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# PLANTING & WATERING (1 Corinthians 3:6)

## EFCC Leadership Newsletter (No 81) – September 2016

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Dear Friends,

### THE LAST TIME (as General Secretary at least)

Like anyone moving on I am currently going through a series of last times for doing something in my present job. As General Secretary I have now gone through – the last Trust Board meeting – the last Committee meeting – the last weekend preaching and staying away from home – the last preaching appointment – the last visit to the office – and now writing the last Planting & Watering – by September when it comes out in ‘Congregational Communications’ I will no longer be in post of course. As I (inevitably) look back there is always a sense of sadness but largely of gratitude. I have really enjoyed doing what I have been doing and whatever the future for P & W my outlook on it will change because my role and relationship to my fellow ministers and other leaders in EFCC will not be the same. I will be simply taking my place amongst the ministers in EFCC without having any formal responsibilities towards them and their churches. That doesn’t mean everything changes and I lose interest in EFCC – I will still use Prayer Concern on a daily basis – but that my responsibilities and main concerns will change greatly.

One thing I am very grateful for is that I have never been in the position of struggling to find something to say in P & W. There has always been so much to excite and stimulate about ministry and leadership. I have found it no different on this occasion. You would be right if you guess that returning to the ministry has impacted on my reading – I have suddenly found that questions about church leadership and pastoral care and questions about the nature of preaching and how to pattern a ministry have become high on my agenda in a way in which they haven’t been until very recently. The subjects covered in this edition have been strongly influenced by this change of agenda. I am concerned that I am tired, I have found being General Secretary with its travel and other strains increasingly exhausting, and wonder how I will cope with the pressures and demands of a pastorate – hence I chose to read: ‘Zeal without Burnout’ by Christopher Ash, someone for whom I have great respect. I was not disappointed and urge people to read the review below, probably to go on to buy the book and then to think through prayerfully how their ministries are best to be conducted. Unnecessary burnout and breakdown brought on by our own bad habits and failure to respond to God’s word and truth do not honour God in any way.

Secondly, in returning to pastoral ministry, I want to constructively reconsider what really matters to me in ministry and to do this by asking myself a number of questions:

1. What were the convictions and priorities with which I began pastoral ministry?
2. Do I still hold to them and to what extent have they been modified, or even dulled and blunted, by the experience of pastoral ministry and of stepping back from pastoral ministry to be General Secretary?
3. Is there anything which I would now like to add to those convictions and priorities based on my experience in pastoral ministry and in stepping back from it for a number of years?

Because of the massive influence of Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones on me as a minister I have based my thinking around the legacy that he passed on to me and to many others of my generation, although I think the conclusions I come to are definitely forward looking rather than backward looking. Even if I end up by simply reaffirming some of the things that I have believed and practised for years it is better to do so after reflection and evaluation rather than simply ploughing without questioning the effectiveness of and the reasons for the patterns of ministry which I am committed to.

Please pray for me in a new calling and pray for EFCC, particularly the Chairman of the Committee, on whom significant burdens will fall, and the Committee, as they are actively engaged in seeking a new General Secretary but also in covering the needs of the churches during an interim period. A letter from Jackie Brown has gone out detailing who is doing what in this interim period and it would be really good if those who are going through the learning curve of undertaking new responsibilities were assured of the prayers of God’s people. Sometimes a period between ministries can benefit a church as issues have to be thought and worked through in a way that was not needed during a ministry and so in God’s goodness this period may be something that is used for good in the life of the fellowship.

Yours in the Lord,

Mike Plant

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## REVIEW ARTICLE: 'ZEAL WITHOUT BURNOUT' CHRISTOPHER ASH

The subtitle to this book: 'Seven Keys to a lifelong ministry of sustainable sacrifice' conveys very accurately what the book is about. It is a book I wish that every minister setting out in the ministry and every minister assessing his situation after years of ministry would read carefully and take careful note of what is said. If this happened we might see a welcome decrease in the number of ministers who breakdown in ministry. Not everyone recovers and those who do have deep scars, as their families also may have. This book gives a biblical and wise perspective on the realities of Christian service and how burnout can be avoided by acting wisely and biblically.

