
PLANTING & WATERING (1 Corinthians 3:6)

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Dear Friends,

PRAYING FOR GOD TO WORK

A frequent question I am asked is: 'How are things going in EFCC?' With well over 100 churches the question is nearly impossible to answer but often I think the standard experience is like that of Tom Carson's ministry (see book review below). The scene often consists of small churches working hard and seeing little example locally of successful and obviously blessed ministry. Remarkably at the very end of Tom's ministry, and with others now taking the lead, there was a remarkable work of God in Quebec. In the 70s the work grew from about forty churches to just under five-hundred and eventually settled down to over four-hundred. Of the converts the vast majority were men and Don Carson was called in to help with training future leaders owing to his ability as a French-speaker as well as a Bible-Teacher. Below is his description of a prayer meeting in the summer of 1976, when he was visiting Quebec in order to give Bible Teaching and Leadership training:

I asked the pastor how long I had to speak. He replied, 'These people are hungry for the Word. I never take less than an hour, as a visitor, you should take more of course.'

I arrived at 7.30pm. About eighty-five people were present. There was half an hour of reverent singing, some of it freshly written hymns and songs. Shortly after 8.00 I began to preach. I finished just before 9.30. The pastor said this was a wonderful opportunity to ask any question they wanted about what the Bible said. I answered questions until 10.00pm. Then prayer requests were solicited, and almost all of them had to do with the conversion of people or the spiritual growth of people to whom these believers were bearing witness. We got down on our knees to pray about 10.30pm. I was the first to leave, sometime between 12.30 and 1.00am, as I still had some preparation to do for my class at 8.00am the next morning. The pastor assured me this was a fairly normal Wednesday evening.

At the beginning of November there will be around 60 of us at the Ministers' Prayer Conference. Although the point is often made that a minority of the time is spent in prayer I believe that proportionately the conference gives more time to prayer than other conferences and that often we have been blessed with a sense of God's presence and help. How an outpouring of the Spirit in answer to our prayers would impact our churches who can tell? Certainly I would anticipate a hunger for the Word and a freedom and earnestness in prayer as well as numerical growth. However unless we give ourselves to prayer in the times of spiritual drought and discouragement it is unlikely the days of seeing God's Spirit so outpoured will come to us. There are many things we need but a renewed spirit of prayer is central and very probably the way in which other desired blessings will come to us.

Yours in the Lord,

Mike Plant

MIKE'S ITINERARY

This is less busy as I seek to try not to do too much travelling in December and January. In December I am preaching on the 14th pm and 28th (either am or pm) at Cannon Park. On Saturday 3rd January I am preaching at Therfield, at the farewell service for Andrew Carter and his family before they depart to Uganda. I am at Woolwich January 25th am and doubtless will be doing some preaching at Cannon Park during the month.

As I am beginning to put together next year's itinerary it would be good if churches were contacting me and I can begin to fill in my diary. Remember that I am still keen to preach at churches where I haven't previously preached. Whether I can fulfil my ambition to preach at every church in EFCC before I retire is not something I can control but I'm willing to do so if possible so do be in touch.

WHEN THE RESERVOIR RUNS DRY

I have often written about our need to study and in Murray Capill's book, 'The Heart is the Target' he makes the point that a preacher needs to preach from a full reservoir otherwise we, and our congregation, will experience drought conditions to no-one's benefit or comfort. It might easily be supposed that all he is writing about is the preacher's need to study and he

includes that – however that is not all that he means. I found reading what he has to say to be very helpful and thinking seriously about what he says could transform ministries for the better.

REMINDING US WE NEED TO STUDY We need reminding and he quotes Tim Keller (page 92) recommending that, after getting as much formal study as we can, we should continue a disciplined

programme of reading and study. Study must not end when we finish Bible College or whatever course of study we undertake. We should cover five core areas:

1. **The Bible** Read through at least once a year with additional study of individual books.
2. **Theology** You need a planned programme for this so you can gain an overview of Biblical truth as well as studying some areas in detail.
3. **Church History** You need to know how things 'live out' not just how they read.
4. **Sermons and Experimental Works** This reading which would include the Puritans and other devotional writers Keller says is: 'an absolute must.'
5. **Cultural Analysis and Trends** We do this by reading widely and seeing 'key movies' – I think this is my weakest area.

