
PLANTING & WATERING (1 Corinthians 3:6)

EFCC Leadership Newsletter (No. 73) – May 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,

BEING AWARE OF OUR CHANGING TIMES

An Issue affecting EFCC Recently, at our AGM, we reaffirmed the EFCC Statements of Position. One church did not vote to affirm the paper on: 'Homosexuals and Christian Fellowship' but stressed the issue was not one of the content of biblical truth but a concern that it should be presented in a way that is both truthful and pastorally helpful. David Saunders, who dates as far back as any of us in EFCC, recalled the reason for adopting the statements on 'The Relationship of Men and Women in the Church' and on 'Homosexuals and Christian Fellowship' was that the church worldwide was under immense pressure on these issues at the time and that it had been necessary to record and state our position – the aim had been to state a position rather than a pastoral one.

The Impact of Changing Times No-one is suggesting the truth changes but our times do – what has happened in our situation to impact on how we express the same views in a different setting? I think there are several issues we need to think about:

1. **The issues have broadened** It is not just homosexuals and lesbians who may be found in our churches but also transsexuals and what the TV last night described as 'intersex' – I haven't yet worked out what that means. Chatting to ministers in EFCC they have had people from all the above categories worshipping in their churches. I think if we discuss it we will need to conclude that more than restatement is necessary – there are clearly unfaced issues that we now need to face.
2. **Information is more widely available** It will depend where you are in the country and the age and social profile of those to whom you minister but many who start attending a church will first have researched it on the internet. That (hopefully) will inform them the church affiliates to EFCC so they can check out EFCC. Someone who has sensitivities about a particular subject – which could be penal substitutionary atonement, bible versions, ecumenism, or same-sex relationships can easily check out what views are held and how they are expressed. Hence the need to express what we hold in a clearly helpful pastoral way which is helpful to the seeker and also deflects criticism from those who are hostile.
3. **The encouraging reasons it matters** Because many of our churches seek to reach out indiscriminately to all who are lost we find that increasingly churches are engaged in sharing the gospel with those who are homosexual. Also, Christians who struggle with same-sex attraction are seeking counsel and help from Christian leaders in a way that has not happened previously. These factors should lead us to praise.
4. **How we should respond** We cannot do so by wishing for a past in which we were blissfully unaware of these things. That has long gone and is now irrecoverable. We simply seek to serve faithfully and with hope in the situation in which God has chosen to place us. I find increasingly that our current situation more fits with the church of the New Testament than the fag-ends of Christendom that I grew up with. That doesn't make life more comfortable but it does assure me that Christians have lived and triumphed in such circumstances.

Practically I am hoping that those who saw the issues before I did, and I want to express our indebtedness to them for pointing them out, will be active and helpful in helping us move forward on this subject.

Yours in the Lord,

Mike Plant

MIKE'S ITINERARY

Sunday 7th June: Ashford Congregational Church –
Anniversary Services not preaching representing
EFCC – available in the evening if anyone would like
me to preach in that area or on journey home.

Sunday 21st June: Low Ham am + pm

Friday 26th June – Preaching at New College,
Birmingham

Sunday 28th June – Bulkington am + pm

Sunday 5th July – Morley am

Sunday 12th July – Stanwell am again available in
evening in the area or on journey home

26th July – Pontefract am + pm

SERMON PREPARATION ON THE RUN

Recently, while reading 'Unashamed Workmen – How Expositors Prepare and Preach' edited Rhett Dobson (CFP Mentor) I came across a contribution by Ajith Fernando, who is Teaching Director for Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka. It has the title above which certainly appealed to me and I found it refreshing and practical. He writes as an itinerant preacher but the wisdom in the article could be helpful to many of us who are in settled ministries as well as to itinerants like me.

The Models We Aspire to in Our Preaching He starts with a very practical issue – that is that often preachers have models for what they would like to do which are completely impossible for them to achieve. The two he mentions are being the Senior Pastor of a large multi-staff church in North America who can devote 30 hours a week to preaching one great sermon. Refreshingly he doesn't just see this as impossible but as actually undesirable:

Good preaching comes out of a lifetime of ministering personally to people ... That is messy (and) can be very frustrating (but) When the frustration of working with difficult people combines with careful study and reflection, the result is penetrative insight.

