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## PLANTING & WATERING (1 Corinthians 3:6) EFCC Leadership Newsletter (No 82) – November 2016

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Dear Friends,

### A REMINDER OF REAL LIFE

Some years ago I read an excellent review in 'Foundations' in which the reviewer helpfully critiqued a number of books on preaching. What has stuck in my mind is the conclusion to the review in which he pointed out that all the books seemed to be written by those in large churches with supportive staff, or by those not actually in pastoral ministry but having an itinerant ministry or whose main work was college lecturing. He pondered whether it would be more helpful to have a book on preaching from a man who regularly preached to the same small congregation and who has to multitask because there he lacked gifted people to work alongside him. He concluded that of course such a man wouldn't have time to produce a book on preaching! The general point is fair – if someone is to help us in our ministry we will want to feel there are strong links between what they do and what we do and that they experience a similar degree of pressure and struggle in their work.

So here I am, back in a local church setting with two Sunday services and a midweek meeting to prepare for as my norm. I am aware of course that the demands churches make on us vary and that early in a ministry our work can be less demanding before commitments and developing relationships build up pressure on us. However already I find it a pressure just to prepare from week to week. It is not that the well of scripture ever runs dry but the hard work of firstly understanding the text, then seeing how it is intended to relate to our own situation and then shaping and constructing the sermon so it can be delivered effectively is a significant demand. Make that several times a week and it becomes considerable not just in terms of actual preparation time but also spiritually it is draining and demanding. What lessons am I having to relearn about ministry in my new situation? I don't claim originality for any of them but they may be helpful to call to mind:

1. Try to start early in the week If it takes 8 hours to prepare a sermon then I would prefer to spend several hours early in the week doing the donkey work of exegesis and trying to discern the pastoral thrust of the passage. Then I find other reading I do and events that take place feed into my thinking and preparation – my final write-up of the sermon takes place at the end of the week and is helped tremendously if I give myself time and space to get ready.
2. Don't neglect other reading If you only read in order to prepare you will quickly become dry spiritually and mentally. All of us need the stimulation of the minds of others and reading, fraternal and listening to downloaded materials can all be a fertile source of ideas and challenges to our established ways of thinking. Currently I'm reading some sermons of Toplady, who used to minister in Broad-Hembury which is quite close to Honiton, Don Carson's 'The God Who is There' and Rebecca Manley Pippert's 'Out of the Saltshaker'.
3. Pay attention to context Obviously every text has a context within the book and passage in which we find it and we will misinterpret what we are preaching without this. However the question of context is bigger than this because whatever truths are in our text has a context in the entirety of God's revelation and also in has points of contact and conflict in the thinking of the world in which we live and preach. I'm currently going through 2 Peter in our midweek meeting and in order to prepare myself reread Dr Lloyd-Jones' 'Expository Sermons on 2 Peter' (BOTT) which I found very profitable indeed. I don't use this book in actually preparing our studies in 2 Peter but used it to orientate myself to the book. One aspect of his preaching which was very helpful was the way in which he analyses the truths taught in the texts he preached but invariably relates them to the way in which the common wisdom of the age thinks of the same matters. He does this in relationship to the wider society but also in showing sometimes how the world's thinking has invaded the professing church. If we don't pay attention to the context in which we preach it is hard to see how our preaching can connect to the world which our hearers live in.

**Making my farewells** I have been informed that this is to be the final 'Planting & Watering' so there is a sort of farewell in regard to this ministry. As regards EFCC it is of course understandable that there is a desire to give a new General Secretary, whenever one is appointed, a clean sheet to work on. For myself I will be glad that the discipline of producing a complete 'Planting & Watering' every couple of months is withdrawn but equally I am confident that I could produce material of value for (God willing) some time to come. Accordingly, if you would like to receive articles, book reviews etc on an occasional basis contact me and I will put you on an email address list to receive a non-EFCC 'Planting & Watering'. I am afraid that I will only be able to email it rather than have it available as a hard copy.

Yours in the Lord,

Mike Plant

## THE PREACHER AND HIS BIBLE

I have often written of the need for Preachers to know their Bible well and to commit themselves to regularly reading all of Scripture. Here I want to go deeper to show how this knowledge, which must be a deep heart knowledge, is necessary in order to bring those to whom we preach into deeper Christian knowledge.

