
PLANTING & WATERING (1 Corinthians 3:6)

EFCC Leadership Newsletter (No. 71) – January 2015

EFCC
PO Box 34, Beverley,
East Yorkshire
HU17 0YY
(01482 860324)
efcc@efcc.karoo.co.uk

Mike Plant
27 The Ridings
Longlands
Middlesbrough
(01642 217222)
mike.plant427@btinternet.com

Dear Friends,

NEW YEAR'S GREETINGS

I had a good break at Christmas – I always enjoy time with our family and friends – a particular joy being that we had a visit from my son Jonathan, his wife Lesley and our first granddaughter Anna (born 1st December 2014). Like a lot of people I seem to have had some sort of bug over Christmas so I am not feeling as rested as I would like. Already this year I've had the privilege of taking part in the farewell service for Andrew Carter and family, as they left Therfield for Uganda where Andrew will lecture at the Africa Bible University. The following week it was a joy to be at Droylsden for the induction of Ian Densham. Please pray for both these potentially fruitful situations.

Below you will see an article ('Interrupted by Hope' - originally in Evangelicals Now January 2015) by Esther Bennett. During my sabbatical I met with Esther and her husband Chris to discuss the Sonship Course and various issues associated with it. My conversation with them was very helpful and enlightening – it is always best to talk to people who really are committed to what you are discussing. I am quite happy to pass on the information below and believe that many Christians would benefit significantly from taking on board some of the elements of the Sonship Course. I think the emphases on grace and the freeness of our forgiveness are great as is the missional and evangelistic heart of those who set the course up. I am less certain that the Sonship Course is the panacea for all our problems spiritually and believe that there are elements of truth concerning Christian living and assurance that it neglects. However in what it says it will be invaluable for certain people at a particular point in their Christian lives – I think Esther's very helpful testimony tells you what issues it is particularly helpful in dealing with. For anyone who wants to know more I am happy to email you a copy of my fuller reflections on this subject. There is also a website you can look at: www.sonshipweekuk.org

A book I am looking forward to reading is: 'Independent Church – Biblically Shaped and Gospel Driven' which is edited by John Stevens and published by FIEC. I think it will be a 'must read' for pastors in independent churches in the UK. It tackles a number of issues which are significant and important for us to think through such as the relationship between congregationalism and independency, confessionalism and independency and the issue of leadership within independent churches. 'Must reads' are not 'Must read and agree with' and this is a book which deserves careful, critical reading and thought-through appropriate implementation. One of the most serious problems of churches within EFCC is that we fail to critically value and think through our Congregational heritage and this book may help some of us do so.

In his helpful book: 'The New Calvinism Considered', Jeremy Walker makes the point that most theological students concentrate their reading on an 'in crowd' of new and approved writers like John Piper, Mark Dever, Mark Driscoll, Tim Keller, C J Mahaney etc. They get their ideas about church life and leadership from this small group and this is actually dangerous and short-sighted. It is not that those who are in this group are not well and widely read – John Piper, Mark Dever and Tim Keller most certainly are – but that we need to be constantly working and reading we can critically assess and apply what we read. I fully accept that those of us who are working and busy pastors cannot attain to the knowledge levels of professional scholars or particularly highly-trained pastors but we can at least make ourselves aware of disagreements and what the issues behind those disagreements are.

For your prayers – I am planning a week in Macedonia in April in which I will be giving teaching and training to the churches out there. I particularly need prayer with a huge amount of preparation to do and seeking to help churches that are very diverse in make-up. A particular prayer would be for all the churches to respond positively to this initiative and take part.

Yours in the Lord,

Mike Plant

MIKE'S ITINERARY

Strangely I am better booked towards the end of the year than I am early on. In particular preaching appointments in the London area on the 15th March would be very welcome. I am also free for another Sunday in March, any Sunday except the 29th in June and any Sunday except the 5th in July.

Sunday 8th February Zion Congregational Church, Hyde, Manchester. Sunday 15th February Cannon Park am + pm.
Sunday 22nd February Honiton am + pm

INTERRUPTED BY HOPE

It's New Year's Eve 2011. I am reflecting on the past year and writing in my spiritual journal. For the third, or maybe it's the fourth year, I write down Romans 15:13 as my longing for the coming year: 'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit'. A longing. Never it seems a reality.