He also dismisses the model of the 'country parson' who could devote every weekday morning to study and preparation. He recalls John Stott visiting Fuller Theological Seminary and saying that the old model of a pastor giving the whole morning to preparation is almost impossible to follow today. Instead he said that we should squeeze in whatever time is available for preparation. He comments, 'Few statements about preaching have helped me as much as this one.' My early ministry followed the pattern of mornings for study but as soon as school assemblies and other contacts kicked in this became impossible.

Ajith recommends harvesting your spare moments. Personally, I listen to sermons and lectures while travelling and sometimes read further in a book when I stop for coffee on a journey. Finding private places, for example someone else's home, where you are not easily contactable and can engage in serious study can be a good idea. There are a lot of us who could utilise the time we do have more effectively.

How do We Keep Ourselves Enriched for Preaching? Ajith relies on five indispensable resources to have a wealth of insight to use in preaching.

Firstly: Reading and Listening We need to read more that feeds our mind and soul than we need to read books about techniques of ministry. (Just as a note: apart from 'Unashamed Workmen' I am re-reading John Newton's letters, reading Eryl Davies' book on 'Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones and Evangelicals in Wales', and reading Tim Trumper's Ph.D Thesis on Adoption. The last few weeks have been very busy so I've read more of Eryl Davies' book simply because it is easier reading and more immediately spiritually nourishing). He comments:

Theology and devotional books based on exegesis feed us with security-building realities. These realities give us strength to go through the rigors of an active ministry. We confront so many uncertainties and receive so many blows in ministry that without this strength we become very insecure people. I am convinced that burnout takes place more as a result of insecurity than hard work ... hard work and tiredness are inevitable in ministry.

He also recommends reading theological books slowly, a little at a time, when we can find the time, even if it takes several months to read them and comments that John Piper's maxim, 'Books don't change people; paragraphs do. Sometimes even sentences' liberates us from the need to finish a book in order to be blessed and helped and to take to heart the author's burden. Something he notes is that online sites, like The Gospel Coalition's Themelios and Affinity's 'Foundations' give good reviews so we know what to buy.

Secondly: Observation We preach into the real world in which the people in the congregation live. So we need to read, listen, view the news so we know what is going on in the world. We also need to mix with people and talk with them – even if it is just greeting and chatting to people in our neighbourhood. He has a very honest observation that some of the stories circulating as news are gossip/pornography and arouse unsanctified feelings within us that leave us impure:

I think it is good for every preacher (indeed for every Christian) who spends a lot of time on the internet to install some accountability software which both blocks unhelpful sites and sends a weekly report of internet use to an accountability partner. He suggests Covenant Eyes as very helpful.

Thirdly: Personal Ministry This links very closely to observation, the only difference being the fact that we engage in Christian Ministry to people and observe carefully what is going on. He accepts the disappointments and frustrations of personal ministry but points out that the benefits in which we learn to 'build a bridge between the biblical world and the world of our hearers' more than compensates. I quote a very helpful paragraph in full:

Personal ministry forces us to theologise. We are forced to ask how we can effectively apply what we know of the Word and the world to the lives of people we are ministering to. This often brings us to the point of desperation. We ask questions like, 'How can I help this person?' 'What went wrong in this situation?' 'How was it I could help John while I couldn't help Jerry?' All this helps us to develop skills so that we can penetratingly apply the Word to people's lives.

Fourthly: Research He mentions software which is available (if there are those who have advice and experience to help here please let me know!) but highlights something it is easy to forget and that is our friends. Many of us know ministers who are

highly competent theologically or in the Biblical languages – phone a friend or see a friend at the fraternal or email a friend for in friends in the ministry you have potentially invaluable resources. I can remember a car journey with George Hemming, formerly minister at Reeth, in which I learnt some invaluable lessons about Ephesians 3.