We need to aim at a balance in this and make time for it. We need to resist the temptation to read primarily in areas like church leadership where there is a flood of material produced and to discipline time – a morning a week, an hour a day, or some other fixed time slot and invest in reading for the long haul.

REMINING US THAT WE NEED TO DO MORE THAN STUDY This is where I found Capill so helpful and thought-provoking. Here is the major point he makes about the resources from which we prepare sermons (page 82):

There are really two sources of input for every expository sermon. First, there is the text itself that we squeeze hard for all its juice. But central as the text is to expository preaching, it alone does not give us a sermon. We must also pour into the message our own heart and life. Our life reservoir is the second source of input. We speak from the reservoir not by talking lots about ourselves and our experiences, but by interfacing with the truth of the text all we know about life, so that what we say about the text is grounded in reality, connected to life and made concrete and specific.

What effect does this have? He quotes Tim Keller (page 83):

I believe *many of the best sermons are discovered, not developed*. In other words great sermons often suggest themselves to you—they have a life of their own. Most preachers do virtually all their study in a completely task orientated way. They are always studying simply to find material for the next talk or sermon. Instead there should be lots of 'non-directed' study of a variety of areas. It is as you study broadly that new sermon topics and ideas can come to you.

WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO BESIDES STUDYING? How is the reservoir to be kept full? He makes several invaluable points:

1. **By our own walk with God** Again he quotes Tim Keller (page 84): 'A man's spiritual vitality is such a critical aspect of

preaching that it can create great preaching despite a poor sermon. On the other hand, the lack of this personal vitality can destroy preaching despite the presence of a good sermon.' Unless we give ourselves to praying, reading and listening and resist the pressures of church leadership we will (page 85): 'most likely find that our own soul slowly withers and our body wears out. While complete burnout may not be inevitable, spiritual leanness in our preaching is.' The Christian who really walks with God understands much of God's dealings with him and through this he understands himself much better than he could otherwise. Self-knowledge of course gives us understanding of others as we preach and apply – if you know your own heart you know the hearts of others!

2. **By experiencing life richly** I think this is a really very helpful point that we need to take to heart. He makes the point that the creation is not only a creation which serves a purpose but that it is made beautiful and enjoyable for us. (page 87): 'There is a right and holy way of enjoying everything God has given us: music, food, drink, sex, clothes, movies, sports, recreation, the outdoors, hobbies ... everything. Of course, idolatry always knocking at the door ... (but) it should not prevent us seeking to enjoy life in the right way.' Capill speaks of two ways in which our enjoyment of life aids our preaching. Firstly: it connects us to the world people live in and experience as Jesus did as he spoke of wedding feasts, losing and finding things, farming, fishing, partying and parenting. More significantly he states we enable people to avoid a dangerous spiritual/secular divide which has no place in Scripture. We are to be holy in our workplace, in the football stadium, in the cinema and in our family chores as well as in our devotions.

3. **By learning to be close observers of life** To be an effective preacher you need to love those to whom you preach as well as loving preaching. Listen to people as they talk – they will reflect on life, they will share their understanding/misunderstanding of the Christian faith and life, they will react to events in life some of which they welcome and others of which are hard, they will show by word and action how they organise and prioritise their lives. They need to know that we know their life situation and therefore when we preach that we preach knowledgeable and are wise and not wet behind the ears! When we preach we need to enable people to link what the Bible teaches, which they believe to be true, with what they actually experience in real life. He quotes Joel Beeke (page 91): 'Experimental or experiential preaching addresses how a Christian experiences the truth of Christian doctrine in his life (it) seeks to explain in terms of biblical truth how matters ought to go on, how they do go on, and what

is the goal of the Christian life. It seeks to apply divine truth to the whole range of the believer's personal experiences as well as in his relationships with family, the church, and the world around him.'

