
PLANTING & WATERING (1 Corinthians 3:6)

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Dear Friends,

Fighting for Our Time

Having self- understanding about our work In God's goodness my life prior to entering the ministry included times when I had a day job and was studying at the same time. I say that was good because it gave me a helpful start in the ministry by training me to use my time effectively. Some ministers will say they don't have enough time – and in that there are always many more things we could legitimately and helpfully do that is true. However ministers have to know how to discipline themselves and to use their time efficiently and effectively so as to do what they need to do to serve God acceptably. In early ministry higher energy levels can carry you through but that won't last forever. You need to know yourself and adapt constantly to changing ministry situations.

How do we protect our time? This includes time we need for preparation of sermons and time for wider reading. If we don't give time to prepare ourselves by wider reading then our sermons will be duller to listen to and harder to prepare. Firstly, try to have a programme – most ministers have reasonably predictable routine and can build a pattern of study and reading. Try to ensure variety in your reading both regarding subject matter and the age of the material you read. A lesson we need to learn from contemporary authors like Tim Keller and John Piper, is to read deeply and extensively and often read older works. I've just been reading Tim Keller on Prayer (see below) and he frequently highlights lessons we can learn from Calvin, Owen and others. Secondly, remember little and often works well with reading. I always try to have a Spiritual Classic, sometimes older and sometimes newer, on the go and if I read nothing else will try and get through another chapter of that each day – the real classics can only be read slowly in any case. Thirdly, switch off the computer and the mobile phone and perhaps the house phone and graft – don't read blogs, don't read just popular books but work seriously and systematically through theological, biblical and pastoral subjects.

Start sermon preparation early in the week – it helps to work through the passage and then to give your thoughts time to mature while you do other things. When you get down to the labour of detailed preparation you will have given the information time to assimilate, get into proportion and you will have noted fresh illustrations. Often, after seeming stagnation, actually outlining and writing a sermon can be very quick when you finally get down to it.

Using odd moments David Meredith, in 'Unashamed Workman', which I have referred to before, says he regularly listens to sermons as he travels. I am currently listening to sermons he preached at the Proclamation Trust's 'Senior Ministers' Conference'. This can be really helpful and stimulating – and many organisations, including Proclamation Trust, make most of their material available free.

Making being spiritually minded our priority David Meredith says he regularly reads Matthew Henry and J C Ryle. Not because they are our best resources for in-depth study of the text's meaning but because they inhabit the world of heart religion and the spiritual application of truth. We need this at least as much as getting at the meaning of a text because you don't really understand a text until you can see how it applies. There are some authors we are simply the better for reading and absorbing their ethos – in a different way this is supremely true of John Newton.

Yours in the Lord,

Mike Plant

MIKE'S ITINERARY

August 2nd: Whitby Congregational am + pm
August 9th: Therfield am
August 16th and 23^r: Cannon Park am + pm
August 30th: Hemel Hempstead am + pm

September 13th: Woolwich am available pm London area
September 20th: Scarr pm preaching locally am
September 27th: Morley am

A VALUABLE INSIGHT

Spiritual Realities Experienced I appreciate Tim Keller's writings because he has the repeated power to surprise me. Many authors are predictable but Keller, I think because of his drawing deeply on writings from the past, often surprises me by what he

has to say. In his book on 'Prayer – Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God' he writes about John Owen's concern for our encounter with God:

The intense spiritual fixation of the mind, by contemplation on God in Christ, until the soul be as it were swallowed up in admiration

and delight, and being brought unto an utter loss, through the infiniteness of those excellencies which it doth admire and adore .. are things to be aimed at in prayer, and which, through the riches of divine condescension, are frequently enjoyed.'

The fears which Owen expresses are concerning the balance of truth and experience, or as he terms them 'light' and 'affections.' He writes:

Where light leaves the affections behind, it ends in formality and or atheism; where affections outrun light they sink into a bog of superstition, dotting on images and pictures or the like.'

