
5. See that Other Matters Permeate Everything My belief in a God of irresistible grace is not in the same category for it touches every area of my belief system. I can no more sound non-Calvinistic than I can sound Liberal and unbelieving. Here the question is how we convey our beliefs effectively and helpfully. John Newton illustrated this by saying his Calvinism was like taking sugar in his tea – it was dissolved and permeated everything. However the sweetness that permeates everything is not overwhelming and off-

putting but attractive and pleasant. A belief in the sovereignty of God, though hard and difficult, is immensely helpful in the face of tragedy and bereavement without needing to be painstakingly and minutely thought through as it relates to soteriology.

6. Present Your Beliefs Appropriately I can remember some years ago listening to Iain Murray talking about the revival of Calvinism amongst the Southern Baptists. While he was generally encouraged he made the point that the way many of them approached persuading their people of these truths in a very unhelpful way. They did it by doing OHP, nowadays it would be Powerpoint or Son of Powerpoint, presentations of the Five Points of Calvinism. He argued that this was unhelpful and the same truths were better presented in the context of regular expository preaching of Scripture. To do it in the way it was being done simply caused unhelpful and unnecessary antagonism. He affirmed absolutely that the Bible taught those truths but was equally firm that there are ways that are appropriate for us to teach them in.

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## THE FOCUS OF OUR PREACHING IN OUR SUNDAY WORSHIP SERVICES

**OUR JOURNEY** In our last issue of *Planting & Watering* we looked at 'The Focus of Our Sunday Worship Services' (the word 'worship' was omitted in the version in *Congregational Communications*) in response to questions that were raised with me concerning this and the preaching that this will lead to. Looking back I think my title gave my conclusions away. I referred to the services being on a Sunday and for some the day of the week would be a matter of pragmatism. Personally, I am clear that meeting on the first day of the week is significant. Secondly I referred to 'worship services' which makes it clear that I regard worship as being something that is specifically taking place when we gather together as well as being a whole life pattern. I concluded my article by writing: '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'. 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

**HOW SHOULD THE CONVICTION WE GATHER TO WORSHIP GOD IMPACT OUR PREACHING? Preliminary Thoughts** I don't want to unsay things so I want to refer you to points I have made previously. One conclusion I came to when reflecting on Tim Keller's writing on being Missional Churches:

We will speak to be understandable and to use contemporary language. We will avoid jargon and archaic language that sounds spiritual. We will also avoid 'we-them' language and jokes that mock people of different politics and beliefs, and dismissive comments about those who differ with us. If we are to attract and hold those who are totally 'un-churched' (the vast majority of the population) we must speak in ways which will not alienate them unnecessarily. Take the way we speak of belief in evolution – it is the reigning paradigm in our society and yet from the way some preachers speak of it you would imagine that a belief in evolution is self-evidently unintelligent.

That preachers take this on board is not always evident but there are important reasons to do so. Our hearers, including our converted hearers, inhabit a particular space in time and culture and we need to speak to them where they are. Even those who are converted have unwittingly bought into the world view of those around them. Even when they develop beyond this they need to learn reasoned thoughtful responses not arrogant and foolish put-downs. In 'Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert' Rosaria Butterfield tells of a young Christian student hearing that one of Rosaria's non-Christian neighbours sent her children to the Public (State run) School. She immediately said in the neighbour's hearing, 'Sending a child to the public schools is like giving pearls to swine' which managed to offend the neighbour without her understanding the criticism being made of public schools. Rosaria's comment was, 'My unsaved neighbour needed Jesus more than this college student needed to hurl a few well-rehearsed epithets about the evils of public schools.' It is also true that Christians need to live on more than slogans!

My other point which I want to repeat here is from an article by John Piper on 'Preaching as Worship: Meditations on Expository Exultation.' Where he makes the point: 'The task of the sermon week in and week out is to help our people bring into sharp focus a fresh picture of why God is the all-satisfying treasure of our lives.' And 'preaching not only aims at worship, it is worship.' We are not moving from one realm, 'It's been exhilarating worshipping God but now for some teaching' but remain in the same realm, 'We've worshipped God in our time of praise, now let's do so as we hear and respond to God's word.' These convictions will underlie all that I say here.

**Finding Fresh Focus** Nothing is more important for preachers than regular, thoughtful and prayerful self assessment as to what we are seeking to do and whether we are doing it effectively. What is it we are setting out to do in our regular Sunday preaching? The key issues are:

Firstly: Feeding the Flock In the last few years I have been increasingly reading up on the subject of typology. The conviction has grown with me that the Bible is an extraordinary book with structures within it and a developing storyline which is wonderfully exciting. Indeed if nothing else convinced me that the Bible is the Word of God the fact that many authors over many centuries could produce something so

complex and yet so unified would convince me that there is one single author, the Holy Spirit of God. The glorious task of the settled minister is to draw from the richness of the Word of God and feed God's people with it. This demands no less expertise in understanding people than in understanding the Bible.

