
PLANTING & WATERING (1 Corinthians 3:6)
EFCC Leadership Newsletter (No. 41)—November 2009

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Dear Friends,

A letter (partly) from Northern Ireland

Having written my letter for the last *Concern* from Engadine (Australia), I'm writing this letter from Ballynahinch (Northern Ireland) during my annual week's visit to the province. Apart from the meetings I am involved with I have been busy preparing for my slot at the Ministers' Prayer Conference which takes place the next week. When I speak next week I will be dealing with the way in which the doctrines of Scripture and the Atonement have been so under attack during the last fifty years. While some of the discussions may be complicated I think the basic reason is obvious. The devil hates these truths and will do anything to cloud them in the minds of the world and if possible in the minds of God's people.

Two books on Scripture that I would particularly want to recommend were both published this year. Stephen Nichols and Eric Brandt have produced *Ancient Word, Changing World* (Crossway) which covers the subjects of the Inspiration, Inerrancy and Interpretation of Scripture. What is tremendously helpful is that the chapters on the above subjects, which are well-written, reliable and informative, are all followed by a chapter titled: 'In Their Own Words: Select Documents on the Inspiration/Inerrancy/Interpretation of Scripture.' These chapters give a representative series of quotations from those who have attacked and those who have defended the historic evangelical position on Scripture and this I found very helpful. The other book is Timothy Ward's *Words of Life—Scripture as the living and active word of God* (IVP), which I think will probably become the standard evangelical book on this subject for some years to come. One of the most helpful things about the book is the way in which he both affirms evangelical distinctives, such as the inerrancy of Scripture, but will not allow his convictions about these to control his treatment of the subject which he wants to keep in Biblical proportion.

This summer I read *Pierced for Our Transgressions* by Steve Jeffery, Mike Ovey and Andrew Sach. It seems most likely that the subject of penal substitutionary atonement will continue to be discussed and this is an invaluable resource book on the subject. Certainly some of the more ill-founded claims about the history of the doctrine are exposed and exploded here and it is also helpful that the different objections to psa are spelt out and then answered. (Resuming writing from my study in Middlesbrough), However if you've already read Leon Morris' *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* and J I Packer: *What did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution* then do please heed my warning in the next paragraph.

One danger we all face is letting the opposition dictate our agenda. We can do this pastorally with disgruntled and discontented Christians in the congregation and we can do it in terms of our study time when current 'movements', those we approve of as well as those we disapprove of, control our agenda. To be honest your life is really too busy to allow this. You should already have a study schedule which is at least sorted out in your own mind and which deals with the major areas theologically, biblically and pastorally. I think Joel Beeke's words are wise:

Remember that you cannot study every false movement in depth, nor should you. Study in depth for yourself those that directly affect your congregation. Otherwise read the best book from an evangelical perspective that refutes a particular error. In some cases, reading one good article may suffice.

Recently I embarked upon a study of Federal Vision but decided it was not really a current risk within EFCC and therefore suspended my study. It may be of course that my judgment of this is wrong and then I would need to revisit it but there is nothing wrong with that.

One matter which I will revisit is the matter of confessions of faith and their value in aiding doctrinal stability and health. I mentioned in the last P & W that the careful and ongoing study of the great creeds and confessions of the church is something which contributors to Martin Downes' *Risking the Truth* advise and there is much wisdom in this. I'm currently thinking through how a Congregationalist, who are historically unlike Presbyterians in their view of confessions, would handle this. I would be grateful for your insights as well please.

Yours in the Lord,

Mike Plant (General Secretary)

In the last P & W I recommended Guy Davies' 'Exiled Preacher' blog. Here is an excellent article on **WORKAHOLIC PASTORS** reprinted with Guy's permission.

Not many members of reformed churches would quietly boast if their pastor was an alcoholic or a drug addict, but it seems that people have a sneaking admiration for workaholic ministers. They say, 'Oh, our pastor is a workaholic. He never stops!' As if that was a good thing. It is easy for pastors to become workaholics. We don't have a human boss who tells us when to start and finish the working day. That could induce laziness as no one is keeping an eye on us, but I don't think that's a problem for most Reformed pastors. The work itself is never ending. Sermons need preparing, people need visiting, meetings need chairing, activities need organising, study, writing articles, admin, blah, blah, blah. It is a great work (apart from admin) and we should all throw ourselves into the ministry of the word. In terms of study and preparation we get to spend lots of time doing things that other Christians have to squeeze around their busy working lives. But pastors shouldn't become workaholics. It's not a good or admirable thing when that happens. Workaholic pastors are a bad pattern for their people. If a minister is a husband and a father, then he like all Christian men in that position will need to spend quality time with his family. Even Jonathan Edwards made sure that he spent time chilling out with his large family each evening. Take a day off. We can't often have Sundays off, but the Sabbath principle that a man needs a day of rest still applies. 'The Sabbath was made for man'. Get in the car and go somewhere. If you lounge around at home on your day off the phone will ring and you'll get sucked into work. Get organised so that your sermons are prepped etc and take some time out with the wife and kids. Churches should be sensitive to this matter and try to leave their pastor in peace on his designated day off.

