
PLANTING & WATERING (1 Corinthians 3:6)

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Dear Friends,

UNDERSTANDING OUR WORK

I have recently been rereading Ecclesiastes which is by no means an easy book to interpret in its entirety. However, as is characteristic of Wisdom literature, there are often very illuminating searchlights on situations in which we find ourselves. One theme of meditation which suggested itself to me was the relationship between the theme of Ecclesiastes: 'Vanity of vanities! All is vanity' and human endeavour and labour. I specifically relate this to our own work in seeking to enable church growth and church consolidation. I think this is an important subject because we run the risk of being overwhelmed by reverses or, equally dangerously, over-elated by successes in the ministry.

Some observations to stimulate your meditation:

- 1. The Nature of Wise-Thinking** Absolute statements are made which are not necessarily fully accurate if taken as universal truths but which are thought-provoking in challenging our perspectives on life. Is it true that 'All is vanity'? The answer of course is 'no'! We are receiving (Hebrews 12: 28), 'a kingdom that cannot be shaken'. What however is meant is that all the human activities we engage in are touched with the qualities of fragility and being temporary that is associated with something being 'vanity'. This even applies to the work we do as ministers and church-leaders which relate to two realms – to the unshakeable kingdom so we can be (I Corinthians 15: 58), 'steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.' However in that it deals with human beings and with human institutions it is touched by fragility and is of a temporary and passing nature.
- 2. The Non-Vanity of Our Work** Because our work relates to the unshakeable kingdom there are aspects of it which will last. That is why in Psalm 90 Moses can pray (verses 16 + 17), 'Let your work be shown to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favour of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands.' I was talking with a Christian friend recently and she was saying how she looks back at the last few years and at the numbers of deaths of church members. However significant numbers of them were converted through the church's gospel outreach and will be permanently part of that unshakeable kingdom. In that aspect we can be confident and happy that our work is not in vain and that it will not simply vanish away.
- 3. The Vanity of Our Work** Of course the other side of that is that now those who have died are no longer with us and in that the church is lessened and in that it shares in the vanity and transitory nature of the present age. We may spend many years labouring in a particular church which is built up and blessed by God however the coming years may see that work disintegrate. There may be all sorts of reasons for this. Churches which were flourishing are in an area that experiences depopulation – travelling in the Scottish Highlands I have come across many handsome church buildings whose current congregation is a feeble shadow of what it was in the past. Unwise or unfaithful leadership in a church means that a once strong congregation scatters and although other churches may be strengthened the one that remains dwindles away. Sometimes a charismatic and richly blessed ministry is followed by another that is faithful but which simply cannot hold the congregation together. The result is the same and can leave us perplexed and even embittered by the changes we see. The truth is we need to take it to heart that we must sing, 'change and decay in all around I see' if we are also to appreciate, 'O thou who changest not, abide with me.'

To see things from a biblical perspective is liberating for us. If we were not dealing with the 'unshakeable kingdom' we would have to see all our work as 'vanity' and as ephemeral and passing-away. That would mean that our life and work would be robbed of eternal significance and would simply be the means by which we occupy ourselves and feed our family. The fact that God may be served in all our vocations and so all work has an eternal significance was a rediscovery of the Reformation and so for all Christians life is not meaningless and passing.

However we are passing through, 'this vain world' and that is also a liberating truth for us. People are converted but their jobs move them away from our church. We may achieve much in the way of building God's unshakeable kingdom but that doesn't mean that our particular church is built up. One of the salutary lessons of the Reformation is to read of the Reformation's history in France where a strong Protestant church was rapidly established but was soon virtually exterminated by persecution. We can continue to be heartened by the progress of the 'unshakeable kingdom' while lamenting the failure to establish the institutions and local churches we love.