Given these twin dangers on either side it is a surprise to read Keller's conclusions about Owen's thinking:

despite his deep concerns, in the end Owen concludes: 'It is better that our affections exceed our light from the defect of our understandings, than that our light exceed our affections from the corruption of our wills.' If we are going to be imbalanced, better that we be doctrinally weak and have vital prayer life and a real sense of God on the heart than that we get all our doctrine straight and be cold and spiritually hard.

Keller also quotes at length from Owen's treatise on 'Spiritual-Mindedness':

In your thoughts of Christ, be very careful that they are conceived and directed according to *the rule of the word*, lest you deceive your own souls, and give up the conduct of your affections unto vain imaginations ... [But] we are not to forego our duty [to contemplate Christ] because other men have been mistaken in theirs, nor part with practical, fundamental principles of religion because they have been abused by superstition ... Yet I must say that I had rather be among them who, in the actings of their love and affection unto Christ, do fall into some irregularities and excesses in the manner of expressing it ... than among those who, professing themselves to be Christians, do almost disavow their having any thoughts of or affection unto the person of Christ.

Clearly then for Owen and Keller, the most important issue is that we actually and really know God in Christ rather than simply knowing about him.

A relevant question The issue is important and has been a significant area of discussion and emphasis/de-emphasis in the last few decades of Evangelical life in the UK. One book which brings this out in a very helpful way is Eryl Davies' 'Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones and Evangelicals in Wales' which focuses on the Bala Ministers' Conference between 1955 and 2014. It sounds dull but captures wonderfully a period that has been very significant in evangelicalism in the UK. Some of the things it speaks of show the constant tension we all experience between matters that are extremely important and matters that are absolutely vital – or between matters

that are the very essence of our faith and those which contribute to its well-being. Something highlighted is the way in which the focus of the conference changed. One man commented, looking at a change of emphasis between the 1950s and the 60s and 70s:

In the 1950s, the major things were of importance in the Conference, namely, knowing and seeking God .. the church is important ... but not more important than our relationship with God .. we are not now seeking God as we were in the 1950s.

From the impact on people some of us have known this was evidently true. Hugh Morgan, a Presbyterian minister, records that after the 1959 conference he found he wanted to pray daily for hours rather than minutes. Derek Swann told me that in his early ministry he habitually prayed for hours – he didn't know what else he could do – that was the 'natural' outcome of their encounter with God.

However it would be unwise to assume that matters that are not absolutely part of the essence of true Christianity are unimportant. In the 1960s evangelicals in England and Wales could not avoid the questions concerning the nature of the church which were posed by ecumenism. Did these things get out of proportion? They did and I can remember the discomfort of the disapproval of some well-known ministers because I belonged to a group like EFCC. That matters are secondary simply means that they relate to important matters like the well-being of Christians and the church rather than to the essence of Christianity itself. In practice all of us regularly make decisions about secondary matters and to pretend we don't is naive and slightly dishonest.

In 1969 David Bentley-Taylor, a distinguished missionary speaker, was the main speaker on: 'Biblical Principles Relating to Church Founding and Expansion.' It is clear from his own reminiscences and from others present that there were tensions which Eryl Davies characterises as 'cultural, contextual and theological.' Davies is generally protective of the Conference but concedes that the impact of a very conservative grouping, consisting almost entirely of ministers of separatist convictions whose emphasis was very much on revival rather than evangelism was obviously considerable and that some of Bentley-Taylor's concerns were justified:

His critique is valuable, providing clues as to the danger of being 'mesmerised' by revival while tending to devalue the ordinary work of the Holy Spirit and neglecting evangelism. This tendency became more prominent in later years. One also detects a more defensive attitude creeping into the Conference by 1969 and a false dichotomy emerging for some between depending on God for revival and active involvement in evangelism.

In many ways the issue comes down to where we are seen to be failing, is it in terms of our relationship with God or is it in terms of our inability to relate meaningfully to the world we live in? Or is saying this suggesting a dichotomy that doesn't really exist?

Some tentative thoughts towards resolution I believe there are two matters we are to bear in mind

and the first is that knowing and loving God is primary and central to all true Christianity. However the second is that all thought is to be made subject to Christ for our task is to (2 Corinthians 10: 5), 'destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God and take every thought captive to obey Christ.'. There is no area of truth that does not belong to God and no part of biblical truth which is not profitable for the Christian and the church.