Fifthly: Bible Study Again he is very discerning. He points us to the basics of observation, interpretation and looking for legitimate application which ‘continue to serve as a sure way to get myself and others into vibrant Bible study.’ Why are more preachers not committed to this as a way of preparation? He suggests this is because Bible Study is ‘a time-consuming task, and it requires people to think hard about what they are reading.. In today’s digital world, people are not accustomed to spending so much time thinking’. Additionally, ‘There is an aversion, in this postmodern generation, to fashioning one’s life by submitting to objective truth (truth that is outside of us). This makes exhortation from the Scriptures a culturally unacceptable practice to many.’

Preparation and Writing Sermon Notes The question I was left with is, given his high standards for his personal enrichment, how this works out in real life. How do you actually prepare sermons on the run? We actually get little of the detail of how he develops an outline etc but there are a number of really practical thoughts on how to prepare when it is inevitably an activity broken up by other pressing duties:

1. Constantly Study the Text He actually prints out the text on the left hand side of a sheet of A4 and makes notes around that using commentaries and other aids.
2. Constantly Note Thoughts Down He will attach several sheets to a clipboard and make notes, attach illustrative material under his various headings. Here it is often true that preparation at intervals over several days is helpful because it gives our thinking time to mature and take shape.
3. He Reads the Passage in His Quiet Time over Several Days I never do this because I fear making my devotional life simply an adjunct of my work. I sometimes study a book I will later be preaching on in my Quiet Time some months before launching into preparation but that is simply to get myself spiritually attuned to the book. You must work out for yourself what would be good practice here.
4. Constantly Modify If you are itinerant then modify between the times you preach a message – after all you do now know what went wrong last time! But even if it is part of a series preached in your home church it is helpful to preach the message through to yourself and often you will find it flows better if you tweak the structure.
5. Rewrite the Whole Sermon before Preaching Have it of manageable length and highlight it so it can be preached without losing eye contact with the congregation.

A VITAL SUBJECT

I am very grateful to Iain Clements, the Minister at Beverley, for producing a review of a book on a subject that is vital to the health of all our churches. Many of us who began our ministries in churches where church discipline basically didn’t exist and was certainly very much misunderstood would have benefited from this book and many of those in early ministry and struggling with difficult issues may be really helped by it.

THE CHURCH AND THE SURPRISING OFFENSE OF GOD’S LOVE (Reintroducing the doctrines of church membership and discipline) by Jonathan Leeman (2010, CROSSWAY)

The reformers stated that the true church was present where the word of God is rightly preached, where the sacraments were correctly administered, and where church discipline was faithfully exercised. While we may all be clear on the first two of those marks, often it is the third (church discipline) where we struggle - whether due to the fact that we’ve never seen it done well, or our congregations put pressure on us not to, or simply because we are unsure of how to and in what circumstances. Jonathan Leeman has done us a great service by taking us back to first principles in this book, explaining why church discipline isn’t just biblical and necessary, but flows out of the character of God himself.

As the introduction states -

Insofar as the gospel presents the world with the most vivid picture of God’s love, and insofar as church membership and discipline are an implication of the gospel, local church membership and discipline in fact define God’s love for the world.

To not discipline - that is, not to draw clear and biblical boundary markers between those who are members in good standing of the local church (with credible profession of faith), and those who are not - is not just to create problems for ourselves internally, but to misrepresent God and his love and his gospel to the world.

In the book, Leeman begins by showing how our common cultural conceptions of love hinder any discussion or acceptance of church discipline - individualism, consumerism, commitment phobia and scepticism all need to be recognised and repented of before church membership can have any meaning. The book then moves on to define what God’s love is (holy, centred on himself, bringing salvation and judgement), what the church is, the role of authority in the church and how it relates to God’s authority and then what it means to be a member of a local church before going on to unpack what church discipline is and how it is applied.

