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## PLANTING & WATERING (1 Corinthians 3:6) EFCC Leadership Newsletter (No. 72) – March 2015

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Dear Friends,

### Reading God's Word – Being Real and Providing Real Help for our Congregations

We all acknowledge how vital Bible Reading is in a Christian's life. However I have a real concern that we assume people know how to have a Quiet Time and how to organise their own Bible Reading programme when, in real life, they haven't got a clue what to do. I want now to deal with the issue of Bible Reading.

A number of churches have found it very helpful to share a programme of Bible Reading – in the last P & W I mentioned the range of schemes to be found on <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/bible-reading-plans/> however I have now come across another scheme which really impresses me. Margaret is trialling it for me and has really appreciated it - [www.thegospelcoalition.org/.../two-year-bible-reading-plan](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/.../two-year-bible-reading-plan) - when and if this link fails simply google TGC bible reading plan. What impresses me about this scheme is that it does take on board some of the problems people experience with other schemes, especially those that like mine seek to do the whole bible in a year.

Stephen Witmer, who devised this scheme, writes:

I've found several weaknesses in many Bible-reading plans:

The plans that guide you through the whole Bible in a year sometimes require so much reading each day that you don't have sufficient time to reflect and pray about what you're reading—you're scrambling just to keep up with the rigorous pace. M'Cheyne identified this danger: "Some, by having so large a portion, may be tempted to weary of it, as Israel did of the daily manna."

M'Cheyne's plan, and most others I have seen, have you read from three or four different sections of the Bible each day; for instance, on June 11 in M'Cheyne's plan, you will read Deut 16, Ps 103, Isa 43, and Rev 13. The next day you will read Deut 17, Ps 104, Isa 44, and Rev 14. I find it difficult to really understand a book of the Bible when you're only reading a chapter at a time, and reading a bunch of other books alongside it at the same time. This isn't how we usually read other books, is it? You don't read three novels at once, a chapter of each novel per day. That would be too confusing.

Most plans I have seen divide up the daily readings according to chapter divisions. That is okay . . . some of the time. But not all of the time. None of the books of the Bible originally had chapters. Our modern chapter divisions come from Stephen Langton, the archbishop of Canterbury, who invented them in 1205. Langton was not inspired when he set the modern chapter divisions, so Bible reading plans that divide up readings by chapter rather than by logical units of thought can sometimes be quite unhelpful.

Another feature of this system is that it is linked to 'How to Read the Bible Book by Book' by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart which means that those reading are helped to make real advances in their Bible understanding.

In Spurgeon's 'Morning and Evening' (morning February 21<sup>st</sup>) I came across a quotation which outlines what he describes as the 'extreme value of searching the Scriptures':

'He hath said' must be our daily resort. .... There may be a promise in the word which would exactly fit your case, but you may not know of it, and therefore you miss its comfort. You are like prisoners in a dungeon, and there may be one key in the bunch which would unlock the door, and you might be free; but if you will not look for it, you may remain a prisoner still, though liberty is so near at hand. There may be a potent medicine in the great pharmacopoeia of Scripture, and you may yet continue sick unless you will examine and search the Scriptures to discover what 'He hath said.' Should you not, besides reading the Bible, store your memories with the promises of God? You can recollect the sayings of great men; you treasure up the verses of renowned poets; ought you not to be profound in your knowledge of the words of God, so that you may be able to quote them readily when you would solve a difficulty, or overthrow a doubt? Since 'he hath said' is the source of all wisdom, and the fountain of all comfort, let it dwell in you richly, as 'A well of water, springing up unto everlasting life.' So shall you grow healthy, strong and happy in the divine life.

If Christians are biblically illiterate they are storing up troubles for themselves and may run into dangers that could be avoided or endure sorrows that could be sweetened and through which they might be supported more fully. Ministries that fail to teach and apply God's word and to give people an appetite for God's Word are simply irresponsible. However, if we impart an appetite for the Word of God, let's also show people how they can learn to satisfy that appetite. Now you've got nearly a year to plan how to approach this.