The first chapters are: 'Stories from the Edge' and 'Sacrifice is not the same as Burnout' which are helpfully anecdotal with Christopher Ash sharing his own experience and the experiences of other Christian leaders. It describes the experience of burnout, which can vary more greatly than most of us realize, from reduced energy levels and a struggle to cope at work right through to physical collapse and hospitalisation with a suspected heart attack. It also describes the aftermath which can mean a lifetime of reduced work capacity, having to leave a job we love, or even resulting increased enthusiasm and energy levels. Although I guess this third experience is rare it is also true that many of us who have broken down in the ministry thank God for the lessons learnt through those hard experiences. And that is true even if our current ability to work is limited by the experience of breakdown.

The next chapter is I think the key to the book. We don't help ourselves by simply reacting when things have gone wrong but need to begin, and to carry forward, our ministry with a biblical self-understanding. The section is titled 'A Neglected Truth' and its one chapter: 'We are Creatures of Dust.' It is actually in realizing and accepting our weakness and humanity that we are helped. Zack Eswine's book: 'Sensing Jesus' takes a similar line of thought but is more diverse and imaginative and less condensed and practical than Christopher Ash's book. Our current constitutional strength and ability, which may enable massive overwork over long periods of time, do not make us less dust but may make it hard for us to recognise this inescapable fact about ourselves. Christopher Ash concludes this chapter:

There are, I want to suggest, seven keys to sustainable sacrifice. And we turn first to four implications of the foundational truth of our mortality and our dependence on God .....

We need sleep, *but God does not.*

We need Sabbaths, *but God does not.*

We need friends, *but God does not.*

We need food, *but God does not* (this metamorphoses to: We need inward renewal *but God does not* as a chapter heading)

Perhaps you will feel that these 'needs' are unexciting and don't fit in with your ministry machismo. As

someone who has experienced a major breakdown whilst in the ministry which meant that I was unable to work at all for some months and then was significantly limited in the workload I could bear for several years I would urge you to realize that this is profound and may contribute to saving your health and your ministry.

One important issue is that we need to have accurate self-knowledge. If someone does breakdown in a major way a blessing that can follow is a renewed self-knowledge. One of the most helpful pieces of advice is that we need to know what helps us to be inwardly renewed. You then have to integrate this with what inwardly renews your wife. My ideal holiday period at home involves lots of visitors and people coming for meals – Margaret's involves being on her own and recharging in privacy – that is a combination which needs working on!

A danger which Christopher Ash doesn't highlight but which also relates deeply to our humanity is that we can let our job mould our identity so much that we feel we have ceased to exist as an individual and have become our role, with a subsequent sense of loss of humanity and legitimate individuality. Many ministers, and their wives as well, struggle because they feel they have become a role and ceased to be a real person. We need to learn to be ourselves and to be authentic and failing to do so will be very damaging to us.

The value of these chapters is not their originality – the tips about leaving your pastoral issues outside the bedroom door, building intimacy in your marriage and relaxing properly are things I have heard from other people but simply in re-grounding and re-orientating us when we so quickly lose our bearings and wander off course in Christian service. I have recently returned from Keswick and I've heard little that is new and the ministry has been good but not outstanding. Has it done me good? Yes, it has enabled me to re-orientate myself to the things that really matter and should be foundational and this is where this book is very strong.

The next three chapters (keys 5 to 7) concern the need to beware celebrity, to remember the work is worth it and to rejoice in grace not gifts. The problem I think with these is that we acknowledge what is true about these matters in our heads but our hearts languish a long way behind. Of course: 'Ministry isn't about numbers. It's about faithfully preaching, teaching and loving the people' but when the congregation was in single figures on Sunday evening that can be hard to hold on to. It is a worthwhile work and calling but it is also true that most of the 'results' are not now visible but will be in eternity but now we may see a church we love and have worked for at a very low ebb. The fact that some men have thriving and blessed ministries, and prove later to have been engaged in deep sin over many years, while other faithful men labour on with little encouragement and success for years has troubled me on their behalf and I guess it has the potential to trouble them more.

Christopher Ash's final chapter ends with a prayer:

*I am – and will never, this side of the resurrection be more than – a creature of*

*dust. I will rest content with my creaturely weakness; I will use the means God has given me to keep going in this life while I can; I will allow myself time to sleep; I will trust him enough to take a day off each week; I will invest in friendships and not be a proud loner; I will take with gladness the inward refreshment he offers me. I will serve the Lord Jesus with a glad and restful zeal, with all the energy that he works within me; but with anxious toil, selfish ambition, the desire for the p, and all the other ugly motivations that will destroy my soul. So help me God.*

That is a prayer each one of us needs to regularly take to heart and allow to control our lives and ministries.

