
PLANTING & WATERING (1 Corinthians 3:6)
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Dear Friends,

‘I NEED A HERO. OH NO, YOU DON’T!’

Recently I have been reading Josh Moody’s: ‘The God-Centred Life – Insights from Jonathan Edwards for Today.’ I confess the reason I am reading it is because it was in the reduced books sale at the Keswick Convention – I had noted its existence years ago but had previously stuck to my theory that we do too much reading of books about Jonathan Edwards/John Owen/C H Spurgeon when we would do ourselves more good by reading books by them. However, reading Josh’s book has been very helpful to me – I’ve not learnt much about Edwards that I didn’t know but he has been so helpful in applying what we learn from Edwards to the present day. In chapter 8: ‘Human Leaders Fail’ he makes a profound point about our approach to Edwards, and by extension to others we can be tempted to idolise and treat as heroes, whether ancient or modern! He writes:

We certainly should not be among those who delight in uncovering clay feet. Neither, however, are we to pretend that weaknesses do not exist, or be surprised when we find them. (he then quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer who is writing about principles for eradicating selfish ambition in (Christian) fellowship:

Jesus made authority in the fellowship dependent upon brotherly service (Mark 10: 43) ... Every cult of personality that emphasizes the distinguished qualities, virtues and talents of another person, even though these be of an altogether spiritual nature, is worldly and has no place in the Christian community; indeed, it poisons the Christian community ... Genuine authority realizes that it can exist only in the service of him who alone has authority ... The Church does not need brilliant personalities but faithful servants of Jesus and the brethren ... Pastoral authority can be attained only by the servant of Jesus who seeks no power of his own, who himself is a brother among brothers to the authority of the Word.

All human leaders fail. They fail morally and we should be sad but not surprised! They fail by not making a stand when they needed to do so and though personally their ministries may not be weakened the next generation end up seriously weakened and compromised by following them. They fail when they make a needed stand but allow harsh and divisive attitudes to separate them from those who equally belong to Christ. They fail because when we get up close to the reality of their pastoral situation we find that it isn’t quite as pristine and glowing as they paint it as being. They fail because they court controversy by being outspoken and then end up being disgraced. The point is that none of these things should throw us out, or damage us spiritually. They are things we should expect because if they were not so God would be sharing his glory with another – and that’s not going to happen. When we read 2 Corinthians 4: 7, ‘But we have this treasure (the glorious gospel) in jars of clays, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us’ we need to take on board that the point of us being jars of clay is that jars of clay are nothing special, they are not bone china, and that if they are broken or damaged it may be a disappointment but it is not an overwhelming tragedy. They are commonplace and we can easily manage without them.

We will all have ministers and mentors who have decisively shaped our thinking. Actually if what they said was true it is still true even though their own ministry may now be in tatters. We need to cultivate the attitude of a ‘critical friend’ even to those from whom we have learnt most. We accept what they say with love but we also do so with the conviction that our friendship should not blind us to their faults. Very often those who become evangelical idols not only have big gifts but they also have big and driving personalities. They naturally lead and drive things forward and do not find it easy to accept the counsel and guidance of others. Sometimes they will need the gentle admonition of trusted friends to help them accept it is possible they may be mistaken.

We do not need to be in despair because of our own limitations either. Occasionally God may choose to use brilliant personalities but what we must be is ‘faithful servants of Jesus and the brethren.’ That is enough of a challenge without believing in our heart of hearts that what is *really* needed is brilliance in gifts and personality on our part. If we grasp this then something which is precious and vital to our ministries will be possible to us: ‘Pastoral authority can be attained only by the servant of Jesus who seeks no power of his own, who himself is a brother among brothers to the authority of the Word.’ So much of our tetchiness and anxiety stems from a desire for recognition and following from others and to be a servant is a wonderful release for us. However limited we may be we all secretly aspire to a worldly greatness and that is our danger when true spiritual greatness would be to be like our master who was among us as ‘one who serves.’

Yours in the Lord,

Mike Plant

YOU AREN'T GOOD AT EVERYTHING!

Don't worry - you don't need to be!