Yours in the Lord,

*Mike Plant*

## COMEBACK ON SONSHIP

**A Concern Expressed** In the last P & W I published an article by Esther Bennett in which she shares her testimony of receiving tremendous spiritual help through the material in the Sonship Course pioneered by Jack Miller in the States. So much so that she and her husband Chris are running two Sonship Courses in the United Kingdom this year. Sonship material has been controversial in the States and a couple within EFCC picked up on issues that concerned them with Esther's testimony – I gave both Esther and Chris the opportunity to respond. I think it is really dangerous when Christians write one another off without first talking to one another. So I encourage this sort of dialogue.

Below is my email to Esther:

As you know I published your article in 'Planting & Watering' - I have a letter in which states the couple involved are puzzled by the inclusion of your article and why I describe it as 'helpful' - I can answer that but the writer then goes on to say that: they know you as 'a mature and faithful Christian' and are therefore puzzled how such person could have no peace and joy. She should have both! (Romans 5: 1, Galatians 5: 22) in short the whole article perplexes us.'

I have no problem with why it is helpful or profitable but it might be helpful if you could reply regarding the lack of peace and joy and how it fits the scriptures they quote.

**Response** Esther's reply:

Thanks for passing those comments and questions on.

I think my brief response would be that the fruits of the Spirit - joy, peace, etc - are indeed the works of the **Spirit**. There is nothing automatic about them. But all too often rather than engaging with God our Father (moment by moment resting on the finished work of Christ as we acknowledge our sin and need, and feel afresh the Father's love and acceptance of us) we subtly slip into relying on our maturity, our faithfulness, our understanding of the Word. That becomes our trust and reliance. Certainly it was mine. Another words, we are really relying on ourselves. And the fruits of the Spirit dry up. Gal 5.6 sums it up, I think: 'neither circumcision, nor uncircumcision, counts for anything. All that counts is faith expressing itself through love'.

What a joy it has been to discover I am loved so much!

Chris also replied with a quotation from C R Vaughan's 'The Gifts of the Holy Spirit' (BOTT):

But the defect [in many Christians' understanding] lies here: sanctification is rather expected than worked for; rather anticipated as the necessary growth of the germ implanted in regeneration than a development dependent on positive cultivation on the part of man, and on

positive energies distinctly and designedly put forth on the part of the great efficient agent, the Holy Spirit. More dangerous still, even when sought in the active use of appointed means and service, sanctification is looked for as a result to be expected as the consequence of a certain steadiness and fidelity in this use of means, rather than as a work to be accomplished really by the Holy Ghost, and by as distinct and definite a series of actions in accomplishing the work of sanctification as is necessary in doing every sustained and constant work. The work of the Spirit is to be accomplished by the acts of the Spirit, and while the steady use of means is rigorously demanded by the diving rule, the mind is with equal imperativeness required not to rest at all in these means, but always to look beyond them for the effective power. There is an intense force and precision in the gospel doctrine that sanctification is *by the Spirit*. It is his work, to be accomplished by his special acts. These special actions of the indwelling Spirit are his gifts to believers, and being dependent on special energies manifested by the Spirit, are warrantably described as the gift of the Spirit himself to believers. The prayer of Paul for the Christians of Ephesus instructs us that we must look to a definite gift of the Holy Ghost, and to definite acts of that gracious giver, as well as gifts, to work out our deliverance from the inward power of sin, and our inward endowment with the power of holiness.

Chris's comment on this is that this means:

we don't grow automatically by being sound or steady but we need to trust the Spirit every step of the way, knowing our sin and need, which is what Esther didn't do much for a number of years, and actually lots of us don't, especially if we are trusting in being good conservative evangelical people!

**Responding to the Response** In their response the couple agree wholeheartedly that advance in the Christian life never comes automatically (Philippians 2: 12 – 13) but didn't feel the quote from Vaughan helped very much. In response to Esther they pointed out that 1) a Christian without the fruit of the Spirit is unknown in the New Testament (Mark 4: 20 and John 15: 2) but 2) our perception or consciousness of such fruit may be absent.

**Summing Up** I am pleased something of a discussion has taken place. Sonship provoked extreme, very personal and largely unwarranted hostility in the States. That doesn't mean it is above criticism but those who criticise should do so as fellow Christians and therefore be loving and constructive. One denomination in the States actually sponsored a chaired debate so the issues and concerns could be properly aired and that was extremely helpful. It forces people to talk to one another rather than at one another. I think that is what my correspondents and the Bennetts have done and I am grateful for this.