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## EVALUATING A LEGACY OR SIMPLY BEING GRATEFUL

At the EFCC AGM Bill Dyer wisely observed that it is too early to evaluate my legacy as General Secretary and he was of course right. What my legacy is, for good and ill, will only be clear in years to come. In my recent reading I observe that it still seems to be too early to evaluate the legacy of Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones – there is too much passion because we still live in the aftermath of events in which he was involved and his stances are being reproduced and repudiated around us and by us. I am settling therefore for expressing my gratitude to DMLJ and seeking to record lessons which I am very anxious not to forget, particularly as I return to pastoral ministry. In that I have thought about and modified some aspects of what he said and did in my own convictions and practice there is evaluation but the predominant motif for me is gratitude.

I am of course aware that for many ministers DMLJ is probably too far back to have been their most significant influence but certainly he was the most significant influence for many people of my age and the aftermath of his influence is still sparking debate and controversy. In my thoughts about him I am simply fixing on what to me are the most fundamental of the lessons he bequeathed:

### **Firstly: A Basic Pattern: Expository Preaching**

I was in my twenties when I first preached – I was on holiday with Margaret's family near Dumbarton and on a Sunday evening we attended a local mission. With no preacher a number of us contributed and I managed some stammering words on Matthew 5 which had their origin in my meditating on DMLJ's sermons on the Sermon on the Mount. This was the book that changed my view of preaching forever. I later read other books, including his: 'Preaching and Preachers', which gave me the theory behind his practice but it was the attractiveness of the practice of systematically preaching through Bible books, or extensive Bible passages, which captivated me. The power of God's word to speak to me on every level – regarding belief and behaviour but also warming and enrapturing my heart was something fresh to me. For those of us a long way into our ministries nothing can

replace those first leadings of God as we were guided into ministry.

Encountering reality by preaching in a church situation was very helpful to me of course and contributed to shaping my thinking and practice. I would have liked to inch my way through 2 Peter, which is what I began by doing, but talking to people in the church it was soon obvious I would help them more and feed them more effectively by a pattern of preaching which covered more of the Bible and was concerned to give the flow and direction of the passages, rather than the verses and sub-verses, which I was looking at. I think the area to worry about losing in the move to preaching on longer passages is carefully thought through and detailed application – it can be too easy to give the flow of a passage without ever bringing it home as we ought. However if we realize the dangers we are half-way to counteracting them and preaching on longer passages can be combined with penetrating application.

However I can honestly say that the pattern of systematic expository preaching which I learnt from DMLJ is so obviously wise and right that I cannot imagine it not being my basic pattern of ministry. I have come to believe a greater variety in such preaching is helpful and so I would want to preach more topical series and preacher shorter series however that is the icing on the cake not the cake itself.

### **Secondly: A Passionate Desire: the Spirit's Presence**

Here again was something new to me. I had many charismatic influences, as did anyone brought up in the London Bible belt in the 1960s, but had never encountered anything like the kind of emphasis on the Holy Spirit I found amongst those influenced by DMLJ's ministry. This did not mean I embraced his position in every respect – I found John Stott more convincing on the meaning of the expression, 'the Baptism of the Spirit'. However an article by Iain Murray helped me tremendously when he also carefully dissented from some aspects of DMLJ's understanding of the Biblical terminology but asked whether this meant that we should also jettison DMLJ's deep concern for the reality of experiencing the power and work of the Holy Spirit. His answer of course was that we should realize how important this emphasis and desire is and that it should impact appropriately in our prayers, our attitudes and our practice. We are always rebalancing our ministries and this is an area that we constantly need to return to in our thinking because it is one which we can so easily let slip.

I must confess how easy it is to let things slip and to be content with good, logical sermons but more than this is needed if we are to be effective in our day. All I can say here is that I know it is right to have a passionate desire for the Spirit's presence and I wish I felt it more deeply and more consistently and more prayerfully.

### **Thirdly: A Priority for Us to Remember: Evangelistic Preaching**

Many of those I write to will remember the older pattern of non-conformist church life – if you don't this is what it was! In the morning you taught believers and in the evening you

preached the gospel as if the congregation consisted exclusively of unbelievers. DMLJ deals with the different types of preaching in 'Preaching and Preachers' – midweek in addition would be more teaching/instruction than exhortation. I started out in ministry with this being very much my preferred pattern, indeed I don't think I had ever thought there might be other ways to minister.