My inspiration for this is a study of the preaching of Augustine by Peter Sanlon: 'Augustine's Theology of Preaching' which I am finding very stimulating and helpful. The easiest way to look at this is by quoting from the book itself as it discusses Augustine's convictions about preaching:

The matter of first importance for the preacher is that he see into the heart of Scripture for himself. The heart of the preacher must beat with the heart of Scripture.

This is something I sure I have said before, if not in those words or expressed so clearly and well, but what comes next I found fresh and exciting:

(Augustine) believed that the way for listeners to learn divine truth was to be drawn into the Scriptures by a preacher who shares his own experience of that same reality. .... He needed to have an inner experience of the things of which he speaks; his contemplation of Scripture's meaning and desire to see into its heart would persuade listeners to do the same thing. .... (Augustine's) frequent meditation on a problem in Scripture was more than a personality trait: ***it flowed from his doctrinal conviction that the preacher persuaded listeners to search for Scripture's meaning by welcoming them into his own search through Scripture. .... The preacher is restless for a fresh glimpse of divine truth and his restlessness stirs up others to seek with him. .... Such a preacher would depend upon God in prayer and draw listeners into a similar dependent experience of being taught by God.***

The italicised words bring to us a profound spiritual challenge – we all know how the routine of preparation and personal weariness can dull our enthusiasm and bring us to the point where sermon preparation can be the grinding out of a message about which we find it difficult to evoke any feeling of excitement or thrill. Such a way of doing things rather than being, as we might pride ourselves, dutiful and a sign of how hard-working we are is actually a sign that we are unable to carry out our calling in an appropriate and spiritual way.

It used to be a spoof definition of a lecture as an exercise in which information is transferred from the lecturer's notes to the students' notebooks without passing through the minds of either but it is that sort of danger we are faced with. Someone taking notes of the sermon might have neither their intellect nor their heart stirred by what they hear. It is this we want to avoid but the answer is not primarily in improved techniques for holding interest or a

renewed commitment to acquiring exceptional communication skills. It is in the development of our own relationship with the Lord through the word which he has inspired and has caused to be written down for us.

This means there is a reorientation in the way in which we think about ourselves. Obviously we are teachers and instructors but we are spiritual men with a deep desire and need to understand and take to heart God's word. We are Christians before we are preachers and the moment we forget that we have gone wrong. If we are Christians we ourselves are spiritually needy souls who need feeding from God's word through a fresh glimpse of divine truth and this makes us prayerful because we are consciously spiritually dependent. Our hearers then share in the search and in the sense of excitement and spiritual joy and fulfilment it brings about in us.

What we are saying is that there is not just a factual content in learning and understanding Scripture but that there is an emotional and experiential facet as well. To imagine we know something truly without it impacting on us in the whole range of our personalities is simply to deceive ourselves and to fail to feed and nurture those who learn from us. This is demanding of course but it makes it very clear that the ministry cannot be understood apart from its spiritual implications. The ordering in 1 Timothy 3: 16: 'Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching' is deliberately and very significantly ordered – indeed it is probably true that if the primary duty to watch yourself closely is fulfilled then the rest will follow. The challenge we all face is to handle our busyness in such a way that we deliberately give time to thinking and praying and becoming contemplative pastors.

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## APPROPRIATE LEADERSHIP

**A Helpful Insight** One of the joys of moving is rediscovering books we have read and then put on one side. A book of Donald Macleod's, 'Priorities for the Church' has been one such book for me. I had put a note inside the front cover a 'Quote on Leadership' which I found deeply insightful and relevant to mistakes I see being made in ministries – it reads:

We are too inclined to define leadership in a restrictive sense – exercising control, maintaining order, keeping people in their place. We must learn to see it as something creative and dynamic, inspiring and liberating people to serve, so that no talent and no enthusiasm in the body of Christ goes unused. Only to a very limited extent should one man (or body of men) interfere with another in the spontaneity of his Christian service.

There seem to me to be a number of reasons why this is self-evidently true.