A particularly obvious observation I have made in my years of ministry is that there is not actually time to do adequately all we are called to do. I may have phrased the basic roles or functions slightly differently – as preaching, visiting and evangelism - but generally I divided the task as Tim Keller does in his helpful book on preaching: 'Preaching: Communicating Faith in a Sceptical Age.' I have also been very aware that there is an ongoing temptation for ministers to focus on the functions that we are best at and therefore come easiest to us. Tim Keller adds a further, and very penetrating, observation:

A Christian minister has three basic roles or functions—preaching, pastoring/counselling, and leading. No one is equally gifted in all three areas, and yet we must do them all. ***The greatest factor in the long-term effectiveness of a Christian minister is how (or whether) the gift-deficient areas in his skill set are mitigated by the strong grace operations in his character.*** You may not have strong public-speaking gifts, but if you are godly, your wisdom and love and courage will make you an interesting speaker. You may not have strong pastoral or counselling gifts but if you are godly, your wisdom and love and courage will enable you to comfort and guide people. You may not have strong leadership gifts (e.g. you may be disorganised or cautious by nature) but if you are godly, your wisdom and love and courage will mean that people will respect and follow you.

What this means is that if we allow ourselves to drift spiritually and so don't face up to the hard work of preaching, pastoring and leading we will inevitably create long-term problems for ourselves and for those in the churches we serve. The spiritual challenge we face is twofold and we need to undertake to work hard in the areas of ministry which come hardest to us and also to so grown in godliness that those in the congregation will appreciate and benefit from our ministries even in the areas where we are naturally weakest.

In many ways the two challenges run into one another – it is godly to seek to develop our ministries with a view to benefitting others rather than merely being satisfying to ourselves and it is through developing godliness that we will make our ministries more comprehensively valuable. What I will now do is look at what we are to do:

FIRSTLY: THE NEED TO COMBAT OUR WEAKNESSES Clearly there are many aspects of an attraction to the ministry which are not spiritual in themselves. It is attractive to study God's truth, it is attractive (to some of us at least) to speak in public, it is attractive to have others look up to us and respect us for our office and the fact that we have mixed motivations is not in itself a sign that we are not called to the ministry by God – temptations such as

mixed motivations always threaten us every step of our way. Our call from God is the reason we must work hard and conscientiously to purify our motives and to serve God in the areas that don't suit us as well as those which do. A simple rule that I have tried to hold to is that if God calls me to do something then he will give me the abilities and grace to do it. So whatever our personality make up we believe that God made us like this and that includes with it that he will use my strengths in the ministry he has led me to and also give me grace to deal with my weaknesses:

- 1. Preacher or Pastor** It seems to me that the dichotomies between preaching, pastoring and planning are highly artificial. Preaching needs hard study but it also needs contact with people and a concern for and understanding of people. However we probably all have a bias either to study and need to drive ourselves out of the study to visit or we are prone to be constantly responding to people's needs and fail to discipline ourselves to reading that indirectly and directly feeds our preaching ministry.
- 2. Pastor or Planner** The same applies here – planners need time to step back and to think deeply and to analyse the situation they are in before finding a way forward and pastors tend to be with people and with unscripted, unplanned emergencies a great deal of the time. However the planner who doesn't engage with people does not properly understand the situation he is analysing and will not be able to motivate them to follow his way forward and the pastor who doesn't plan will work inefficiently because everything will depend on them and their personal engagement. Again we all have tendencies to be overly detached or so involved we don't have time to think.
- 3. Planner or Preacher** Again the obvious difference is that some of us love to read and study and want to develop a theological/biblical approach to what we do. Others are more pragmatic and restlessly seek a way forward for the gospel in their situation. Ivory tower existence where the sheep are well-fed and correct but never prompted to action is damaging but so is pragmatic, unthought-through activism – it just depends where you are and on your background and the church's background to determine which is your greatest danger. Both dangers can of course be fatal to churches!

What each of us needs to do is to be aware of the weaknesses we have – I suspect most of us, if we consider seriously the division of our tasks above, will find that we have one distinct strength, one lesser strength and one area of significant weakness. If we have gifts in all three areas we will be in danger of neglecting our weakest area because that is the hardest for us. So our first step is awareness and disciplining ourselves to work hard where we are weakest.

SECONDLY: THE NEED TO ACCEPT OUR

WEAKNESSES This may sound as if we are then not going to face and combat our weaknesses but I think there is an important spiritual point here. Many of us are perfectionists, or have a strong perfectionist trait, who feel we always have to do well and are driven by a need for the approval of others and so find it hard to admit and accept that there may be areas of our work we are not much good at. To effectively deny our weaknesses may feed our pride but it will not feed and protect the sheep.