Speaking for myself, I regard Esther's testimony as profitable - it describes what all too many Christians seem to feel - I quite accept that feelings are fallible but it concerns me that many Christians seem to feel obliged to have 'a stiff upper lip' when they are crying out on the inside. It would be far better if people were more open and honest, with themselves if not publicly for fear of discouraging others.

I don't believe Sonship, or any other movement, has all the answers but they do have answers in that they advocate a getting back to and seriously taking on board basic gospel truths about justification and adoption. Where I hesitate with Sonship is the possible assumption that there is no more to be said when Scripture inevitably says more than any 'system' can encompass. So if, as in the States, you get the same people coming back year after year for the same message at Sonship Conferences something will have gone wrong.

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## CAN WE BE PASTOR- THEOLOGIANS?

**A Serious Problem** My friend Richard Underwood has two categories for ministers - a few are Pastor-Theologians or Pastor-Scholars but most are Pastor-Practitioners! I think the distinction he makes can be helpful but it is important to think why he needed to make the distinction at all.

The problem in part stems from how ministry has been regarded in the past - ministers were often the best, sometimes the only, educated person in the community. They were already highly trained academically, and that would still be true of those who are Presbyterians, and it was assumed that a major part of their work was to study. An extreme example would be Jonathan Edwards (Congregationalist) who spent thirteen hours a day in the study. In the 1950s and 1960s many ministers rediscovered Reformed Theology and with it a view of the ministry that emphasized study and preaching, and hopefully prayer, above all else. This was in reaction to a pattern of ministry which involved endless cups of tea and 'pastoral' visits but where serious study and exposition was notable by its absence - as often was serious pastoral care.

I think that this historic view of the ministry which was rediscovered then has taken a pounding because of the realities of the situation ministers are now in:-

1. We are clearly in a Post-Christendom Era The Church is no longer a stable part of the community and church attendance in the United Kingdom has halved since the 1980s. If we were to remove those of African descent and Eastern Europeans from our statistics I think the figures would be worse than that. Churches that don't evangelise and don't see people converted are going to die. Ministers need to lead and inspire evangelism.
2. Pastoral Problems Proliferate I am not speaking here of deprived areas which inevitably produce social problems but more generally. Marriage breakdowns take place within well-taught evangelical churches. People's personal situations can be a mess with increasing addictions to internet

pornography, drugs, alcohol, gambling etc. Helping those in such situations is costly and demanding emotionally and in terms of time. If ministers are to be engaged with loving and helping people with these problems they need to spend time with them.

3. Ministers have responded by preaching less I think it is true to say that the majority of younger ministers prefer to only preach once on a Sunday and may prefer only one service on a Sunday. Given the changing pattern of midweek ministry that means many speak only once a week compared to the three times a week most older ministers began with. Is this a good thing? Partly I think it is and I believe I, and many other ministers, simply had too much preaching and preparation to do and that probably stopped us giving proper attention to other things that ought to have been done. However I'm encouraged that Tim Keller believes that you learn preaching by doing plenty of it - as he had to in his early ministry. In his current situation he spends a similar amount of time on one message that he previously spent on two. However many ministers probably spend less time in the study than was typical of ministers in the past and are doing so in reaction to what they see as an imbalance.
4. There has been an increased emphasis on small groups and one to one help Personally I applaud this - I think it was profitable when I committed to going through Calvin's Institutes with three (then) young members of the church and I should probably have worked more in this way. However again it is demanding of time which cannot be given to personal study - although studying together may give insights that study alone can't.

Richard's distinction is based on his observation that many, probably the vast majority of pastors, do not have the time or the ability to be Pastor-Theologians and have to settle to be Pastor-Practitioners. My problem is that the distinction doesn't solve the problem.

### **The Distinction doesn't Remove the Problem**

My issue here is that the need for Pastors to engage in serious study isn't removed by the change of terms. Clearly a group like EFCC doesn't have a highly-trained ministry where most ministers have had several years training at an academically rigorous Bible College. We do have some who have trained full-time and others who have a full academic training in another discipline but have trained for the ministry through distance learning or distance learning plus residential periods each year. Others have done guided reading but have not had the opportunity to do more. We all start from what God has so far enabled us to do but the need for serious study is obvious and pressing:

1. You need to Understand the Bible to Preach it This doesn't mean all of us must be Greek and Hebrew Scholars but it does mean that we need to work hard - compare different versions and look at serious commentaries in

order to find out what the text really says. Then in order to understand it more fully we need to view it in context – of the Bible book that it is in, of Biblical Theology and of Systematic Theology. You will spend a lifetime trying to grasp the Bible in its entirety, which is what Biblical Theology is all about, and then you will still feel you are not there.

