
PLANTING & WATERING (1 Corinthians 3:6)

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Dear Friends,

SUMMER IS ENDED AND THE SABBATICAL IS OVER

I'm glad to be back at work! This doesn't mean that I am regretful about my sabbatical, which was very valuable but just means that I never wanted to be in an ivory tower and too long away from the churches does not agree with me.

The Value of a Sabbatical I have been able to do some reading and study in a concentrated way and have covered an amount of ground and grappled with some issues in a way that would normally not be possible to me. If this is good for no-one else, and I trust it will be, it has been very helpful and stimulating to me. One thing I failed to achieve was to focus on a project which led eventually to a book or more probably a magazine article. That would have been a valuable discipline for me but I failed to narrow my studies down sufficiently. I will make some book recommendations below which stem from my reading this last few months.

Reading Great Writers for Ourselves One book I read was, 'The New Calvinism Considered' by Jeremy Walker (EP) which is very readable and helpful in itself although by its nature it will soon be outdated. One comment he made is that Jonathan Edwards, as mediated by John Piper, is a strong influence amongst the New Calvinists – who by the way are a movement whose leading figures are a number of influential older and younger ministers in the States. The best known among them would be Tim Keller, John Piper, Don Carson, Mark Driscoll and Kevin De Young. My problem is not that Jonathan Edwards is influential, which is great, but that the influence is mediated so strongly by a modern figure. The resulting danger is that Edwards himself may be domesticated and hardly encountered for himself. Certainly some strong views Edwards held, such as the cessation of supernatural spiritual gifts and certainly the cessation of God's activity of revelation, are not found in his modern day popularisers – either in Piper or for that matter Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones. We gain immensely grappling for ourselves with the thought of great minds such as Jonathan Edwards, John Owen and John Calvin for ourselves.

Rediscovering the Value of History I spent some time studying the 'Sonship Course' which originated with Jack Miller about whom I spoke at last year's Ministers' Prayer Conference. The course has been controversial amongst Presbyterians in the USA. A number of considerations arise from this:

1. Discussion and debate face to face rather than long-distance slanging is both more edifying and more productive. The Presbyterian Church in America held a structured debate on the subject and this clarified differences and enabled progress to be made. All Christians, particularly those of us with sufficient convictions to make a stand for the truth, need to remember and learn from this.
2. Rarely does anything completely new emerge as subject of controversy – the most effective critiques actually picked up that the issues have been discussed before. The controversies about books like Edward Fisher's 'The Marrow of Modern Divinity' and Walter Marshall's 'The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification' have largely been rerun over 'Sonship.' If we recognise the historical precedents of a modern debate it often clarifies what the real issues are. Ministers need to read church history not as an alternative to seeing if teaching is scriptural or not but to enable them to first discern what the real issues are.
3. Long term response to an imbalanced Christianity has to be more than reacting by strongly emphasizing the aspects of truth previously neglected. When people lack assurance because they are inward looking and overly focused on their own Christian 'performance' we need to remind them of the gospel and of the impact of justification by faith and adoption. However that other elements involved in assurance, such as the reality of brotherly love and developing obedience, have a secondary and supportive value. Now when these other elements are not mentioned the danger is that eventually they become disbelieved and denied.

Rethinking Our Own Ministries When I have a sabbatical, indeed I try to do this annually, it is good to read something about Pastoral Ministry and Preaching. We clarify again our deepest convictions and seek to relate them to the situations we encounter both in terms of changing culture and of locality rather than simply imitate good, fruitful ministries which have flourished in another setting which may be very different to ours. Sometime ago I heard Don Carson say that the most gifted and fruitful ministries known to him had a characteristic shared emphasis. They were committed to expository preaching and gave 50% of their preparation time to considering how biblically and effectively to apply God's word. Now clearly how we work out how much time we give to considering application is an inexact thing but his point is that application demands more attention than we normally give it is important and worthy of consideration. See below for a book review on this subject.