In the last half-century and more Christians and Conferences have focused on many areas and that is not wrong. It was very important and beneficial that Christians in the UK had to think through their doctrine of the church but it is also important that we love and respect all who belong to the Lord Jesus. Ultra-separatists may need to repent as well as overly complacent denominational Christians!

The Conference did seek to rebalance the emphasis on revival with a renewed emphasis on evangelism. Seeing the way the Lord brought many to faith, including those in theological college preparing for the ministry, during the 1950s it is strange that this emphasis had diminished but it had and in 1980 Paul Bassett 'delivered two passionate addresses on evangelism' which transformed at least one ministry.

Further on, in the 1980s, there was an emphasis, largely associated with the Proclamation Trust and the Evangelical Ministry Assembly on expository preaching which has also been of value. While in many respects Dr Lloyd-Jones, and in different circles John Stott, had led by example with expository preaching it was Dick Lucas' vision that actually took the task of teaching men how to expound scripture and developed it. The criticisms of the Proclamation Trust have generally been well responded to and this movement shows how important it is that we realize the temporary and passing nature of movements which emphasize secondary matters.

To emphasize a secondary issue is important and generally takes place because of an imbalance in the diet the church at large is receiving. So movements like the resurgence of Calvinism through the Banner of Truth Trust and the reinvigorating of expository preaching through the Proclamation Trust render a service to the church and then, because by their nature they are unbalanced, need integrating into church life to provide a balance. What we can never forget and must never forget is that the knowledge of God is not a secondary issue for the whole nature of our salvation is caught up in it. John 17: 3, 'And this is eternal life, that they may know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent'. Paul's heartfelt desire is the same. Philippians 3: 10ff.

that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. I press on upwards towards the goal of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

In the main things intensity is vital and in all other things charity is essential.

EVENING SERVICES – WHAT TO DO AND WHY WE DO IT

Recently a friend wrote to me:

I wondered if you could recommend what I could helpfully read on the following issue:

I have been tampering a little with the evening service. For a while I have felt that we need some time for some straight teaching on doctrinal matters or practical issues that face us (so, for example, I gave some teaching on elders, as we need to look for one or two new ones). We are lacking time to do this, and the obvious spot to place it in seems to be Sunday evening. However, this hits some issues I need to get more clear on:

1. If the Sunday evening is a service of worship, is this something distinct from other meetings? A fellow minister I respect has asserted that the worship service is distinct as God is gathering his people for worship, in a way which cannot be said of the mid-week Bible study or prayer meeting. I am not convinced of the distinction, but do not want to disregard it without proper consideration. (I realise that one could maintain this distinction but not insist that the Sunday evening consist of a service of worship. That is a different matter, and I need to get clear on the distinction above before making any practical moves.)
2. If the distinction between a service of worship and other meetings is correct, another distinction must be considered. Does such a service of worship require preaching at its centre, rather than a study of a topic such as "elders" (or of a passage related to this)? Is it only fitting with such a service of worship to have preaching which is affectional and clearly Christ-centred, or is it an appropriate act of worship to listen in submission to God's word, whatever subject that may be on or form it may take (e.g. more like the interactive teaching style which suits me)?

Could you recommend anything to help me with thinking this through? If the issues concerning me are not clear, please ask for further clarification.

[At this point I asked for clarification of the distinction between Sunday gatherings of God's people and other gatherings for spiritual purposes during the week]

He replied:

Thanks for taking the issue seriously.

In my phone conversation with my friend we ran out of time before fully pursuing the grounds for the distinction made.

Where we got to went something like this: when we meet for worship God is gathering us, just as God gathered the people at Sinai. This is something beyond what is happening

when the elders call the church together, for example for a prayer-meeting. We couldn't say a church was wrong if they were only called together for a prayer-meeting once a month, but we could if they only gathered for a service of worship once a month.

In case it helps you to understand where he is coming from, he was trained at Westminster.