1. NT precedent Donald Macleod draws our attention to the 'Mobility of Preachers' in the New Testament and points out that 'Certainly the local church commissioned Saul and Barnabas (though we cannot be sure that

Philip was similarly commissioned). But it is perfectly clear that from that point onward they did not require the permission of 'sending church' for their movements. With the wisdom given to them by the Holy Spirit they made their own decision on the spot..... Before leaving this point it is worth noting that no hard-and-fast distinction can be drawn between an itinerant and a settled ministry. Itinerants like Paul sometimes settled in particular places for extended periods (Acts 19: 10); and sometimes (again like Paul and his associates Timothy and Titus) they exchanged their church-planting roles for church-building ones. The evangelist sometimes became the pastor. Mobility involved flexibility in function as well as location.'

2. How the New Testament views the Church  
The predominant NT description of the church is as God's household or family – families are more spontaneous and more untidy than organisations and corporations. At the least it would not be much fun being in a family that modelled itself on a business. So in the same way in which things may happen spontaneously in families and we rejoice in that we should also rejoice in the life of our churches when people are spontaneous and creative in evangelism and in how others in the fellowship are shown care and love.
3. The sovereign work of Jesus through the Holy Spirit in bestowing gifts  
Two texts that are vital for us to bear in mind are (1 Corinthians 12: 7), 'To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good' and (12: 11), 'All these (gifts) are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.' It is important that we reckon on God's sovereignty here – education, family background, even workplace skills do not dictate the distribution of gifting and usefulness amongst God's people. We tend to be Ok with this in history, Billy Bray and W P Nicholson are fine at a distance, but less happy with it in practice. If God allocates gifts we are to aid their usefulness in the Lord's work.

**What does this say about the role of church leaders?** Our job is to inspire not to attempt to control and direct. I will give just one example which I think is extremely telling. I came across a church with a great reputation for church-planting – there have been, I think, about 7 or 8 successful church plants coming from this thriving church. What I found noteworthy are things I observed and discovered when I asked questions:

1. The church was seriously understaffed while this took place  
When there is a large congregation, numbered in the hundreds and one (part-time) minister, it is obvious that there is not the time for the careful calculation, organisation and planning which

we would expect would normally need to be involved in a church plant.

2. Therefore this was not a top-down led exercise  
What happened, spontaneously, is that gifted people in the church would be involved in preaching and helping other churches in the area and would be asked to come alongside them with a team to revitalise the work. They would then talk to their friends and in turn to the leadership of the church and organise a team to go and to do this. They would leave with the church's blessing and prayer support.
3. What was the secret?  
If you belong to a church where people are inspired by the preaching and love the gospel they will do things like this because of their love for Christ and because having seen the power and wonder of the gospel they are confident about it.

This means that leadership is meant to be more about channelling and harnessing enthusiasm than it is about control and pushing people to be involved. It cannot be done overnight but surely this is the goal of our ministries? It means of course that our pathway towards what we desire from the church is indirect. We don't drive things forward primarily through our organisational ability but seek the Holy Spirit's presence so that he will empower the work.

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## PRACTICAL POINTS FOR PREACHERS

Again I am indebted to Donald Macleod for these points. It could be argued that his book 'Priorities for the Church' is deeply affected by the Highland culture of the Free Church but that is a given, he is contextualising his message, but also a criticism that misses the fact that he is working from principle to practice. Taking it his principle is correct we will need to apply it to ourselves in what are often very different cultural and pastoral situations.

By way of preamble he makes the important point that the ministry of the Word is not something exclusively practised by Ministers or other preachers:

In short all Christians have a teaching ministry. This was a marked feature of the life of the early church: so much that one of the Fathers commented, 'In the beginning all preached and all baptised.'

The minister's distinctive is that preaching and teaching is his life's work: his major, and indispensable, contribution to the church. As the body will suffer if we fail to play our part we must ask how we can do it well:

1. Make it a Priority  
'Being a preacher is not simply an activity. It's a lifestyle.' He points out how the Lord Jesus used a host of things he and his hearers would observe regularly – birds and lilies, sowing and harvesting, fishing and commerce, shepherding, vine-dressing and children playing to illuminate his teaching.
2. Discipline Yourself to Study  
Here I slightly dissent from the details of what is advocated.