'Joy and peace'? Signally what my life has lacked. Serious Christian devotion, yes. Perseverance, yes. An outwardly good life, certainly yes! Respected by other Christians? For sure. But who knows the inner struggles of my heart? Who knows that grey fog through which day by day I swim? A fog rising from the fears and anxieties that lie like stagnant water in my heart. I can't work out this life of mine! Does anyone know how desperately I lay claim to God's promises? How resentful I am that however hard I try, God always turns out to be right and I to be wrong? No-one else knows.

From the tiniest age I have been a Christian. Brought up in a Christian home, my father was the minister, and for over 25 years I have been married to a minister. With great sincerity I have wanted to live to God's glory. Credentials surely that could make the Apostle Paul proud, had he wished to boast!

Here I am. A month or two from my 50th birthday. Wondering if there is something more? Or is this simply the struggle God has given me in this life? How can I engage with more reality with other believers? That seems like a New Testament approach! Hope is stirring in my heart. At the age of 50 perhaps a risk or two may be in order. After all, there is not quite so much to lose!

A few months later I made a journey (reciting my scriptural knowledge A-Z and Z-A on the way, I jest not!) to see a Christian elder in a church not far away to pose these questions. For the first time I shared the real state of my inner life with someone other than my husband or mother.

Two things stick in my mind from that meeting: the first was a challenge to risk sharing with other Christians. The second was an almost off-hand remark – 'You don't understand adoption!' I fought the first. How can I share what others may not understand? Perhaps I may harm others; maybe they will harm me. My listener was unrelenting – 'why can't we just be messy together?' The second reverberated round my heart: it was shocking to be told that I, a Christian of such long standing, did not understand adoption. Shocking. But it rang true. In God's mercy some big changes started that day in my life which are still very much ongoing.

Over the last 2 ½ years I have taken the risk of allowing some others into the inside of my life, sharing my current struggles, learning to admit weakness and my need of the prayers and support of others in the Body of Christ. Believing indeed that this is God's chosen way of building us up together. In doing this I have had the privilege of others sharing with me in a way that I had never dreamt

possible. What a liberation it has been to have come out of hiding.

I have been finding out what it means to have God as my Father. Just a little! I discover I am the daughter of a King; greatly loved, and I barely knew it. Years ago as a student I worked on the Royal Household Staff at Balmoral Castle. I remember then it had struck me that I was living, sleeping, under the same roof as the Queen of England and, for all the world, her presence made no difference to me. In effect my relationship with God had been the same: living under the roof of his promises but not engaging with HIM. The promises were formulas. I didn't look beyond them to the heart of my heavenly Father who is speaking them to me. I have been amazed to find that He, the Almighty God, enjoys me! Ludicrous it still seems even as I write. But 'he takes great delight in me; in his love he will no longer rebuke me, but rejoices over me with singing' (Zeph 3.17). Day by day, and moment by moment, I can talk directly to one who loves me in such an outrageous way.

One risk led to the next! I was well aware of need and weakness. But I had no day-by-day sense of my sin. In fact, to be brutally honest, I had barely repented of sins for 30 years. They simply weren't on my radar. Hadn't God forgiven me in Christ? Issue over. I started to pray God would show me my sin, a prayer that felt as dangerous as falling backwards off a cliff clutching vainly onto the grasses at the top. But dangerous only it turned out without the tender hand of my Father. And that I had. I had Jesus too. As I saw over the months that followed the bitter, harmful ways my sins impacted others, and how incurably determined I was (and am) to walk, orphan-like, detached and independent of God, I experienced grief that drove me to the Saviour. Christ's love grew as the sight of my sins grew. My bitterness and sorrow encountered his extraordinary healing.

Inevitably all of this has been played out in the imperfect earthiness of everyday life. Stumbling and faltering I am seeking to live out this reality in my relationships with others. At work, with some of my non-Christian friends I am freer than before to acknowledge how at times I struggle with anxieties or with getting stressed; how I need to know the love of my Father. Sometimes the Gospel shines out just because I need it so much. In one time of particular difficulty at work it came as an unusual blessing to be reminded by my far-from-Christian friend: 'Remember Who you are looking to!' With my Christian friends to a growing extent I am becoming freer to live without pretence, and enjoying fellowship and connection I did not know to be possible.