Working from a full reservoir There are several points to ponder:

1. **The Benefits** We can engage with the Bible spiritually as well as technically and we will find that our lives will bring issues and questions that relate to the text, our experiences and reading will supply illustrations and examples of its truth and teaching. In other words the text will speak into the 21st Century setting that you and your hearers occupy.
2. **This isn't an automatic process** We need a degree of measured reflection because all the methods of having a full reservoir need to be thought about and processed and applied – otherwise it is as though the pipe between the reservoir and our home is blocked. Reflection produces wisdom and insight and deepens us and our preaching. A life lived at frantic pace and without prayerful reflection is inevitably frustrating and unproductive.
3. **Even in sermon preparation we need to consciously work at this** We need (page 93): 'to consciously interface the text and our reservoir in a prayerful way'. Developing application cannot be rushed – prepare in outline early in the week and then develop application. You can do this by praying and thinking in a disciplined and formal way and also informally as you read or talk to others or simply go for long meditative walks. You will often come home and have to rush to jot down notes of what has occurred to you.

Sometimes I hear ministers discussing how long it takes to prepare a sermon. Dick Lucas' rule of thumb was one hour's preparation for every five minutes of the sermon. But the answer to the question, bearing in mind the need to pour our own heart and life into its preparation and delivery, could with equal accuracy be eight hours or 40 years.

I'm grateful to John Stevens (FIEC) for allowing me to use the material below. I think it is helpful and sensitive to the realities of our ministry situation. He also got me rereading Don Carson's biography of his father which was very helpful and led to the review below.

COMPARING NUMBERS: HOW SHOULD WE EVALUATE MINISTRY SUCCESS?

How do you evaluate success in ministry? All too often we fall into the temptation of comparing numbers. How large is your church? How many converts have you had in the last year? How many baptisms? How many people attending your Christianity Explored course? The assumption is that larger numbers indicate greater success and therefore a more faithful ministry. Those with larger numbers

may feel proud and superior; those with smaller numbers feel inadequate and wonder what they are doing wrong.

The danger of simply comparing numbers was brought home to me some years back when I was on a trip with a group of Christian leaders down the Grand Canyon. Most of the American pastors seemed to have huge churches, with membership of 2000+. It only dawned on me after several days that their congregations were generally far smaller than their memberships, especially amongst the Southern Baptists, and that we count numbers in different ways. In UK churches the membership is often just 50% of the congregation size, whereas in the US it seemed that regular congregations were sometimes less than 25% of the membership. Even with a common means of counting the fact remains that many US churches are much larger than their UK equivalents, which makes us tempted to think that we must be doing something wrong.

However at a more fundamental level evaluating ministry success by comparing numbers is flawed because it fails to take account of the context of a ministry. It is not wrong to want to evaluate whether you are being effective, but this can only be assessed in the light of the prevailing spiritual circumstances and gospel opportunities of the time and place in which you are ministering. It will inevitably be harder to minister in a rural area and easier to grow a large church in a major city. It is easier to build a large church in the Bible belt of the US than in the post-Christian context of Western Europe. There are times and places where God is at work in great power and many are converted, whereas in other times and places there seems to be little response to the same gospel. It is not necessarily that we are doing something wrong and need to find another technique, still less a different message. All pastors should read Don Carson's *"Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor"* about his father's ministry in Quebec (see below for my review of this title).

In contrast Spurgeon wrote: *"..[I]n the halcyon days in which we live, men are earnestly craving for our prayers – men are longing for deliverance...There was never an age like this for hearing sermons. I marvel, every Sabbath day, as I see the crowd willing to stand outside waiting by the hour, and then rushing in like a mountain torrent, even treading upon one another to hear the Word. Is this not an encouragement to labour? See the theatre on a Sunday; no actors could attract greater multitudes! How they throng the doors, to listen to some simple-minded man, who is going to tell the story of the cross! I have seen this thirst for the Word all over England; but this present week I have seen in a village, thinly populated, some ten thousand people crowding the cliffs, drinking in every word from the preacher's lips – earnest to listen to the message or mercy. We have not now to stir up the people to attend to the means, for there is all around us a desire to hear. This is a hearing age; this is a time when men are willing to listen – when they are only too glad to hear the Word faithfully preached. I say not that it is so in every place, but certainly it is in London; and a man with but very moderate gifts,*

if his tongue be but on fire, will soon command an audience. If there be an empty place of worship in London, it is generally the preacher's fault; and in nine cases out of ten, you will find that empty benches are evidences that the man does not preach the gospel; for if he preached the gospel, the people would soon throng to listen to him."