One of the points that Paul is making in 2 Corinthians 4: 7, 'But we have this treasure (the glorious gospel) in jars of clays, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us' is surely that our frail humanity is chosen as a fit vehicle to transmit the gospel simply because that means that rightly glory will come to God and not us. Hence if the gospel triumphs in your ministry, despite your failings of temperament and talent, so much the greater glory to God! It is part of God's way of working that you have your current set of strengths and weaknesses and hence it should drive you to despair but strengthen your confidence in God that you are as you are.

So, humbly and realistically, we accept that we face ministry not only with God-given gifts but with God-allowed weaknesses and this should shape our attitudes:

1. **We are not self-sufficient** Only God in Christ is everything we need. We may be gifted and used by God but all we have comes from him and no-one has everything that he gives for the building up of the church. 1 Corinthians 12 makes it evident that the Spirit both empowers all gifts and apportions them as he wills (verse 11). So our sufficiency is always from God (2 Corinthians 3: 5) and never from ourselves. In ourselves we are limited in every respect – time, availability and gifting and we are sinful and even our service needs forgiveness and atonement.
2. **We need others and cannot manage without them** It follows from this that if the Spirit always gives gifts, 'for the common good' (1 Corinthians 12: 7) and controls who has what gifts (verse 11) that he has done so in such a way as to make us completely dependent not just on himself but on one another (verses 12 – 26). The point of this is that (verse 25), 'there is to be no division in the body, but the members may have the same care of one another.' All true church ministry is a team ministry because God designed it that way – we are dependent on others for the exercise of their gifts as they are dependent on us.
3. **Only God's grace will be sufficient for us** Tim Keller's point:

The greatest factor in the long-term effectiveness of a Christian minister is how (or whether) the gift-deficient areas in his skill set are mitigated by the strong grace operations in his character.

brought this home with fresh impact for me. What we are asking at one level is that the bonds of Christian love and fellowship between us and our congregations will be such that our deficiencies are covered over, or passed over by others because of the affection and respect that has been built up. On another level we are asking that godliness will mean that we are enabled to serve in those areas where our gifting is least significant and least strong. Keller highlights 'wisdom and love and courage' as the products of Godliness. So developing Godliness means we have self-understanding which means our preaching and pastoral counselling will be perceptive and thoughtful and will go to the heart. Godliness will enable us to love and care and bear with people where a natural impatience on our part would make us brusque and critical. Godliness will give us a fresh courage in taking things forward and a determination to overcome the disorganisation which prevents us providing effective pastoral leadership. These factors bring about relationships where we are both appreciated for what we are and protected from what we are not. While clearly this demands activity on our part it is an activity where our progress and its outcome rest with God alone.

One of the greatest dangers we have in our ministry is professionalism. We are first and foremost Christians before we are ministers and godliness is not something we seek when we have time but stems of our intense desire to know him. We seek godliness because we love God and want to walk with him and, in his grace, that actually adds to rather than subtracts from our ministry and service to God.

Below is a blog that John Stevens (FIEC) wrote following on from his holiday reading.

THE PREACHING WE NEED

Whilst on holiday in France last month I enjoyed reading about the emergence of Evangelicalism in the 18th Century. It seems to me that this is a highly relevant period for us in the UK today, as it marked a new explosion of gospel growth after the decline and stagnation that followed the failure of the Puritan experiment in both the UK and the nascent US.

There were a number of highly significant factors that contributed to the Great Awakening and the Evangelical Revivals on both sides of the Atlantic, but one was a fundamental change of emphasis in preaching and the objectives of ministry. The emergence of Evangelicalism was marked by:

- An overriding stress on the need for personal conversion through new birth by the Spirit
- A strong emphasis on the reality of Original Sin as the human condition
- An adoption of preaching that addressed and appealed to the affections

- A focus on the need for personal heart religion rather than mere formal adherence to doctrine or church ritual
- A crucial role for itinerant ministry that took the gospel to where people were
- A deliberate shift away from divisive secondary issues, such as sacraments and church order, towards a unity rooted in evangelical convictions and experience
- A objective of individual transformation by the gospel rather than the attempt to reform a whole society under God