Yours in the Lord,
Mike Plant

MIKE'S ITINERARY

October 5th – Peniel Green (Swansea) am + pm
12th – Cannon Park am
18th – London Theological Seminary Elder's Day
19th - Cannon Park pm
26th – Droylsden am + pm
November 9th - Cannon Park am + pm
16th - Morley am and pm Bible Study
22nd - Christ Church Teddington Anniversary 2.30pm
23rd - Crystal Peaks (Sheffield) am + Wycliffe pm
30th - Orange Street am + Kensit Evangelical Church pm

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

It has been a privilege being able to take time for reading during the summer. Three books which I found especially helpful were:-

DAVID GOODING: 'THE RICHES OF DIVINE WISDOM' (MYRTLEFIELD HOUSE) I borrowed this from a fellow-minister with whom I share the conviction that a modern 'scientific' approach to the Bible may rob us of riches which were apprehended and appreciated better before the advent of modern criticism. It is not that earlier methods of Bible Study cannot be defended in the modern world but it true to say that even good, evangelical scholars and ministers have been influenced away from realizing the sheer riches of the scriptures. There are hints in Geerhardus Vos's 'Biblical Theology' and Patrick Fairbairn writes exhaustively, and exhaustingly, in 'The Typology of Scripture' defending the view that rather than see typology only where expressly sanctioned in the New Testament we are to see there is an entire Biblical system of typology which the New Testament writings sometimes introduce us to.

David Gooding is both academically qualified and personally committed to sound and perceptive biblical exposition - see particularly his 'According to Luke' IVP. The value of this book is that it is a very helpful introduction to how the New Testament uses the Old Testament and therefore to how we should use the Old Testament. It is not difficult to read and will introduce any of us to a range of thoughtful and perceptive understandings of the Scriptures.

If like me you still feel guilty about the weakness of your Old Testament preaching here is something that will instruct and inspire you to new efforts. Very valuable and full of helpful examples.

MURRAY CAPILL 'THE HEART IS THE TARGET' P & R Some years ago I read 'Preaching with Spiritual Vigour' (CFP), which in part drew lessons from Richard Baxter's ministry, which is by the same author. It was a book I found extremely practical and it was one that stirred me deeply. There are books on preaching which may help us amend our methodology and there are books on preaching which touch the heart and give us a passionate desire to preach more effectively and to honour God more deeply as we do so. 'Preaching with Spiritual Vigour' definitely ticked both boxes and so I read THITT with real anticipation and was not disappointed.

A paragraph (page 14) sums up Capill's burden in writing:

Can .. biblically sound sermons ever really be regarded as ineffective sermons? That depends ... on what the purpose of preaching really is. If the main game is biblical faithfulness, then an exegetically sound sermon always hits the mark. If the goal is solid Bible teaching, then a sermon full of truth always comes up trumps. But if the goal of expository preaching is that God's Word changes lives-converting sinners and sanctifying saints-then, all of a sudden, the stakes are much higher and the number of goals kicked may be fewer. If the point of preaching is that people, through the word of God proclaimed by the preacher, hear the very voice of Christ in a life-impacting way, then far more is called for than biblical faithfulness alone. Application is required.

Now it is made very clear that the choice is not between faithfulness and application but that true faithfulness demands the proclamation of the meaning of the text, including its proper applications, for the here and now. Many preachers do the hard work of exegesis and explanation but struggle with the application which tends to be an 'add-on' and sometimes when time presses to be an 'omission.'

I found this book helpful in a number of areas:-

Firstly: What Application is We can easily limit our application and 'a holistic approach to application is concerned with bringing the message as a whole, to the person as a whole, to life as a whole.' For Capill this means the whole sermon is to be orientated to a goal. 'The goal is that people sense that they have met with the almighty, holy, glorious, gracious God and that they have heard from his timeless Word a timely word.' Rather than being addressed solely to the will application is to address mind, conscience and feelings and to engage the whole of life.

Secondly: The Purposes of God's Word 1. Teaching the truth and rebuking false doctrine; 2. Training believers in godly living and correcting wrong patterns of behaviour; 3. Testing the state of people's hearts and bring conviction of sin; encouraging and exhorting people according to their particular needs. He makes a particular and helpful point that gentle encouragement, as in the 'we' passages in Hebrews, is as biblical as direct rebuke and correction.

Thirdly: The Resources from which We Preach I found this a very helpful and perceptive chapter and it is a topic that invites revisiting. 'All that a preacher has read, learned, thought about, observed, suffered, processed and experienced has the potential to form a rich reservoir out of which much powerful preaching and penetrating application can flow.' He lists way in which the reservoir is kept full. 1. Through our own walk with God Studying scripture and praying for the sake of our relationship to God rather than for our work. 2. Experiencing life richly We are to inhabit and enjoy and be thankful for the world that God created for us and so fulfil God's kingdom purposes for this world. 3. Observing Life Closely We are to love and so enjoy

people and their ways. We love them and so we seek to listen to them and understand their lives and their pressures. From this we can offer wise advice as well as given biblical commands. 4. Understanding World, Church and Culture Ministers and Preachers cannot afford to stop reading and learning when their formal training ceases. So everyone needs a programme of reading, Capill quotes Tim Keller: The Bible at least once a year and studying Bible books; theology; church history; sermons and books that are spiritually helpful; and cultural analysis and apologetics – reading and viewing not just what comes from Christians but directly what writers and movie makers produce. Capill's chilling warning is: 'Once we stop growing, our ministry ceases to have an impact.' Not just intake is enough but we need regular and thoughtful reflection on what we intake. To quote Eric Alexander at our Ministers' Conference: 'I wish I had pondered more.'

