
PLANTING & WATERING (1 Corinthians 3:6)

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Dear Friends,

WHAT NOW HAPPENS TO PLANTING & WATERING?

When will we know? Since hearing of my plans to return to a pastorate I've received emails and had conversations which have raised the question of what happens to 'Planting & Watering'? The truth is that EFCC's planning in the matter does not go that far ahead as yet. So far I have provisionally (awaits committee ratification) agreed to keep the publication of P & W going to the end of 2016 to preserve continuity. I anticipate that we will discuss the matter at the EFCC Committee Meeting on 17th and 18th October and I am very open to whatever may be decided. Obviously if EFCC are in the process of appointing a new General Secretary, or hope to do so in the near future, that will have a decisive impact as a new General Secretary will need to put their own stamp on what is done.

My own thoughts about producing P & W It has been a tremendous privilege to do this and to do the majority of the writing for it over the last thirteen years. I have always found it vital to read and think about pastoral ministry and preaching and often felt the need for a forum for discussions and the sharing and assessing of discoveries. In that a number of people in EFCC have contacted me in response to things I have written, sometimes by way of disagreement and sometimes to continue a discussion, then it has been a success and has stimulated discussion and thought in a way I think is helpful. I think too using folk who have preached through Bible books to give their thoughts on the best ways of approaching that book and also to recommend commentaries which they have found helpful as preachers has been a good thing.

It has been really great when people have raised questions for discussion about issues that we all face. What do you do when evening service attendance has declined alarmingly? We all need to think matters through and while being practical is fine if we are not firstly principled in our thinking and actions we are likely to raise long-term problems for ourselves and others.

Regrets about P & W It is not to do with popularity or lack of popularity Some people responded to it and others didn't – we would all like a 100% approval rating but in real life I have found it is necessary to manage without it so that is not my problem. The focus for my regrets is a failure to achieve some of the goals that I had for P & W and for the closely linked theological forum which is now totally inactive. My assessment of EFCC is that while there are many good things about the fellowship, notably the commitment to the evangelical faith and the gospel and the spiritual warmth, there are also some areas which I think should seriously concern us and I am regretful that I didn't make more progress in tackling them. That we are not a theologically perceptive and thoughtful grouping and we are not operating from strong theological roots are very obvious concerns which we need to address.

A serious concern I think the lack of theological roots amongst us is disconcerting, dangerous and baffling. It is partly explained because the immediate theological background of EFCC in the final years of the Congregational Union of England and Wales was a battle with arrogant liberalism. In the United States there was a strong Fundamentalist reaction to Liberalism across the denominations and that has led some unhelpful outcomes – for example Pre-Millennial Dispensationalism being a litmus test for Biblical faithfulness. However with the influence of Gresham Machen and the emergence of Westminster Theological Seminary there was also a reformed and paedobaptist element within the conservative theological groupings opposed to Liberalism. In the UK this reformed element was very small, which meant that for many evangelical convictions and baptistic convictions were seen as inevitable soul-mates. This also meant that Arminianism was a frequently assumed truth amongst those opposed to Liberalism and in CUEW amongst those opposed to the United Reformed Church. I think this rather overstates it but in its earliest years it could be argued that EFCC was predominantly baptistic, arminian and very often charismatic. I am not wishing to outlaw or to marginalise those with these convictions in EFCC but rather to say that their presence could have challenged and helped an EFCC which was centrally strong and clear in its convictions but that we were not such a body.

Not without hopeful signs but these have not really come to anything It is evident to anyone who has been around during the years EFCC has been in existence, and I have been around for most of the time, that EFCC has been strengthened by many strong biblical ministries which have gone back beyond the latter day Liberalism of the CUEW and have tapped into the theology and convictions of conservative, reformed Congregationalists of the 17th, 18th and 19th Centuries – that has been great and it encourages me. I think it is probably also true that many of those ministers have thought deeply and seriously about church life and practice as it needs to be in the 21st Century. This is needed for two reasons – firstly, we always need to be reforming by scripture – the Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries generally give insufficient weight to the Great Commission – and secondly, times change and

we face new problems and questions. However what we have failed to do is to engage with one another in discussion and to think theologically and creatively together.

