

So long, and thanks for all the ἰχθύας

Chris Green is leaving Oak Hill after 14 years of teaching about leadership, church planting, preaching and ministry, to be Vicar of St James, Muswell Hill. Commentary caught up with him



So, 14 years at Oak Hill. Was that always the plan?

Chris: Not at all! In fact, coming to teach in a theological college was never the plan. I was praying and planning on the basis that I would continue in local church leadership. I was looking to move on from Surbiton, but that was the extent of our thinking.

And what changed your mind?

David Peterson, who's quite a persistent man. He wanted someone with good ministry experience to come to join the team. He also knew that I was concerned about the state

of theological education in the UK and that I'd been encouraging some younger and able theologians to consider pouring themselves into training others. So he tried over several years to get me on board and eventually I gave up saying 'no'.

Why were you so concerned about theological education?

Because it really matters! I had the advantage of studying Divinity in Edinburgh. I wasn't a brilliant student by any stretch, but I saw the advantage that a well-balanced course can have for the people in the second eleven, like me.

I did that straight from school, and so I had a leg-up when it came to training for ministry. But I was shocked to see what my contemporaries were covering in their theology degrees. The doctrine wasn't remotely orthodox – in fact, some tutors took a perverse delight in being unorthodox; the biblical studies were atomised; the pastoral care was liberal theology dressed up with compassion.

My friends said they took that in their stride, and that they coped by encouraging each other and going to decent conferences in the vacation. They said that fighting unorthodoxy toughened them up. But from what I could see, the cost was immense. Some of that is financial: to spend three years learning poor theology that you're then going to have to unlearn and rethink seems pointless. When again are you

going to have the opportunity to read Calvin and Augustine, or dig deep into the languages? So it's an enormous waste of cash and time.

But there's a personal cost, too. One of my good friends came within a whisker of a breakdown. Many others have become spiritual shipwrecks. That's too high a price to pay. Theological training is not supposed to be a Darwinian struggle for survival.

It sounds like you're still passionate about it.

I am! For several reasons. There's an English love of amateurism, and a dislike of the smart-aleck. Anyone who obviously knows what they're talking about is a swot, and no one likes a swot. Our preferred myth is the person who is able to do something without apparent effort.

But that isn't biblical. Elders are supposed to 'hold the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.' That means they can explain predestination, the trinity and the incarnation to the best of their ability, and with integrity. And they have to do that when our churches seem to collude with a culture that makes few intellectual demands, but despises us for our creeds, and where false teachers will be always present.

What's odd is that we've benefitted enormously from great scholar-pastors, but we refuse to listen to them. If you lined up John Piper, Phillip and Peter Jensen, Peter O'Brien, Tim Keller,

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Mark Dever, Dale Ralph Davis, Don Carson, John Chapman and Sinclair Ferguson, and said 'Should we invest in decent theological education?', we all know what the answer would be. It would deafen us. But for some reason, we are not persuaded.

I suspect one reason, aside from the class and culture ones I have alluded to, is a misplaced theology of the church. I'm a big fan of a high theology of a congregation and what it's meant to do, but it can't do everything. At least, it's a rare church that has people who can teach Greek and Hebrew, doctrine, preaching, counselling, discipling, leadership and so forth, all as integrated ministry of the word, to a substantial level. In fact, I don't know of one in the UK.

I think it would be foolish to conclude, if our church can't do it, then

it shouldn't be done. That's not what the New Testament teaches – think of the way Paul arranged the collection for the Jerusalem church. I think we'd be wiser to conclude, it should be done, it must be done, but on this occasion, not by the local church. Not if we want it done well, without distracting a local church from its purpose.

What about the people who have effective ministries without decent theological training, then?

I owe an enormous amount to the generation above me, who had to learn things without the benefit of a decent training, by and large. But, as I said to one of my heroes, 'You've achieved an enormous amount without having had the training the Jensens did. What do you think might have happened if you had?'

You might be a John Stott or a Mark Driscoll, able to do great things on your own raw talent. But most of us need help. The argument that 'Charles Spurgeon didn't go to seminary, so I don't need to' doesn't really hold water if you look honestly at yourself.

You don't think theological training is supposed to 'toughen you up', then?

Well, of course it is! The church needs workers and soldiers, not wallflowers. You know the verses: we are supposed to fight, run, contend and reason in a context of constant opposition. Of course theological training has to

toughen you up. But sending someone to train in a context of theological hostility doesn't do that – in fact it achieves the opposite. Think of training a soldier. They're trained in safety and with toughness, so they can face the enemy when they are ready. Take a raw recruit without any training, and stick him up against an experienced and trained opponent, and he'd be captured or dead within minutes. Or, more likely, he'd be cowering in a foxhole hoping the enemy would go away. I don't want pastors who'll be captured or cowards. So they need proper training before they fight.

OK, so that's why you came to Oak Hill – what's changed? Why are you leaving?

Nothing's changed, really. Sharon and I had always thought that our time at Oak Hill would be for a season, not for life, and that we would return to ministry in a local church. After all, that's where the action is!

We've been increasingly aware of that for a while now, and this seems an appropriate time for us to move as a family. And God has been very kind – the church we are moving to is only a stone's throw from college, so our boys won't have to change schools and they can keep up with their friends, and we can keep up a ministry contact with Oak Hill. I've spent 14 years buying ministry-related books for the college library, and now I want to put them

into practice in real life. And St James is a church we know.

What are you most looking forward to, and what are you going to miss?

I'm not going to miss academic administration, that's for sure! The bureaucratic work that goes on behind the scenes to make sure that Oak Hill maintains its place at the table is enormous, and I shall be relieved not to have to go through another revalidation or inspection!

I'm going to miss being around a passionate, focused community of people who are investing their lives in wanting the local church to flourish and spread. This is an enormously stimulating place to be, even if it sometimes feels like being in the West Wing. We're nearby, though, so I don't think I've been here for the last time.

But Oak Hill isn't the centre of God's plan. Church is. And Oak Hill only has viability in so far as it isn't the focus of its own attention. So I'm looking forward to getting back to preaching, evangelising, discipling, leading and all the other things that God's word encourages and equips us to do. Being here has sharpened me up in all those areas, just as much as it has for any of the students, but now I'm looking forward to getting back into the battle.

Chris Green was Development Projects Vice Principal of Oak Hill and is now the Vicar of St James, Muswell Hill, London