Responses I emailed a number of friends and got two responses – I suspect that another one vanished into the ether and regret that. The first response rephrases and re-evaluates how we could approach some of the issues raised:

Well, "folks", I basically don't buy the idea that 'services' and 'meetings' are somehow different, not biblically anyway. It strikes me as an example of asking the wrong question, e.g. "Which is the better vegetable, an orange or a lemon?" However, I would be willing to be convinced if some-one could find a few Bible verses that demonstrate the difference between the 'service' and the 'meeting'.

But, I suspect that what we mean by 'service' is what we do on Sundays (plus maybe Good Fridays). What we mean by 'meeting' is anything else involving 2 or more people. So, to my mind, the probable distinction here is between the attitude that says:-

Meeting together on the Lord's Day with some kind of definition of the Sabbath, resurrection day, first day of the week in a Reformed/Pro-nomian/trad kind of way is commanded the Lord, and is the mandatory and blessed way to meet with the risen Christ by his Spirit.

(Alternatively) Meetings are just meetings, whatever the day, because we don't really believe in the Lord's Day/Sabbath because we are New Covenant/Antinomian (used non-pejoratively). We can do what we like, when we like, how we like, so long as it is edifying.

As is often the case, some clear and unambiguous definitions may be required;)

Then there is the little matter of the regulative principle...

The second response is more direct but also seeks to home in on the key issue:

The issue/question that needs to be resolved in your correspondent's mind is around the purpose use of the Lord's Day -

We touch here at the heart of the demise of the Lord's Day and also the demise of preaching in general and the worth of the Word of God.

Our people need the Word of God preached - and frankly 30 minutes on a Sunday morning is a woefully inadequate diet. So I preach twice on Sunday and midweek - from 3 different books - currently Isaiah, John and Revelation - and feel that the diet is still inadequate - the people are being fed worldly rubbish the rest of their 24/7 life.

I'm just not convinced of 'topic preaching' - if there is a need to teach on Elders - then why not preach through Titus?

Let's not abandon the Sunday evening sermon because it's the only time we have available to teach topical stuff - have a special meeting during the week?

I suggest your correspondent needs to read and clarify his thoughts on the use of the Lord's Day and the worth of preaching - other things will fall into place once these issues are settled for him.

My Response I think that my correspondent has a slightly different problem to the one many of us bring to mind. Many churches are simply struggling to maintain any sort of evening service on a Sunday and that is not his problem – his problem is a conscience problem and not a pragmatic problem. Although clearly there is a practical question about when to do teaching on eldership and some theological issues and I assume the midweek option has been considered and found wanting.

Firstly: Is the Issue the Lord's Day? While it is important to be clear on our understanding of the Lord's Day/Sabbath question and certainly I believe there is something significant in meeting on the first day of the week I am not sure this actually answers the question. A former missionary in Europe told me that because believers were scattered his church met in the morning for a traditional service, shared lunch and then had Bible classes and prayed – in total probably spending more time together on a Sunday than the churches he had served in the UK did, despite the fact they had two services! I would certainly argue they observed the Christian Sabbath!

Secondly: What is Appropriate for a Lord's Day Service/Meeting? I think the big question here is whether the Ministry of the Word must be 'affectional and Christ-centred' rather than a lecturing style or interactive. Another friend I consulted made a distinction between, 'preaching on behalf of Christ, and instructing, teaching, exhorting' and states that in preaching, '

I believe Christ is acting (2 Corinthians 5 ambassador etc.) ... Q155 (Westminster) Larger Catechism. 'The Spirit makes the preaching of the reading, *but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of enlightening ..*' (he contrasts this with their Sunday night practice) when I'm *teaching* on Sunday nights, I'm not acting as Christ's ambassador. I'm seeking to help people know Scripture, and grasp the truth; I still pray for the Spirit to open their minds, but I'm doing something different.

I think therefore the question is not the Lord's Day but between preaching as an ambassador of Christ and teaching/exhorting. The questions we then face are firstly: is the distinction valid? And then secondly: if it is then should we teach/exhort in a Lord's Day meeting/service? I hope to write more on this and to attempt to draw up a helpful reading list – suggestions gratefully received!