So I lived happily ever after? No! (Though one day, yes). I can hardly convey how strong the default of my heart is to live independent of God. I see myself sometimes like one of the ragtag orphans in the story of Oliver Twist. I, the daughter of the great King, who should be living in his royal palace, keep finding myself out and about with the pickpockets on the street, and sleeping rough under the bridge. What a deeply erring heart! What passionate love in my Father, enveloping this tired wanderer and leading me to rest.

Much of this change the Spirit set in motion following the insightful comments of the elder I spoke to at the beginning. Leaving my isolated hole was a risk worth taking! Sometime later I and two friends were mentored through the Sonship Course which helped me connect with the Gospel in a much deeper way. This course was originally devised by the late Jack Miller who set up World Harvest Mission (now called Serge) and has been of real benefit to many Christians who like me have known the Gospel yet not known it.

For me these insights are treasure I cannot keep to myself. I am now involved - with others - in organising a residential Sonship Week for people in ministry and their spouses: 19 – 24 April 2015. If you would like a brochure with some more information just send an email to Margaret-Elliott Czentnar (meczentnar@gmail.com).

Again and again I need to hear the sweet voice of the Saviour: 'I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you'. May the Spirit of Jesus Christ lead us into our privileges.

Esther Bennett (October 2014)

NINE QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU EXEGETE PEOPLE

I don't really use Twitter but someone sent me this via Twitter and it is quite thought provoking and helpful. It is from Paul David Tripp and is very helpful for approaching exegeting your congregation. By that I simply mean understanding the people you are preaching to. Here are nine helpful questions to ask yourself as you attempt to be a student and exegete of your people:

1. What are the cultural idols that are particularly attractive to my people?
2. Where do they tend to buy into an unbiblical worldview with its accompanying hopes and dreams?
3. Are there themes of spiritual struggle that I need to speak to?
4. Where do they tend to get discouraged and need the hope of the gospel?
5. What is the level of their biblical literacy and theological knowledge?
6. How many of them are actively involved in service, and how many are "ecclesiastical consumers"?
7. What do they tend to struggle with in the workplace?
8. What do they wrestle with at home?
9. What are they reading, watching, and listening to, and how are they influenced by it?

WHY SEEK TO EXEGETE YOUR CONGREGATION?

I can imagine some people must look at the idea of exegeting people and think that it doesn't sound spiritual, that it isn't something earlier generations of

preachers have done and in any case, with all the other burdens of ministry, this isn't something else I can take on. Let me make some responses:

Firstly: Why this Terminology? I don't actually think the terminology is very good. But it came about because preachers need to understand = exegete the text of the Bible and equally need to understand (and so exegete) the people to whom they preach. If I had titled this: 'Why Seek to Understand Your Congregation?' you would have thought it was obvious that you need to. So the terminology is unimportant it is just about understanding people.

Secondly: Great Preachers of the Past didn't Use this Terminology Agreed but they did seek to understand the people they preached to and worked very hard in order to do so. Here is Richard Baxter in 'The Reformed Pastor':

it is necessary, that we should know every person that belongeth to our charge; for how can we take heed to them, if we do not know them? We must labour to be acquainted, not only with the persons, but with the state of all our people, with their inclinations and conversations; what are the sins of which they are most in danger, and what duties they are most apt to neglect, and what temptations they are most liable to; for we if we know not their temperament or disease, we are not likely to prove successful physicians.

The duty couldn't be put much more forcefully!

Thirdly: I don't really have time for this Let me try to persuade you otherwise:

1. **Systems sound more complex in theory than they are in reality** William Perkins categorised the spiritual state of his hearers very minutely but if there are nine spiritual states of our hearers going from 'converted and growing in grace' to 'unconverted and unawakened' we are not going to address everyone in every sermon. Indeed, we know that what we say in a sermon may get home to someone in a way which was not intended. One woman told me she grasped that she wasn't really a Christian and needed to do something about it when I preached on spiritual growth. She suddenly realized that she needed to be spiritually alive in order to grow. However it is more being aware of these issues so that we will from time address them and not have blind spots in our preaching that is intended.
2. **This could really benefit your preaching and so your congregation** A danger is that our application of sermons becomes very stereotyped. You must believe in Jesus, attend church regularly, tithe, witness – and of course every one of these things is right. Proper study of the burden of the text and consideration of people's situations might mean we address that difficult work/family/church balance in people's lives – after all failing to care for your family, even to serve the church, makes

you worse than an unbeliever! We will realize that encouraging is no less applicatory and no less vital to God's people than teaching them to obey his commands.