Spurgeon was speaking in 1862. We may long and pray that the spiritual desire he describes would be seen again in our day, but we must not fall into thinking that we are somehow failing because the people do not throng to listen to us when we preach the gospel. We live in different times, and we must evaluate our success and faithfulness by the standard of the prevailing spiritual condition of the time in which we have been called to minister by God. In some places in the world it may be more like the days Spurgeon describes, *but that is not the case in the UK*. I would love to report that there are ministries around the country that are seeing great interest in the gospel and remarkable numbers of true conversions, but I don't know of any. In most places it is a case of slow, hard gospel slog with a trickle of conversions. In reality, of course, the time of great blessing that Spurgeon witnessed in the mid-19th Century did not last.

However this is the way it has been for most of the history of the church. The gospel has generally triumphed by long slow steady growth as a result of faithful gospel ministry, with occasional periods of remarkable and exceptional growth. In the UK most mainline denominations are in dramatic decline. Evangelicalism as a whole has a 0% growth rate, and even this is only being maintained by the high level of immigration of those who are already believers. In these times to see a church growth rate of 1-2% growth by conversions a year should make us rejoice, and if that is repeated year on year for the next 10, 20, 50 or 100 years it will see a remarkable triumph of the gospel and transformation of our nation. We should pray for more, but not assume we are failing simply because the progress we see in our day is not as dramatic as that in days gone by, or of others ministering in very different contexts.

'MEMOIRS OF AN ORDINARY PASTOR' D A CARSON

John Stevens, in his helpful article above says every pastor should read it Carson's memoir of his father, Tom. I agree but what is so unusually helpful about this book which I reread with real profit for this review article? I think it is the realistic approach to ministry through the lens of the ministry of a pastor who was never successful in any obvious way. Don Carson describes most pastors: "They cannot possibly discern whether the constraints of their own sphere of service owe more to the specific challenges of the local situation or to their own shortcomings" and that certainly rings true to me. His concern is that 'ordinary ministers are encouraged, not least by the thought that the God of Augustine, Calvin, Spurgeon, and Piper is no less the God of Tom Carson, and of you and me.'

Tom Carson was born in 1911 and his family emigrated to Canada from Northern Ireland when he was two. He was converted as teenager and attended Toronto Baptist Seminary where he committed himself to ministry in French-speaking Canada which at this point was desperately hard. Until the 1970s a large evangelical church would have a congregation of forty and Tom did not minister in large churches!

He married in 1938 and commenced ministry in 1941, beginning in an English-speaking church but working to build up a French work. In 1947 Tom moved his work to Drummondville, a town just North of Montreal, but owing to a dispute within their denomination promised support did not materialise. Strangely Don Carson was completely ignorant of the disputes, in which his father was vilified, until he heard about it in a lecture at the seminary where he studied. His father's comment when asked about this was that children of the manse see more than their share of difficult and ugly things, and he did not want to further burden his children, and that he and his wife wished to protect their own spirits from bitterness. That is an example I wish all ministers and their wives would take to heart.

In 1963 Tom resigned as minister at Drummondville. He had been deeply discouraged by long-term fruitlessness in the ministry and had vowed to leave if the Lord did not change things. So aged 52 he left full-time ministry for good. He did not regard himself as having left the ministry but as tent-making. He became a civil service translator and worked incredibly hard working alongside pastors. Don Carson observes that he was far better working alongside a more forceful and dynamic leader: "The brute fact is that Tom functioned better as a number two pastor than the senior man. ... Tom began to flourish again, doing the things he did best: personal work with young Christians, encouraging those who needed it, the gift of hospitality and prayer with folk, and steady, workmanlike preaching that always aimed to be faithful to the text." It is a real problem for groups like EFCC, consisting largely of small churches, that men are put into ministries with responsibilities and demands they are not fitted for.

In later years he was limited in the ministry he could undertake because of his wife's deteriorating Alzheimer's. It is noteworthy that he was intensely self-critical regarding his wife's care, just as he had been in regard to his ministry. His self-condemnation was not mirrored in the eyes of others. His 'glass half-empty' outlook characterises many of us and we have to learn to combat and control our temperament so as to protect our ministry from its weaknesses.

In many ways the great virtue of this book is that it takes seriously 2 Corinthians 4: 7, 'But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.' Many of us become despondent because we have learnt the lesson of the first part of the verse – we see our weakness and ineffectiveness and despair. However the lesson of the first part of the verse is simply the necessary foundation for the second part: 'the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.' That is a comfort reserved for those who know their own weakness.