It is somewhat ironic (though not surprising because it is the Biblical methodology) that Evangelicalism, with its more pietistic and individualistic emphasis on personal conversion and new birth, ultimately led to a more widespread and lasting social transformation into the 19th Century than had been achieved by previous Puritan attempts to establish a covenanted nation under God, not to mention a passionate commitment to world mission,

If we want to see increased gospel growth and the transformation of society today I suspect that we need to recapture some of these emphasises. In particular we need to make sure that we are preaching the gospel to the lost who need to hear it. Too often we make the mistake of simplistically equating “preaching” with “sermons”, and indeed use the language interchangeably. However the sermon is a form of discourse, generally a monologue, and in and of itself it can serve the function of “teaching” or “preaching.” Too often we confuse the form with the substance. There is a right and proper place for “teaching” the church, and it is an essential ministry. However the goal of “preaching” is more specifically to herald the good news of the gospel and to call sinners to repent and believe. The object of preaching is not primarily to “explain” the Bible so that people can understand it better, but to offer Christ and exhort people to put their faith and trust in him. We may well do this by expounding a particular passage of Scripture, but whether or not our method is “expository” in this sense the aim of “preaching” ought to be to confront sinners with the claims, call and comforts of Christ.

I was particularly struck reading this quote from Freeborn Garrettson (1752-1827), a leading Methodist itinerant preacher in Canada and New York State, reflecting on the work of more than half a century. For him the success of Methodism was down to the fact that it had proclaimed "the *essentials* of the gospel":

The design of preaching is to awaken sinners and to bring them to Christ; - to urge believers to the attainment of holiness of heart and life; - to show sinners the turpitude of their hearts and sinfulness of their practice, and to bring them to the foot of the cross, stripped of self and of all self dependence; - to press the old Methodistical doctrines of justification by faith; the direct evidence from God, through faith in the merits of Christ, of the forgiveness of sin; and the adoption into his family.

In other words the focus of preaching needs to be: conviction, conversion and assurance of salvation.

If we want to see a lost nation won for Christ we will need to preach like this, and we will need an army of spirit-empowered preachers who have a burden to preach the gospel. It is not just a matter of style, or a contrast between “lecturing” and “preaching”. Edwards and Whitefield were poles apart in their manner of sermon delivery, but both shared the same emphases in content and purpose

Bible “teaching” is vital for the growth to maturity of Christians in the church, but gospel “preaching” will be essential to the growth of the church. We have perhaps lost sight of the crucial importance of such preachers, who might more accurately be identified as “evangelists” (*Ephesians 4v11*), and of the need for them to engage in itinerant ministry to reach as many people as possible with the good news about the Lord Jesus.

We need to pray that the Lord would raise up many powerful preacher-evangelists, and that the church will encourage and enable them to use their gifts in the most effective way. This is surely what Jesus means by his prayer for workers for the harvest field in *Matthew 9v38*. If we want to see gospel growth and progress we need more than just Bible teachers – we need gospel preachers. We need to be Evangelicals rather than Puritans: Men of the 18th Century rather than the 17th.

Some Further Thoughts When I saw John’s article I thought how it would resonate with Bill Dyer and forwarded it to him. A question he raised is where the preaching we need is to be learnt? I wonder if preaching of this nature is ‘better caught than taught’ – do we need the Lord to raise up someone who can preach in this way in our time so that he will be a model for others? That certainly happens with ‘teaching’ ministries and is a principle that has wider application.

A weakness of the Evangelical movement from its very beginnings, and one which appears to be more concerning as time goes by is what John describes as:

A deliberate shift away from divisive secondary issues, such as sacraments and church order, towards a unity rooted in evangelical convictions and experience.

I applaud this and agree that it is vital and helpful to evangelicalism and yet still wonder how ‘secondary’ seems to mean ‘unimportant’ in practice.

MIKE’S ITINERARY

October 4th Peniel Green (Swansea) am + pm
10th 3pm Thorpe Edge Anniversary

11th Hemel Hempstead am + pm

17th EFCC Rally Birstall

November 1st Cockfield am Bury St Edmunds pm

15th Honiton am + pm

22nd Crystal Peaks (Sheffield) am + pm

Orange Street (London) am

I am available to preach a second service in the area if I am only listed for one service at a church.