Workaholic pastors are acting as if their acceptance with God were dependent upon their frantic efforts. That is a contradiction of justification by God alone. God accepts us on the basis of what Christ has done for us rather than on the basis of what we have done for him. We need to find the time and space to bask in the loving acceptance of the Father, rest in the finished work of Christ and delight in the witness of the Spirit of adoption. If our ministry does not flow out of communion with the triune God of all grace, then what's the point?

Workaholic ministers are guilty of a form of activism—the tacit belief that God's work is almost entirely dependent on our gargantuan labours.

Perhaps we need to do less stuff and spend more time in prayer. After all our primary calling is to give ourselves to 'prayer and the ministry of the word' (Acts 6:4)—in that order. Business does not necessarily amount to fruitfulness.

Workaholic pastors make themselves inaccessible to their flocks as they seem to be far too busy to bother with problems of one kind or another. This may stop spiritual hypochondriacs from pestering their minister unnecessarily, but our people should know that we are available to them when they need our help and counsel.

Workaholic ministers need to remember that, 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy—and if he's a pastor, a dull preacher.' Maintain interests outside of pastoral work. Keep up with what's going on in the world. Enjoy sport. Listen to music. Watch a bit of TV. Catch the occasional film. Read a novel. People sometimes seem affronted that pastors have time to do anything else bar work. I'm often asked how I have time to blog.

Fellow pastor, don't be a workaholic. Don't be addicted to your work. The only permissible addiction for Christians is an addiction to Christ, Philippians 3:8. 'One thing is needful'!

My response to the article I'm going to refrain from direct comment as I think Guy's article is excellent. A few additional thoughts:

- Be honest—if you don't take a regular weekly day off and have no non-work interests you regularly take part in—then you are a workaholic!
- Being a workaholic is deplorable not commendable!
- Don't make intellectual exhilaration in grasping the truth a substitute for spiritual communion.
- Be sensitive to the changing seasons of life. My tendency to be workaholic has been worse since the boys got older and left home.
- Don't assume workaholism is our only danger. Some pastors (hopefully few) are lazy!

SOME THOUGHTS ON READING CURRENT CHURCH HISTORY (4)

Tracking this Series of Articles We started with the thesis that evangelicalism's maturity would be shown by open and clear discussion on disputed matters rather than a theological truce which means these subjects are effectively taboo. I mentioned baptism as such a subject within EFCC and the discussion then erupted in our internet EFCC theology discussion group. In the last P &

W I sought to move the discussion to dealing with what we are to do when we honestly disagree and cannot persuade one another. The view I put forward is that the 'Congregational Way' while hardly indifferent to the issue of baptism, all the Congregational statements of faith are statedly paedo-baptist, has regarded the duty to receive into fellowship all who belong to Christ as being far more important than securing detailed doctrinal agreement on matters which must be regarded as secondary. Secondary matters are matters which are not vital to gospel truth but nevertheless, being revealed, as important for the welfare of the church.

Retrenching before moving on! I had intended to discuss how we might achieve greater oneness even within the context of disagreement. I had begun an article on this when my good friend John Legg blindsided me by objecting to my statement: 'all paedo-baptists believe in the need to baptise new converts to Christianity'. His point was that routinely paedo-baptists accept Roman Catholic and Anglo-Catholic baptism, or for that matter baptism in a liberal church, as being valid baptism. Which reasonably leads Baptists to believe they are not serious about baptising converts. So I will look first at this apparent or as John would argue real inconsistency.