Three things have impacted heavily on this pattern. In my own situation I became aware that there were significant numbers of Christians who only attended in the evening and therefore didn't receive teaching that would nurture and mature them. I am not saying that the gospel isn't for Christians but I am saying that a diet of gospel preaching aimed for unbelievers is not a suitable sole diet for believers. So you face the question of what to do for those who actually attend if you want them to develop and grow as they should?

In terms of national trends the move has been, probably more dramatically in the South-East than elsewhere, that evening congregations have shrunk and that those there are likely to be highly committed Christians. So the pattern DMLJ commends is simply no longer appropriate in many situations, and this leads us to the need to rethink. Often of course newer churches will often have only one Sunday service which means the pattern will inevitably have to differ from the older one. There is of course nothing more biblical in two rather than one service on a Sunday.

I also developed an increasingly strong belief that evangelism is what the church does in the world and not predominantly in-house on a Sunday evening. This means that congregations must be aware of the need to evangelise, and what their church does to evangelise but that the central focus of this may well not be during the Sunday services. This should not lead to the accusation that, 'You don't believe in preaching the gospel' but to a realization that faithfulness is not simply continuing doing what we have always done but in seeking ways to be urgent and effective in gospel proclamation in changing circumstances. A church with a regular gospel service may in reality be less evangelistic than another church without a stated 'gospel' service.

If you read DMLJ you will soon realize that his thinking about preaching was largely controlled by his reaction to the preaching he heard as he grew up. Preaching was done on the basis that everyone in the church was a believer and that they simply needed teaching and instruction. Clearly such preaching is simply wrong in its basis and therefore unhelpful. Tim Keller's emphasis on preaching being necessarily gospel-based, both as addressed to Christians and non-Christians, is very helpful. I have come to the conclusion that every sermon must bear in mind that there will be saved and unsaved hearers and that the distinction between a Christian and a non-Christian and so the nature of, and need for, the gospel must be flagged up and explained in every sermon. This challenges our spiritual instincts, it is very easy to drift into a non-gospel mode in preaching, and is also a challenge to remain fresh in the way in which we seek to achieve this. All preachers tend to have one set way of outlining the gospel and this doesn't do

justice to the huge variety in scripture and risks boring our hearers. This calls for hard work in study and meditation.

**Fourthly: Is there anything to add that I have subsequently picked up?** I think there are a couple of areas which I have come to see as lacking in my emphases and where I need to sharpen up on my practice:

- 1) Discipleship and mentoring need a higher profile I am not saying for a moment these things were not done in the past – indeed I can think of ministers who did them very effectively - but that it wasn't highlighted in terms of ministry models I was exposed to. I think that I need to look out for how to develop this in terms of helping new Christians get established and in terms of helping those who have potential to serve as leaders within the church. I recently read Mark Dever's book on 'Discipling' in the nine marks series and found it very helpful. Jonathan Leeman's conclusion to the book is a vital contribution because he describes how Mark Dever's theory is actually lived out in practice within the church. Reading both what DMLJ has written and what has been written about him this area does not seem to have been something that he developed or put much emphasis on. There seems to be a general consensus that he failed to equip his fellow leaders at Westminster Chapel so they could lead the church effectively when he could no longer do so. I think the fact that he was instinctively not one who built a team ministry was probably unhelpful in this regard.
- 2) Churches need effective leadership This is linked to the discipleship theme and again I don't know how much DMLJ ever reflected on this. The modern obsession with leadership and leadership skills is in part a reaction to leadership simply being something assumed in past generations. A strong personality, very sharp intellect and strong drive may have been all he needed to assume leadership and direction of a church and the same applies concerning a number of prominent and effective ministers I can bring to mind. However not all of us are as naturally gifted in this respect and we do need to reflect on what we are to aim for in leading and how we are to bring it about. It seems to me that many problems in churches come from poor leadership, or more accurately from poor relationships which come about through poor leadership. Leadership in a new situation does require thinking and praying through and is as much to do with relationships as with objectives.

My time with EFCC has made me very conscious that leadership is a gift given but also a skill to be learned and developed. I think to neglect this as an area of concern would be unhelpful to me and any church which I am called to serve.