Yours in the Lord,

Mike Plant

EVENING SERVICES – WHAT TO DO AND WHY WE DO IT

We started on this subject in P & W 74 and then I got waylaid on other issues in the last issue. There are actually a number of questions we need to look at. Is there a distinction between preaching and other word ministries? Is there a mandate as to what word ministry needs to take place on the Lord's Day and are there permissible variations concerning the ministry of the word which might take place if there is more than one service? The second question strikes me as the easier of the two

THE DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN WORD MINISTRIES Tim Keller quotes Edmund Clowney on the first question:

It is true every Christian must handle the word of God with reverence, and seek the help of the Spirit to make it known to others. Yet there are also those with special gifts of the Spirit for preaching ... of the word of God (with) a special charge to tend and feed the flock of God (1 Peter 5: 2). There is some danger that, in reacting against clericalism, the church may forget the importance of the ministry of the word of God by those called to be under-shepherds of the flock.

Keller then continues:

While we will always require a host of varied forms of Word ministry, the specific public ministry of preaching is irreplaceable. (Peter) Adam strikes the balance nicely when he says that a church's gospel ministry should be 'pulpit-centred, but not pulpit-restricted.'

The other ministries of the word that we are to be aware of are, firstly, the ministry committed to all Christians. Colossians 3: 16, 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.' Keller writes:

Every Christian should be able to give both teaching (... instruction) ... and admonition (... strong, life-changing counsel) that convey to others the teaching of the Bible. This must be done carefully, even though it usually informally in conversations that are usually one on one.

Secondly, and this is fresh to me and I find it very helpful, Keller points us to 1 Peter 4: 10 + 11:

As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, one who speaks oracles (the very words of) God: whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

He points out that the word, *lalein* can mean ordinary daily speech but is also referred on occasions to preaching ministry. In view of the fact that the categorisation of gifts in the text is very broad he

suggests that there is reference to a variety of 'word ministries'. He quotes Peter Davids' commentary on 1 Peter:

(Peter is) not referring to casual talk among Christians, nor referring only to the actions of (pastors) or other church officials (but rather to) Christians with 'one of these verbal gifts' of counselling, instructing, teaching, or evangelising. In this category of ministry, Christian men and women aren't preaching *per se*; they prepare and present lessons and talks; they lead discussions in which they are presenting the Word of Christ.

The point being made is that when Christians teach the Bible their speech should be as 'the oracles/very words of God' – the claim is that Christians who are presenting biblical teaching are not simply giving others their own opinion but that through them 'listeners will be able to hear God speaking to them in the exposition'. I think this perspective on word ministry, which I believe to be biblical and wise, will help us in addressing the question as to what type of word ministry may be appropriate in a Sunday service.

WHAT WE SHOULD DO DURING LORD'S DAY SERVICES I am going to proceed by assuming the correctness of what I have said above about the different categories of word ministries. It is not that we do not have confidence in preaching but that we do not think that preaching can, or was ever intended to, bear the whole burden which word ministry needs to bear. There will always be a need for 'every member' word ministry and there will always be a need for the intermediate type of word ministries which are not preaching but which embrace formal, semi-formal and downright informal teaching situations.

What doesn't really matter Whether we have one or more than one Lord's Day service seems to me to be irrelevant to what sort of word ministry may be appropriate. If it is appropriate at all it must be appropriate for all. That is not to argue that a more formal preaching style should not be a regular part of Lord's Day worship.

Additionally we must beware of making our definition of 'preaching' something which purely reflects the particular social situation in which God's word is proclaimed. If we talk of preaching as standing up to declare God's word to the seated congregation we run into a problem with both the bible and church history. Jesus 'sat down' to preach the Sermon on the Mount and the parables of Matthew 13. The church fathers sat to preach to a standing congregation. We may feel that powerful preaching demands we stand and can be demonstrative but Jesus, Augustine, Chrysostom and many others refute that by their example.

The same point applies to power-point, handouts and verbal interaction with the congregation. If we simply assume the existence of any of these rules out true preaching we are making a sociological rule which defines preaching rather than adhering to a biblical rule. It is certainly notable that much of Jesus' teaching of his disciples, and others, is the result of

initial teaching which is then questioned and followed up with further teaching to elucidate and confirm what has already been said.

What may matter This is really a response to what I think may lie behind the question. It could mean we rephrase the question as: 'Is it OK to move from warm, affection-moving, Christ-centred 'preaching' because subjects such as eldership/church discipline etc demand a more conceptual information-loaded format?' We could also rephrase it as, 'Can I lecture rather than preach?' Preaching could of course touch on the same subjects but in a different way!