Fourthly: How to Speak into People's Lives

This section, and the following one, are deeply thought provoking. Anyone who preaches knows the pain of feeling our words are just like water which slides off an impermeable surface such as glass when we want it to sink in and be absorbed by dry ground. We need to understand that the four words 'heart, soul, mind and strength' are the sum total of our being with which God wants us to respond in love to him. It is not sufficient to reach the mind and not engage the affections or to move the will but not convince the mind. We are also to be aware of the 'idols' of the heart that can so ensnare us and often appear deeply spiritual. Our own ministries can all too readily be idols and if we are blind here how will we see clearly in order to help others?

Fifthly: How to Speak into People's Varied Lives

This is a subject that has often challenged me and which I don't feel I've ever handled systematically – I think I've sometimes done this instinctively though and many preachers may be much the same. It simply takes up the point that people are at different stages of life and spiritual life when they hear God's Word. Regarding life in general imagine a stressed out businessman, a lonely widow, a young mother who has just discovered she has cancer and a student leaving home for the first time. Regarding spiritual life we may range from unconverted and knowing it, to unconverted and not-knowing it, to converted and lacking assurance, to converted and assured and actively fruitful, and then on to complacent and backsliding and that is not the half of it. Now clearly we can't address every situation in every sermon but it would be wrong if those conditions of life and spiritual life don't get some mention sometime or if we only ever preach to some categories – such as those working or those who are consciously unsaved. Thankfully of course the Lord does apply what is preached beyond our organising of it but our responsibility is real.

Finally: Preparing the Sermon Capill rightly argues that what we are doing demands that the actual process of sermon preparation be shaped by our goal. So sermons typically begin with the 'here and now' and not the 'there and then' of the subject. In other words application begins in the introduction.

He then endeavours to ensure that the imperatives of the sermon stem from the indicatives of God's truth – he argues strongly that the dimension of preaching which involves 'us' rather than you is also important to cultivate.

Within the sermon he aims to have at least a third of each point as 'here and now' and of course the conclusion is solely 'here and now.' In a way the idea of proportions is artificial as we need to move backwards and forwards so each element of the sermon is permeated with 'here and now.' Additionally he points out that the application should be a rising tide in the sermon so each application is deeper and stronger than the last.

To Buy or not to Buy I own a lot of books on preaching – does this one add anything to them? It certainly builds on them. I find it encouraging that the author refers to other books and makes it clear when he is indebted to others. I think that it is only realistic to say that we always build on those that went before so even when he covers similar ground to others and only has a fresh vocabulary to describe it that is not a problem. The question is whether he adds anything worthwhile to his predecessors? I do find that he adds much of value – while much of the way in which we preach and apply is probably instinctive that doesn't mean it shouldn't be thought through and understood.

In the period of about a year I heard speakers from Black, Asian and working class churches and they all made the same point about preaching. Each speaker pointed out that 'their' congregation didn't benefit from lecturing and abstract truth but wanted preaching to be warm, practical and applied. This really only left the white middle-class satisfied with lecturing. Actually most white middle-class Christians I know (myself included) long for warm, practical and applied preaching. This book could go a long way in helping some preachers produce what the hearts of their people need and long for.

RICHARD D. GAFFIN 'BY FAITH NOT BY SIGHT' P & R

During my sabbatical I was advised that it would be helpful for me to read in order to get a doctrinal context for my work on 'Sonship.' This was a book I was encouraged to read and I found it one of the most helpful and informative books I have read for a long time. I have also been aware that there has been a debate going on amongst Presbyterians associated with Westminster Theological Seminary concerning the subject of the Ordo Salutis and Union with Christ. The basic idea of the Ordo Salutis is that salvation comes to us in an ordered way and so various terms used to describe aspects of this – justification, sanctification, union with Christ, adoption, regeneration etc. are envisaged as forming a logical if not temporal order of events. That there are problems with this is evident from the debate which has gone on to establish what the order of salvation actually is.