1. *What is to be accepted a valid baptism?* I'm aware here that I haven't first assembled a case for the covenant baptism of the children of believers but I will return to this. The Savoy Declaration is explicit about this: 'Not only those that do actually profess faith in, and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptised, and those only.' John Legg adds, in his 1982 Congregational Studies Lecture available from EFCC as: 'Children of the Covenant', that the church which baptises should be orthodox (evangelical) theologically and that it should seek to make a proper assessment of the parents' confession of faith. Before picking me up on these issues it would be helpful if you were to read John's booklet.
2. *Why then did, for example, the Reformers accept the validity of Roman Catholic baptism?* The argument was simply that the Trinitarian formula was used and of course the validity of the sacraments is objective and not tied to the spiritual state of the celebrant. The alternative view is that the formula of Matthew 28 is tied to the context in which it is used. We wouldn't accept the baptism of the Jehovah's Witnesses because they use the Trinitarian formula but deny the Trinity. Neither then should we accept liberal or sacramentarian baptism because their beliefs deny biblical teaching on justification, regeneration and the work of Christ. There were later discussions on this,

notably between Charles Hodge, arguing for the validity of RC baptism and James Henley Thornwell arguing against. As you would imagine these discussions are erudite and high-powered. John acknowledges in his booklet that: 'This is a thorny issue, with all its implications of denying churches to be true churches, and one which, as far as I know, has not received proper treatment' and, to my knowledge, they still haven't. Although discussions about Federal Vision impinge on this subject.

3. *The Pastoral Issue* While John insists 'we should not be afraid to rebaptise (baptise validly) where there are genuine grounds for thinking that the first baptism was not valid' he also recognises (in his section on General Principles) that: 'In the light of Old Testament practise and the historical differences of opinion among great men over defining a valid baptism, we should be very cautious about rebaptising and should not insist when a convert is happy that his infant baptism was real.' He adds, and this is important: 'We must be clear that this is not, in such cases, a matter of "obedience" as our Baptist brethren so often insist, but one of biblical interpretation and application, as with, for example, the doctrines concerning our Lord's return.'
4. *Practical and Pastoral Concerns* In my pastoral ministry I drew a line when people were seeking church membership. As we assessed their application we discussed their baptismal situation and obviously non-baptism meant that they needed to be baptised before they could be accepted as church members. To some extent this led to having a conscience line on baptism but I see nothing wrong in that. It is markedly better than a baptismal decision resting on debatable judgments about the church where someone was baptised. I think the Reformers were wrong about Roman Catholic baptism but felt unable to exclude the position of someone like John Calvin as valid for evangelicals.

Where to next? I will simply explain the evangelical Baptist and paedo-baptist views and then try to find some areas where we can develop understanding and agreement.

ENCHANTED BY OUR CULTURE?

At the Ministers' Prayer Conference I spoke on: 'Deja vu all over again—Evangelical Theology 1950–2009'. I did most of my reading in August although I was recommended some very helpful books later on and managed to at least look at them. I actually typed them up in Ballynahinch the week before the conference and this

prevented me from really taking on board something which is immensely important but which I had not entirely grasped before.

What I came to realize was the extent to which all of us, and I include myself, assimilate to the culture we live in and how that reflects particularly in the way in which we preach. Summarising, we are in a culture which embraces feelings and experience as somehow intrinsically superior to precise statements of truth. Truth is not seen as objective and therefore precise definition would be neither possible nor desirable. We may not accept this as an argument but it takes us over as an enchantment which makes us sleepy and unobservant of what we are really doing.

What this faces us with is huge pressure to make our preaching to be seen as practical and centring on experience rather than abstract doctrine. However this is a dichotomy which is essentially false and to be resisted. God's truth is all given to promote personal experience and practical godly living. What I realized afresh is that we need to consciously resist certain trends. Devotion and obedience without doctrine ends up as superstition and legalism. Post-modernism has revived past spiritualities but needs to reflect

on the beliefs that undergirded these. We need to be unashamedly doctrinal in our preaching and to insist that this is inseparable from robust Christian experience and godly living.

I close with some of my final thoughts from my paper: 'If we assimilate (to the changes in the culture around us) we will lose a concern for theological accuracy and rigour and that is vitally necessary if we are to challenge the culture in which we live with the gospel.' In other words our waking up is a matter of life and death for us and for our hearers.

MIKE'S ITINERARY

6th December: am Orange Street pm Hayes Town

13th, 20th, 25th December: St Stephen's Free Church of England, Middlesbrough.

Doubtless I will do some preaching at Cannon Park over the Christmas period but I am aiming not to do too much travelling in December and January. As always I am keen to be booking for preaching for the coming months so I can get to know our member churches better.