The truths of the Bible are sometimes presented in propositional form and sometimes in narrative, poetic or even apocalyptic forms. Presumably, in God's wisdom, different people respond to different ways of presenting the truth and even the same people sometimes need the truth presented in different forms. Our task is to present a balanced and interesting diet of God's word. As a suggestion it would sometimes be helpful to follow a theme throughout the Bible and preach on selected passages that relate to it. If all our preaching is consecutively going through books of the Bible we may miss much of value.

Secondly: Keeping the Flock Warm I can remember R T Kendall arguing for a regular gospel service by using the analogy of sheep who are overfed and suffer from 'bloat'. Is there a danger that if there are not regular gospel services Christians will become spiritually overweight, inactive and unhealthy? The answer must be 'Yes!' Additionally, Dr Lloyd-Jones presents another argument in favour of at least one sermon a week being evangelistic in pointing out that the preaching he heard as a child invariably assumed those who were listening were converted which led people to the false assumption that they were converted and now needed building up in the faith. If these points lead to the necessary conclusion that we need at least one 'gospel' service each Sunday, with preaching primarily directed to the unconverted, then this would mean that the conclusion that preaching in Sunday services is primarily directed to God's people is simply wrong. These are important concerns and our response is to say that we must make clear that the gospel is foundational to all Christian living as well as to initially responding by faith to God's grace in Christ and being converted. Therefore every single sermon, including those with a primary thrust dealing with sanctification and growth in grace, must make clear that:

1. Both unbelievers and believers need the gospel Christians are constantly tempted to relapse into legalistic attitudes and never outgrow the need to hear the good news of free and sovereign grace in Christ. Sanctification, no less than justification, comes by grace alone, through faith alone. However to say that believers need the gospel is not identical to saying that every church must have a weekly gospel service and sometimes it is assumed that it is.
2. Both unbelievers and believers are in danger of idolatry The risk is always that we put some other source of joy in place of knowing God in Christ. We must constantly be called from false gods, beliefs and goals which we believe will give our lives happiness and meaning, to finding our all in all in Christ.

3. The presence of non-Christians is assumed This will include habitual churchgoers, occasional visitors, the families of Christians who attend with them and others who may be present simply because a Christian invites them. In explaining the gospel to Christians and non-Christians it is important to realize and confront the dangers of cultural assumptions which make the gospel appear alien and unattractive. Additionally non-Christians cannot be lastingly won and held to Christ by simply receiving good advice about how to live their lives and need instead to encounter God's grace in Christ.

These points are largely gleaned from Dennis Johnson's analysis of Tim Keller's preaching (Him We Proclaim – pages 54 – 61) where such preaching is categorised as: 'The Gospel Changes Everything': An Approach to Evangelistic, Edificatory, Redemptive-Historical Preaching.' That is a book I would urge anyone to read who wants to think seriously about their preaching pattern and programme. My conviction is that such preaching keeps the believer/unbeliever distinction primary and therefore centres people on the gospel. It should lead neither to lethargy nor to false assurance.

Thirdly: Impacting Unbelievers In 1 Corinthians 15: 23 – 25, Paul assumes the frequent (normal) presence of 'outsiders or unbelievers' and points out that the general pattern of our worship should be made intelligible to them. I've already twice made the point in this article that we are to do the same and we are to speak, and preach in worship, on the assumption that some unbelievers will be with us. One thing this must lead to is that our approach to the gospel in our preaching will not be assumption but explanation. We will constantly think about new ways to explain the gospel and new ways to impact people with the gospel. We will do so because the fallen human default mode is to revert to works righteousness and to rely on the flesh not the Spirit. God's truth must be kept fresh for everyone.

**Legitimate Concerns** What about evangelism? Even some who do not have a weekly gospel service feel guilty about not doing so. For thought, if you are left wondering what to do for unbelievers:

1. Where in the NT do we find unbelievers being evangelised in a church service? The answer is we don't – except in 1 Corinthians 14 where the concern is intelligibility not having a gospel service. Clearly then having a weekly gospel service is not a duty we have.
2. What are you doing to ensure unbelievers who meet with you understand the gospel? One recurring experience doing 'Christianity Explored' with those who had attended the church for sometime was that the 'penny dropped' when we did the session on the cross. In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Richard Baxter worked out that people missed in sermons what they could not evade in small groups. Let us learn from his experience!