Realistically many of us couldn't study from nine to one every day because of other pressing duties. School assemblies, house-groups – all sorts of things may come to disrupt the pattern he advocates which I think probably worked very well in the past. I also find myself wondering that he thinks this time can be spent without it being used for sermon preparation. He writes: 'During these times the preacher communes with God, pores over the word and enjoys the fellowship of the great master-preachers and master-theologians of all ages. Having spent the week in God's market, there is some hope he can then provide his people with the feast they deserve.' That we need to work far harder than we do at study, not just reading non-demanding material, I don't question for a moment.

3. Be Obsessed with Mastering your Craft Questioning ourselves as to whether our content and presentation was right is vital to a preacher's progress and so is seeking help where it may be found. So we will read and listen to sermons and we will read about preachers and we will read book after book on preaching. We will read old standards on preaching and newer books – we will read critically and with a view to changing our preaching so we will be more effective. At the recent Ministers' Prayer Conference Mark Johnston passed on advice for those in early ministry to read a systematic theology annually and a book on preaching every three months. Personally I would say seek to master a basic textbook on preaching in detail in the first few years of your ministry so you can develop the preaching method most effective for you. Then read other books to refine and inspire your practice. The moment a preacher is complacent about his preaching every alarm bell should be ringing!
4. Be a People Person If our responsibility is to preach the Word in the world then he needs to know both and he can only do this through taking time to get to know them. That means in the pressures they face in their families and in their work, in the spiritual problems they encounter with sin and doubt, in their leisure time and in what they actually glean Sunday by Sunday. I actually find it quite hard questioning people about their response to my preaching because it sounds as though I am seeking their praise. I need to know them so I can serve them effectively with the gospel. My observation of what goes on among preachers suggests there is a real need to get to grips with this area of our duties. There has been a move away from ministries in which incessant visiting crowded out preparation for preaching to methods of preparation which just seem to take too much time from an overcrowded schedule.
5. Our Ministry needs to be Pulpit-Centred but not Pulpit-Exclusive Macleod points out that many of the greatest preachers also

catechised and discussed issues with other believers at fellowship meetings. This in part meets the needs that point 4. Above raises. It also means that ministers have an opportunity to find out how well people in the congregation have grasped what they have been taught. By not encountering people in this way we rob ourselves of much needed encouragement and challenge. Encouragement because sometimes our people have grasped what we have said and are applying it in their lives in a perceptive and spiritual way. Challenge because sometimes we will come to realize how terribly like their non-Christian friends and family our Christians think and talk.

I was encouraged, attending our local fraternal, to hear a senior minister say that he found it is the basic lessons we need to learn and relearn as we near the ends of our ministry. This brings home to me the constant need to remind ourselves what is primary and to refocus in our ministry.

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### **PRAYING FOR THOSE BEGINNING NEW PASTORATES**

I recently reread something very relevant to my new situation in Peter Vosteen's chapter on 'Pastoral Preaching' in Sam Logan's 'Preaching':

After completing eight years of service in New Jersey, I took my labours in a new charge. As I stepped into the pulpit for the first time, I was overwhelmed by the realization that I did not know the people to whom I was addressing God's Word. What was I going to say to these people? I could say, 'Thus says the Lord,' but how could I apply that Word to their lives in a meaningful way? I did not know them. I did not understand their background, their culture, or their particular needs. I could only preach to them in a very general way. 'I must visit them,' I said to myself. 'I must get to know them. I must gain understanding of their wants, desires, dreams and goals before my preaching can be truly pastoral preaching-worthwhile to them and satisfying to me.'

So if you want to pray for me and for others new in a pastorate pray that we will develop and build those relationships from which effective pastoral preaching flows.

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### **PLANTING & WATERING – THE FUTURE**

As I said above this is the final edition of 'Planting & Watering' and for me there is a sense of sadness. I intend to circulate occasional book reviews, articles and thoughts on the ministry, preaching and leadership and if you would like to receive this, email me at [mike.plant427@btinternet.com](mailto:mike.plant427@btinternet.com) and I will put you on my mailing list.

In the meantime thank you to my various friends who have stimulated and encouraged me during the last thirteen years by their questions and by challenging my thinking from time to time.