- 3. It is nothing like as hard to implement as you may fear** If as a pastor you regularly talk to a good cross-section of your congregation then those regular talks will provide all the information that you need. If you learn the art of asking the right questions and listening then you will soon pick up what idols and false hopes people have, what they struggle with and what are their influences both secular and spiritual. Of course some issues you will take up in conversation at the time but it helps to be aware of the general spiritual shape the church is in. It also enables you to address issues because you have anticipated problems rather than because you are really irritated because of the way people in your congregation are behaving. Scolding normally produces resistance not response.

EDUCATING A CONGREGATION

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM? I am struck by one of Paul David Tripp's questions to enable exegesis/understanding your congregation: **'What is the level of their biblical literacy and theological knowledge?'** The reason that hits home to me is that assuming the answer is that their level of knowledge is pretty limited then there are no short term solutions and a long-term strategy will need to be adopted. The reason I assume that the probable answer is 'pretty limited' is that many ministries don't instruct people theologically and biblically and that even if the previous ministry did then, assuming a changing congregation, there will be new Christians joining from other less-instructed backgrounds and non-Christians and new-converts also in attendance. These may be not only 'pretty-limited' in their understanding but sometimes even 'frankly mistaken' in what they think.

WHY LIMITED UNDERSTANDING MATTERS Of course I entirely accept that the big question is whether we are in Christ or not. If we are in Christ then at one level, and that is the most important level, all is well. I was very gripped when I listened to a Haddon Robinson sermon on Jephthah some years ago. He makes the point that God honoured Jephthah's faith, indeed Jephthah is listed as a man of faith in Hebrews 11 but that his poor understanding, indeed his misunderstanding of God and his ways, brought tragedy to his family and to himself. When I consider some of the Christians I know a term from my childhood 'keen but clueless' comes to mind. They love and trust the Lord Jesus and sometimes their trust and commitment puts me to shame – however they are frequently unwise and I am concerned for the impact on them and on their families in the long-term. Often such folk become disillusioned and are deeply suspicious of churches and their leadership – their resolve is: 'Won't get fooled again!'

DEVELOPING A STRATEGY Because this is inevitably a long-term commitment we cannot just think that there are one or two steps we can take and then we forget about it. We must urge people to take steps themselves to remedy this situation and then we ourselves must be taking steps to help them.

Firstly: What people can be doing for themselves Hopefully, and I am not sure we should assume this, most ministers and church-leaders are diligent and organised in their devotional life. This should include regularly reading through the Bible and there are numerous online and other schemes for doing so. If you want a comprehensive choice of ways for doing this try:

<http://www.ligonier.org/blog/bible-reading-plans/>.

In addition I suggest that we should also study parts of the Bible in more depth and with the help of commentaries. There is much helpful material available for doing this. We should be seeking to encourage people in our congregations to do the same and to organise to set time aside each day to do so. If you don't know people are doing this assume they are not.

The same applies to reading – there is much available in accessible form that introduces people to basic theological understanding and so will enable them to both understand and articulate their faith better. We need to know and recommend. Many people we gain from shared reading and discussion so why not read a book together with a small group and meet to discuss it? Not everyone works at the same level but some of the Bible Speaks Today Bible Themes books like Peter Lewis's 'The Message of the Living God' are excellent as are some of Grace Publications simplified classics.

Secondly: What we should be doing for them

These are a number of thoughts and I am sure they could be added to. I'm always grateful for information on how others have tackled these issues.

- 1. Planning our Preaching** Prayerfully done there is nothing unspiritual about this. We need to preach on books which the Lord has just laid on our hearts but we also need to aim to cover major foundational books and themes regularly. Read and study them devotionally – read about them – seek to get their major themes and emphases in your mind and heart and you will sense when the right time comes to preach them.
- 2. Doing 'Big Picture' Preaching** To preach a passage properly far more is needed than a running commentary on the verses. We need to analyse the message of the text but then to present it in the context of the content of the gospel and of the book we are preaching from. The message of the text is only properly understood within the whole teaching of the Bible and so we will need to give the 'big picture' so that the real message of the text will get through to those who hear. Over a short period basic, foundational truths about God, the creation and its purpose and destiny, about Christ and his mission and our response should be clearly explained and deeply rooted in our hearers.