My intense desire was, and still is, to see a fellowship which is active and loving, passionate and committed, but also thoughtful and creative. I believe the Congregational Way is something that should be active and developing and I lament that I have not seen much progress in this because that makes us a group who are likely to just drift with the trends in wider evangelicalism and who do not have the strong theological roots to evaluate what is going on around them. That makes us vulnerable and likely to be ephemeral and I greatly regret that.

Not Despairing Please don't assume I am looking back at years of work I believe to be wasted. I am not but I think we need to flag up from time to time that our current situation is nothing to be complacent about. Activism and passion may achieve much of good but if not informed by godly and biblical thinking may create or accentuate trends which will be damaging to the churches in the long term. A case in point is the influence of the evangelical awakening which minimised church distinctives and has left a decidedly mixed inheritance for our generation. Short term gains in evangelism may in the long-term be undone by the weakness of churches which have come to embrace a lowest common denominator evangelicalism and don't understand their own identity.

This is not an attack on evangelical unity and co-operation but simply an observation that evangelical unity works best for those who know where they themselves stand. The Free Church of Scotland and the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) are committed to evangelical unity but their own ecclesiastical and doctrinal position is clear – the same really needs to be true of us.

Yours in the Lord,

Mike Plant

THOUGHTS ON GUIDANCE

(A good friend in the States, Bill Brandon who used to be the WECF Treasurer, sent me this from a letter of Chuck Swindoll's – he had just heard that I had accepted a call to Honiton and wanted to encourage me by sharing something he found perceptive and helpful on the subject of guidance.)

HOW DO YOU KNOW IF GOD IS MOVING YOU TO MAKE A MOVE? I've thought about that a lot lately. I'll tell you why in a moment, but for now, think about it . . . How do you know if the Lord is leading you to make a significant transition?

After many years, I've discovered five practical indicators that can help us recognize God's leading:

1. You have an increasing uneasiness with your current situation. Most likely, this will come in little hints . . . passing thoughts . . . a gnawing restlessness that won't leave you alone. That's first.
2. You have a growing curiosity regarding a new challenge. It's strange, but your willingness to follow God is stronger than your fear of change.
3. You develop a decreasing attachment to creature comforts and tangible securities. I've discovered that people who are truly following God's lead have won the battle over materialism. Money isn't as important as the desire to obey God.
4. You cultivate an increasing desire to obey the Lord at all costs—even when you can't explain it. Truth be told, I have made moves that made little sense. But looking back, it's clear that God initiated the change . . . though it defied logic.

5. Finally, you have an inability to turn off the thoughts. When God is moving you, He won't let your mind rest. The thought hits you when you awaken—sometimes, several times during the night. It stays with you throughout the day, buzzes in your brain as you lie down at night. It comes to mind when you pray, read the Scriptures, and go to church. You can't escape it.

I don't agree with everything that Chuck Swindoll says here but I was very struck by some of his observations. The first and third points particularly struck deep with me as they seem to be matters that have been very much in my thoughts regarding my own recent move.

Firstly: uneasiness with our current situation

I was very aware of this when I moved from the pastorate at Cannon Park and became General Secretary. The work was flourishing at the time I left but, try as I might, I could not get rid of a sense of unsettlement. I remember Alan Tovey commenting to me in a discussion I had with him a few years earlier that sometimes God sends experiences which unsettle us because we need them to enable us to move. He used the illustration, which has stuck with me, of the way the roots of a tree need to be loosened before it can be removed from the ground.

Before anyone makes a rash and hasty decision and moves from one ministry to another it may be helpful to point out that I had often felt unsettled during a 21 year ministry but always found it took little by the way of encouragement to enable me to settle down again. So – do take notice if you feel unsettled but give the sense of uneasiness time to disappear or to really establish itself as a settled condition before you actually do anything. The process of events and thinking which are bringing me back into pastoral ministry have actually taken place over a period of

perhaps five years. It had certainly taken so long that I had actually begun to believe that the door back into pastoral ministry was one that the Lord had simply determined that he would not open.

Secondly: Points three and four seem to coincide with my experience There is absolutely no doubt that as we get older a need for security, to establish a viable pension fund, and to minimise financial concerns can predominate in our thinking. Gareth Crossley planted a number of churches and would simply use the offerings of the Lord's people to finance him in doing so. I remember in an article he wrote he recorded very honestly how this kind of 'living by faith' became increasingly difficult for him as he got older. We all have a need of 'tangible securities.' However if we are set on honouring the Lord and doing what he wants us to do then at a point we will simply have to accept that our earthly securities are never actually genuinely secure and that seeking God's kingdom means that we are investing our time in what will never pass away.