All preaching/teaching has its place on a spectrum. So elements will vary in the prominence they are given:

1. The amount of information conveyed Some sermons major on conveying fresh information but others on applying and eliciting a right response to previous known information. In the latter case there is less 'teaching and informing' and more 'exhortation'. However it is also true that those subjects such as the cross, which we might regard as primarily affectional, are actually subjects which are massively doctrinally thought through and explained in the New Testament and so to be faithful to Scripture we would need to be strongly informational in our handling of them.
2. The degree to which affections are raised It might be assumed that a subject such as 'church discipline' is primary informational in its nature because congregations seem downright ignorant about it. I think this is a serious mistake because reluctance to discipline is most often linked to wrong affections although ignorance may compound this. A church's refusal to discipline may relate to family loyalties, sentimentality over a sinful act or choice or simply antagonism to sticking out one's neck! The only motivations which will keep a church faithful in administering discipline are loyalty to Christ which is stronger than the loyalty we have to family and friends. This will not come apart from a grateful regard for his name and glory and these things may be seen as matters about affection rather than information.

The point I am seeking to make is that due to the nature of Christian truth the attempt to separate off a subject as though it can be thought of only in terms of thought or feeling or action is artificial and must in some ways lead to a distortion of the subject matter. So we might decide that certain subjects demand a more 'lecturing' approach but that must not blind us to the fact that other facets of that subject might be primarily affectional rather than theoretical.

I would suggest that if one week we feel that the subject matter demands a largely information based approach then the following weeks should cover in an appropriate way those aspects of the subject which cannot be covered by such an approach.

What follows from this We need to note some definite certainties:

1. All ministries of the word have authority not because of who is carrying them out or the style with which they are carried out but because they are ministries of the word.
2. In that other 'ministries of the word' than formal preaching are helpful and necessary there is no reason why these methods could not be used in a Lord's Day service.
3. It would be a mistake to relegate 'formal preaching' amongst the various ministries of God's word that are legitimate. While it may not be our particular danger, authoritative powerful preaching which relates every subject to Christ and the centrality of the gospel is endangered in the wider church community and must not be abandoned.

With these things in mind I cannot see how varying our approach and the style of our word ministry can be wrong provided we note that God's truth is for us in our entirety and therefore its impact on our feelings and obedience will be lessened by too great an emphasis on only one aspect of its impact on us. Word ministry which aims too much at the mind, the feelings or the will, by its nature will imbalance the nature of our Christian faith.

Following the marathon of thinking through and writing this article I forwarded it in draft to the person who originally raised the question. He replied and helpfully summarised what I was driving at – he wrote:

Maybe a large part of the answer is actually in two quite familiar pieces of advice on preaching:

- a) Preach Bible truths in the Bible's proportions and with the Bible's tone. This tone will sometimes be warmly wondering at Christ's love, sometimes be sternly warning against sin. If we don't see this range of tones, David Cook warned at a recent EMA, we tend to judge 'reaching the heart' in a way that reflects our different temperaments.
- b) Exegete the passage and the congregation. So, while there isn't a rule that we shouldn't preach certain passages on a Sunday morning (and) they must be left to mid-week, we must know what the greatest needs are of those we preach to and preach, accordingly.

A PROFOUND QUESTION FOR ALL PREACHERS TO FACE

Recently I read Zack Eswine's 'Sensing Jesus – Life and Ministry as a Human Being' and found myself gripped. The test of whether a writer has real insight is if I find myself gripped by the thought the writer has seen something so obviously true that once I have seen it I cannot see the subject any other way. This meant that when I saw a very cheap offer for his book: 'Preaching to a Post-Everything World' I

overcame my instinctive loathing of the title and bought it. At the moment I am partway through it but what I want to share is his opening that asks such a breath-takingly obvious but profound question that I am frustrated that I haven't asked it myself.

I will simply quote Eswine at length and then offer some further thoughts:

When what a preacher longs for (his aspirations and dreams - MP) makes contact with what actually is, a transition awaits. ...