Clearly we have to accept that some aspects of the believer's experience are ordered as we find in Romans 8: 28 – 30. However other terms seem to overlap or to be used confusingly. Richard Gaffin's study is very helpful and I found convincing. His

approach is biblical theological and his view is that we are united to Christ by faith and then justified, sanctified and adopted in him. So these are aspects of the same act and are true of us because they are true of him. His point is that Christ is justified, sanctified and adopted in his resurrection and that we currently have these things in him and will have them fully at our own resurrection when he returns in glory. A wider ranging book which also addresses similar concerns and relates biblical and systematic theology more fully is K Scott Oliphint (edited) 'Justification in Christ' CFP. Clearly there is much to think about here – Sinclair Ferguson writes an engaging, substantial and enthusiastic foreword for Gaffin's book and I enthusiastically recommend it for your consideration.

CHURCH LEADERS – YOU ARE CALLED TO BE EXAMPLES OF FAITH

This is a subject that I found myself drawn to when speaking recently on Hebrews 13: 7 + 8 at a midweek meeting. The comfort of these two verses is that Jesus is faithful, compassionate and effective in aiding his people now in heaven just as he was in his life on earth (verse 8). The challenge for the believers written to was that they should 'remember' and 'imitate' the faith of their 'leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God.' The challenge for us as leaders is that believers need to be able to 'consider the outcome of (our) way of life and imitate (our) faith.' I think my tendency has been (rightly) to think of myself as a believer rather than leader when approaching this text but the challenge for leaders is clearly legitimate and needs to be faced.

Firstly: the need for Christians to have someone to imitate The major New Testament way of speaking of the church is in household/family terms. How do you learn in a family? There is direct instruction and before state schools were common there would have been more of it. However the major methods of learning are assimilation and imitation. So new Christians learn from the preaching and from reading the bible but much of what they pick up is simply by imitation and fitting in, instinctively, with the way other people in the church behave. Now clearly such learning is from fallible people and not the infallible word but much progress, always in time to be checked and reviewed through the word, takes place in this way.

Having the faith that others should imitate

Firstly: Our Circumstances It is worth considering what this meant for the leaders of the churches written to in Hebrews. I place them in Rome in the 1st Century and it is clear that they were at risk of imprisonment, deprivation of goods and possibly martyrdom in addition to the normal realities and pressures of life we all face. Their scenario tops our own experience but we face genuine difficulties leading churches in a time of decline in church attendance and when the Christian faith is increasingly marginalised and assumed to be discredited. Additionally there is a general suspicion about and resentment towards leadership which assumes the responsibility and authority to give

account for people's souls (Hebrews 13: 17). My point is that we share some difficult issues of life with our church members and that church leadership brings another set of issues on top of this.

Secondly: Showing Faith in Our Changing Circumstances We are never clear of the troubles that affect families and individuals. During a period of leadership we may experience bereavements, serious illness of our own or of a family member, acute financial pressures, personal antagonism and the grinding pressure of working hard in a church without seeing growth and indeed sometimes seeing a church decline before our eyes. Others will be discouraged, will discourage others in turn, may blame us for the decline and generally will disappoint us but the question is how will we respond? Will we be the examples of faith others will imitate? Here are some important guidelines for us to consider:

1. **Show you really believe in God's providence** When revising the EFCC Statement of Faith we were anxious to fully affirm God's full knowledge of all events past, present and future and his sovereignty in controlling them. They are of course working together for good for us as believers (Romans 8: 28). It is one thing to affirm this but it is another to apply it to our own difficult circumstances. Other Christians need to see how our stated beliefs are expressed in practice. How we handle disappointments and providences that cross our hopes and plans is vital to being an example of faith.
2. **Show that zeal and love for God are not conditional on favourable circumstances** It would be unrealistic to suggest that encouragements don't encourage us – of course they do. However we are not less committed to God and we do not love him less because currently our service to him is not being rewarded as we would wish or because there is a cost to our discipleship. A Christian's conviction of God's love should enable rejoicing even in testing times (see Romans 5: 1 – 11. If that is true of others how much more should it be true of those of us who teach God's word?
3. **Show that you are driven by hope in God** Our obedience is not conditioned on success but is driven by the hope of God's blessing. While we cannot always know that God will intervene dramatically in our situation we must always hold the hope that he will and the conviction that he can. Church members will be tempted to live by sight and it is hard to 'see' how God will work. Christian leaders must be an example of resisting that temptation. He is able.
4. **Show that your identity is in Christ not in your ministry** This is important because when ministry becomes idolatry we are completely vulnerable when our ministry is questioned or struggling. Ultimately I am in Christ, I am secure in Christ and finally I will be glorified in Christ and that is what really matters.