In saying this I appreciate that many folk serving the Lord do so with a level of sacrifice that puts me to shame – I am simply admitting that battles have to be fought at all levels and in areas where we might not previously have suspected a weakness as God moves us to do his will. My normal experience in seeking God's will is that when we are finally clear what it is then there seems to be almost an inevitability about following it. We don't seem so much to be making a decision as walking through a door opened to us.

Review Article: Timothy Keller 'Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Scepticism'

Anticipating Objections Following the WECF Triennial Meetings in February, Margaret and I holidayed in New York. One of the things I wanted to do was to attend the Church of the Redeemer at which Tim Keller is the Minister. I have read several of his books, heard him preach at conferences and have downloaded sermons from his church and was keen to see how his thinking worked out in practice. (Incidentally for those who are marvelling at my naivety in being impressed by his ministry, I have read the critique, 'Engaging with Keller' edited by Iain D Campbell and William M Schweitzer and am aware of criticisms levelled at his ministry – I don't have time or space to respond but it has not decreased my respect for his ministry although I respect some of the thoughtful, constructive and irenic contributions to the book).

Both Margaret and I were thrilled with the church situations, the ministry reaches out to many young professional people who typically will be working in New York for several years and the preaching was excellent in the morning when we heard Tim Keller and in the evening when we heard David Plant (not our David Plant another one!). What struck us most about the services was how very conservative and traditional they were, although they were full of spiritual life. There were read prayers, we shared in a liturgy together and even said the Nicene Creed

together. My reaction to reading Tim Keller's book 'Preaching' is almost the same – what is said and done is apparently traditional, but fresh and full of spiritual life.

What Category of Book is 'Preaching'? It is definitely a refresher for those long-term in the ministry and an inspirer for those commencing ministry. Tim Keller writes:-

This book is far from being a complete textbook on preaching. You will have noticed that I've spent most of my time on *why* a certain kind of preaching is needed and *what* that preaching looks like in principle and in example but relatively little time on *how* to prepare a good sermon. A manifesto, not a manual, as I told myself many times in the writing of this book.

However he does provide a 28 page appendix on: 'Writing an Expository Message' which in a small way compensates. However in the refresher/inspirer category this is one of the best books I have ever read on preaching.

The Programme of the Book His prologue is on 'What is Good Preaching?' and towards the end of it he summarises his conclusions and sets out his programme for the book:

As we preach, we are to serve and love the truth of God's Word and also to serve and love the people before us. We serve the Word by preaching the text clearly and preaching the gospel every time. We reach the people by preaching to the culture and to the heart.

Then there is what God must do. He brings the Word home to our hearers through the 'demonstration of the Spirit and of power' (1 Corinthians 2: 4). According to Paul you can preach with genuine spiritual power only if you offer Christ as a living reality to be encountered and embraced by those who listen. This means to preach with awe and wonder at the greatness of what we have in Christ. It means to exhibit an uncontrived transparency, showing evidence of a heart that is being mended by the very truth you are presenting. It entails a kind of poise and authority rather than an insecure desire to please or perform. So your love, joy peace, and wisdom must be evident as you speak. You should be something like a clear glass through which people can see a gospel-changed soul in such a way that they want it too, and so that they get a sense of God's presence as well.

If you are not thinking 'Who is sufficient for these things?' then you've missed the point.

Part One: Serving the Word Keller argues in favour of (mainly) expository preaching because this best expresses the 'insights, directives and teachings' of the Scriptures. This 'is the best method for displaying and conveying your conviction that the whole Bible is true' and also sets the church's agenda and ours according to God's priorities.

I found his section on 'Dangers to Avoid' very helpful and would suggest anyone committed almost exclusively to preaching long series from single Bible books would do well to at least consider his thoughts on the impacts of the hugely increasing geographical mobility of our society.

The second chapter of Part One is on 'Preaching the Gospel Every Time'. If you want to consider the issues that he is concerned about in detail I recommend reading the chapter and then reading Sinclair Ferguson's 'The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism and Gospel Assurance' to which Tim Keller provided the foreword. In summary there are two opposite dangers that face those hearing the gospel – legalism and antinomianism. Sinclair Ferguson is quoted:

legalism is at root the manifestation of a restricted heart disposition towards God, viewing him through a lens ... that obscures ... (his) holy love. This is a fatal sickness ... This same view of God ... lies at the heart of antinomianism.