I was the child of a single mother in a low-income apartment complex. I had little biblical context. I smoked cigarettes as a five-year old while playing with the older kids. I think sometimes our playing together was like parenting one another. I am the stepson of two stepmothers (one of whom is a friend and mom to me) and two stepfathers (one of whom is with our Lord). I am the brother of four dear half-sisters (one of whom is with our Lord) and three stepbrothers I rarely see. My family tried to love one another, but we often broke one another with various forms of active abuse, passive neglect, or earnest attempts to love that didn't accomplish what we hoped.

That was then. The grace of God has long since met my family in the deep places. I am a Christian, a pastor, a seminary professor. And I have been asking myself this question: **COULD I NOW REACH WHO I ONCE WAS?** Asking this question exposes one to ... discomfort.

John Piper writes that it is sentences not books that change people and if any sentence should impact and change pastors this one should: 'Could I now reach who I once was?' is a question that should haunt us.

There are two parts to this – firstly what happens when vision hits reality and secondly whether those of us who preach have now lost touch with the realities of preaching the gospel to the type of person we used to be. So we will look at these in turn:

FIRSTLY: WHEN VISION HITS REALITY This is a problem particularly for those who study in an academic environment which is to some extent sealed off from the rest of the world but it can also affect those whose study is not thoroughly integrated with real-world of church life and flesh and blood people. Personally I am grateful for many of the ways in which the Lord has led me which have protected me from the dangers of over-bookishness and of being over-theoretical. Exposure to a church in a tough working-class area as a student, three years of social work and three years working in a garage as a transport clerk post-Bible College did a tremendous amount to make me keen to bridge the gap between the academic world of study and the world of pastoral care and needs which all ministers will find that they inhabit after they leave Bible College.

It is not just the world around us that inflicts reality on our dreams and visions, the real-life church itself also does so. People simply don't see what is absolutely clear to us – this may be in realms such as

the interpretation of prophecy but more worryingly might also be in the areas of the need for and the duty of church discipline. As this duty rests on a realization of the true nature of Christian love and the responsibilities that Christians have to one another it becomes evident that many Christians are seriously askew in their thinking and at spiritual risk. A short period of pastoral life will tell us that rather than the secular thinking of the society around us having invaded the church it appears never to have been expelled in the first place.

This is a major reason why church leaders need to be aware of the culture we live within. It is not just non-Christians who are controlled by the culture but many Christians may have experienced salvation but have never replaced their previous secularised world view with a biblically reshaped Christian World View. In our preaching we should be consciously challenging ways and patterns of thought which exist because every thought has not yet been taken captive to Christ.

SECOND: PREACHING THE GOSPEL TO THE TYPE OF PERSON WE USED TO BE In some respects this narrows the bigger question we need to ask. We need to ask if we are preaching so as to reach the people we are preaching to. If you are in a missionary situation abroad or preaching the gospel as an ex-bookish nerd in a strongly working-class area the need is not to reach the kind of person you once were but an entirely different kind of person. However some issues are focused by asking: 'Could I now reach who I once was?'

1. **Understandable Language** Since I have been a Christian, let alone since I have been to Bible College, I have picked up a whole new vocabulary. Such terminology is essential if we are to communicate quickly to our in-group but dangerous if we assume it communicates accurately to those outside. My wife Margaret once did a Bible-Study with two local unsaved women – what they understood by Jesus healing a paralytic was totally different to what she understood (for those unaware paralytic in Middlesbrough means dead drunk).
2. **Connecting with Concerns** What do those hearing us actually bother about? What concerns and questions do they have which our preaching must 'hook into' so that we actually connect with them? The danger of academic training is that it may give us a new set of dialogue partners so we end up looking at a passage with the questions a college lecturer might have. While we need to be aware of that world the bigger question is what questions do the congregation I preach to have? Once we know this we can work on carrying out the Holy Spirit's purposes in preaching this passage to this congregation.

During December/January I am preaching at St Stephen's (Free Church of England) on the mornings of 20th and 27th December and will doubtless be preaching in Middlesbrough at other times.