2. You need to Understand the People to whom you Preach Some of this knowledge is gained in the context of pastoral visitation or personal evangelism but we need to be aware of what is happening in the world around us. Both Christians and non-Christians are deeply influenced by the wider culture we live in and we will need to work hard in order to grasp what is going on there. Fortunately people like Don Carson and Tim Keller have done a lot of reading and thinking for us but we still have to read their books. We need to read critically – they are not in my situation and I am not in theirs.
3. You have to Learn to Lead in a Post-Christendom Era I think this is deeply threatening for a lot of us because the respect our office as pastor had is disintegrating and our place in society is less clear. Simply to teach and preach and pray will not be enough if the people where we are don't come in to hear us. How will we reach them? How will we persuade church people to reach out to people and in situations where they feel afraid and inadequate? How we will handle the effects on our congregation if needy folk from a background that alarms them start attending. Visiting churches in EFCC they have had gay couples attending, transsexuals attending and alcoholics attending – any of these can be alarming and upsetting and without any intent newcomers may be put off because the congregation can't cope. A tremendous amount is required of us and our training is unlikely to have prepared us for it – at best it will have given us the tools with which to tackle the task.

I could develop this a lot further but let's consider the help given by one discipline which many seem to regard as outmoded and therefore as being unworthy of serious study. Church history I find to be a great help in the sometimes paralysing pessimism that seems to engulf some church groupings as they face the diminishing influence of the Christian Faith in our society. Christendom with its positives and negatives simply has not been an issue for Christians at most times and in most places in the world. So to be without influence and to have our cherished beliefs and attitudes despised simply identifies us more closely with the New Testament Church than we are used to being the case – a sense of history helps greatly.

**Being Realistic about Our Solution** A bit belatedly I should mention that what has brought this issue to my mind is the experience of attending the Affinity Theological Conference in February. The

topic was 'Union with Christ' and we had a very high-powered galaxy of speakers of whom three were full-time academics, one had been a full-time academic, one works for the Proclamation Trust and is largely engaged in teaching, and one who has a pastorate as well as being his denomination's tutor in Systematic Theology.

I always feel on these occasions like an occasional tennis player being invited to knock-up with a Wimbledon champion. The speakers, and some of the ministers attending, are better read than me, seem to remember what they've read better than me (one of the speakers quoted page numbers in a book from memory), and seem to be able to see the information they read in the context of an overall grasp of the subject which I simply don't have. One of the speakers, John Fesko, produces voluminously on Historic Reformed Theology and more popularly with books on Biblical subjects for preachers and lay-people. When I chatted to him I found he only preaches about 12 Sundays a year. Being realistic:

1. Accept your Limitations I am neither as bright or as well-trained, as these people. Given optimum conditions, which I don't have, I could not emulate their breadth or depth of knowledge. Be content - if you can get a grip on a subject you don't need to know all that has been written about it. Find out what the best books are and have a programme of reading them.
2. Accept your Calling(1) Ministers are Generalists not Specialists so I need to understand theology and have some grasp of its historical development so I can preach and teach knowledgeably and effectively. I do not need the detailed knowledge to enable me to teach or write on the subjects themselves.
3. Accept your Calling (2) To concentrate your studies too narrowly is to rob your congregation of the help you can give them by wider study. So in a way academics don't do I will range across a number of disciplines to equip myself to serve God and his people. This will include seeking to equip myself to be a better pastor and preacher by reading up on those subjects – I will not assume that academic subjects are superior in importance to practical ones.
4. Be Guided by Love We are to love God, we are to love his Word and his truth in its entirety and we are to love those to whom we preach. When we are considering what we will read and study, and also what we should be preaching about, it is not simply our own enjoyment that matters but the benefit to God's people and we must plan accordingly.

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## MIKE'S ITINERARY

**April** 14<sup>th</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup> Ministry in Macedonia // 26<sup>th</sup> Orange Street

**May** 17<sup>th</sup> Birstall // 24<sup>th</sup> Wiveliscombe am + Henley pm

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