He also quotes Sinclair Ferguson in spelling out the remedy which in both cases is the gospel:

(which) is designed to deliver us from this lie (of the serpent), for it reveals that behind and manifested in the coming of Christ and his death for us is the love of a Father who gives us everything he has: first his Son to die for us, and then his Spirit to live within us ... There is only one cure for legalism. It is the same medicine the gospel prescribes for antinomianism: understanding and tasting union with Jesus Christ himself. This leads to a new love for and obedience to the law of God.

The third chapter of Part One is on 'Preaching Christ from All of Scripture' which is something I find a continual challenge. I am very conscious that my OT preaching in particular may fail to relate the passage I am engaged with to the gospel and the central message of Scripture. Tim Keller surveys the ways we should use every genre of Scripture, every theme, every major figure, every major image and every deliverance story line. Obviously other books deal with this subject in a more fully, he recommends Alec Motyer: 'Look to the Rock', Ray Dillard and Tremper Longman: 'An Introduction to the Old Testament' and Ed Clowney: 'The Unfolding Mystery' as introductions to the subject. However he develops examples from Jonah and the way the story is used, overtly and non-overtly, in the NT and also from the horrible tale of the Levite's concubine in Judges 19 – 21 which are enlightening and thought-provoking.

Part Two: Reaching the People It is the areas he covers concerning 'Preaching Christ to the Culture', 'Preaching to the (Late) Modern Mind' and 'Preaching to the Heart' that which I think helped me most reading this book. This simply because I don't think I am very good at it. His major point is that our adapting/contextualising is 'in order to confront' – we want to be understood in the ways in which we must challenge the pre-understanding of our hearers. Some of the basics here are unexpectedly challenging

– for example we must: 'Use Accessible or Well-Explained Vocabulary' - the examples he gives of evangelical, sub-cultural jargon are – 'lukewarm', 'spiritual warfare', 'backsliding', 'seeing fruit', 'opening doors', 'walking with the Lord' and 'blessing'. It made me wonder how much I say is in code to outsiders and so alienates them. His section on using respected authorities to quote daunts me – I do not read as widely as he does. He is very sharp in understanding and responding to the real doubts and objections of those who hear him and in that way his messages are great to lend to secular friends. There is a very helpful section in the second chapter of this section which takes up core beliefs of our society and challenges them. Many values of modern society – such as a belief in progress, a desire for freedom, the need for justice and the worth of the individual - are in fact derived from Christianity but in a way that makes ultimate something other than the Creator. So we appreciate these values, challenge them and offer the gospel where these values fail to deliver.

Part Three: In Demonstration of the Spirit and Power It is very significant for understanding Keller that the final two chapters of the book are on 'Preaching Christ to the Heart' and 'Preaching and the Spirit'. He is very helpful in the way in which he talks about illustrations, which is done using the example of Jonathan Edwards:

Most people know they are going to die, but it is only when they have an actual physical brush with death that their mortality becomes real to them and influences how they live their daily lives. For Edwards preaching is an 'attempt to construct a verbal correlative to such a brush.' A sermon is a place to wake people up to the realities they have assented to with the mind but have not grasped with the heart. The way to do so is to connect a spiritual truth to a memory of a vivid sense experience the listener has had, 'representing to the spiritual in concrete language implying an almost physical tangibility.'

This sounds abstract but the example he gives is that in a sermon Edwards says that 'all your righteousness would have no influence to ... keep you out of hell' and illustrates with '(any more) than a spider's web would have to stop a falling rock.' The great point in preaching is that we do it to real people and we must have them in mind as we prepare and preach.

He summarises what it will mean to preach with the Spirit and from the heart. We will preach powerfully, wondrously (with awe in our hearts towards God), affectionately (transparently exhibiting we benefit from our own medicine), authentically and adoringly. This overwhelms us but paradoxically this comes about only as his power is made known in our real and experienced weakness.

MIKE'S ITINERARY

My itinerary is very straightforward – I preach on the 7th and 14th August am + pm at Cannon Park and from 4th September I will be preaching as Pastor at Honiton Evangelical Congregational Church.