The book is not a manual for church discipline - do not read it expecting a “how to...” discussion of dealing with pastoral nightmares, rather it sets church discipline in it’s theological and ecclesiological setting. However it is this extended

discussion of this context which is the great strength of the book. As a new pastor I found it very helpful to go back to work through the foundational issues surrounding church discipline before beginning to think about the practicalities. It would be especially helpful for any church leader to read who has started at a church where church discipline has either never been practiced or has been poorly practiced. The temptation may be to just jump in and set in motion processes of discipline, but the wiser course is to begin further back - in teaching and preaching to both teach positively about God and his character, the nature of the church and membership, sin and holiness, as well as teach negatively exposing the sinful attitudes we bring into the church so that discipline isn't just grudgingly accepted by a congregation, but rejoiced in as an overflow and implication of the gospel. Don't be put off by the length (350+ pages) - this is a book which will help you do these things, and time spent reading this is well invested. The chapters are thorough, biblical and logical, and very helpfully there are chapter summaries at the back, and a subject and scripture index.

The author has also written a much smaller book ("Church Discipline", also published by Crossway) which just deals with the practicalities of discipline, but it would be a mistake to miss out on this larger work.

REFLECTIONS ON THE ABOVE

I just want to underline some points that Iain mentions above which may be helpful to reflect on further and which have wider implications than simply the comparatively narrow issue of church discipline.

Firstly: Most problems we face are part of a larger picture We often get frustrated because:

- Christians don't see the need of church discipline
- Christians don't seem to mind that a believer is marrying an unbeliever
- Christians tell 'white lies' as readily as unbelievers
- Christians condone gay relationships

The bigger picture is a misunderstanding of love and how it functions and a misunderstanding of God and his holiness. In other words we need to deal with the larger picture in our preaching before we move on to the details of how it is worked out. A few years into my ministry I gave a paper on 'Church Membership' at the fraternal I then belonged to. I made the point that the first thing to do in helping a church sort out its position on church membership is to preach the gospel. It is only as you see a clear distinction between 'saved' and 'unsaved' that discussions about a saved church membership make any sense.

Secondly: The need to see our problems in their cultural context In some ways this relates to what I am talking about above although there are issues which distinctly relate to this. In the 1970s and 1980s many things were rediscovered by the church - some

were picked up from scripture and others from a return to reading the Puritans and Reformers. I am enthusiastic about the latter and wish I had read more widely in them but there was always a danger that went along with this. That is a romanticism that not only picks up the enduring absolute truths that they emphasized and had been rediscovered but of adopting form as well as substance. The result was that sermons increased greatly in length and were often very heavy and lacked illustration. That actually only indicated a narrow reading of the Puritans. John Owen may be heavy going but other writers such as Thomas Brooks are absolutely overflowing with illustrations and illustrative, lively language.

The problem with simply taking up Puritan practice in Church Discipline was that the cultural setting was dramatically different. In more traditional societies everyone is assumed to be primarily part of the community, with duties and privileges attached, and little value is given to personal autonomy. So to us biblical commands that a man must marry his brother's widow so his brother's name and line are not lost read very strangely - we naturally think of the right of both of them to love and freedom without coercion. A traditional society simply doesn't see it that way. In our society personal freedom and choice are simply taken for granted.

What do we do by way of response? We cannot just require that anyone wanting to move or get a new job must see the elders and get their direction before doing so. The answers I think are:

1. Teach about our mutual relationships and responsibilities as Christians We are 'members one of another', we have mutual responsibilities to love, to help one another in time of need because each one of us belongs to Jesus. So the personal autonomy we tend to assume is actually controlled by obligations and privileges which come through belonging to Jesus. The assumption that we belong to one another must become part of our spiritual DNA and must challenge the assumption of personal autonomy that comes as part of our cultural DNA.
2. Ask how these biblical principles are appropriately worked out in Western 21st Century Culture I remember Alan Tovey remarking that there seems to be little detail in the New Testament about what elders actually do. I think the answer to that is that in any culture there are assumed appropriate levels of authority for leaders to have. This does not mean there are no biblical mandates on the subject because Hebrews 13: 17 is clear, 'Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.' What it does mean is that the obedience given will cover different areas of detail in different cultural situations. I would personally be delighted if people in a church I pastored felt it to be normal to discuss a possible move or job change with me - that would be a big advance on our current cultural norm!