

The Spirit Equips

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[0 : 00] So we are in our series of Meet the Holy Spirit and we started with the Spirit invades, speaks, plurum. So I think as a church we are evangelical and we're also charismatic. Evangelical in that we feel that the Great Commission to actually be the hands, feet and voice of Jesus to others is our responsibility. And charismatic can have some different connotations depending on our past and our history. For some that's an uncomfortable word, for some it has no real meaning and for some it's a positive word. But from a theological perspective, charismatic means a very high expectation of an interaction with God. From our prayer, from our being a community that the Holy Spirit will move among us to meet with us and use each other to support others in our community as well. And as I have been preparing for this, I've seen the sort of four steps into this passage. The first is where we see Jesus saying in Luke 4.21, having read from the Scriptures and Isaiah, today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing, expressing that the Holy Spirit was on Jesus. And then when he's tempted in the desert by the devil and Jesus quotes Scripture in his defence, culminating with, away from me Satan, for it is written, worship the Lord your God and serve him only.

And the next step that stood out for me is when Jesus says to his disciples, wait for the counsellor, the Holy Spirit. It will be better for you when I am gone and you receive the Holy Spirit. And in Luke 24, I'm going to send you what my Father has promised. But stay in the city until you've been clothed with power from on high. And we've explored that moment in Acts 2, and that's how we started this series, a sense of encounter for the disciples and then that wider community, a gift for all of them. And that sense of, well, what does that mean then for this chapter?

[2 : 43] We read Paul speaking to the Corinthian church, who are grappling with this revelation of our personal encounter and connection with God and there being gifts of the Holy Spirit given to members in that community. And we see a diverse community with internal rivalry and competition, envy and jealousy and judgment and judgment and a sort of spiritual version of the TV series Succession going on, a really unhealthy dynamic. And Paul is speaking into this, saying the church should model community, cooperation, equality, and have Jesus absolutely at the centre. And so I want to share three reflections.

One on the body, one on the parts of the body, and one on the gifts, and have us reflect on that this morning. On the body. So my work is with clients, particularly helping senior leaders establish the right behaviours and ways of working to help them deliver the strategy or the mission that they have.

This week's a good example. Tomorrow I'm working in the public sector, helping an executive team grapple with how do they actually deliver the outcomes they need, transform the organisation, and all with less money, so all the service users get a better outcome. It's incredibly difficult.

On Tuesday, I'm working in professional services in London, helping people consider how they raise the capability of all their teams, so they can serve clients more effectively. On Wednesday, I'm working with around 40 vicars or ordinans, who all are from the global majority heritage, so from a black or Asian background, who are wrestling with racism in the church. And then on Friday, I'm working with a group of senior teachers in schools, who are considering how do they truly raise the standards when staff are under such pressure.

And much of this requires a really clear understanding about how you genuinely improve the quality of relationships to improve the quality of outcomes, so they can deliver effectively.

[5 : 05] The main insight that informs this work, that informs us being one body, is that it's less about who the individuals are, and it's more about the quality of connection between us. We have to attend to the quality of connection to order us to fulfil our mission. Are we clear? Do we have a shared ambition, shared mission together? Are we appreciative of the difference that others bring?

Do we communicate well? Do we resolve issues when we have them? Is there a commitment to the best for those around us?

Now, I really remember experiencing this for the first time. I was a 16-year-old RAF cadet, and I got thrown onto a training program where cadets from all over the country were pulled together. You have turned into squads, and then you had a senior officer come and lead you, and then you went off into a week of assault courses, how to ambush, evading capture, all very useful in church life, and marches and shoots, where you would march at great speed over a long distance, and then you'd have to calm yourself and shoot 100 rounds accurately over different distances, and one thing after the other, a week like this, it was absolutely fascinating, and the first thing that happened was that as our squad, our senior leader was the person who used to run Royal Marine Officer Training, so he was quite a tough person, and the first thing he did was arrive at 6.30 in the morning when we were meant to be starting at 7, and say, why aren't you all ready? We're like, so it's a seven o'clock start. He's like, on time is late.

All of you run and dive into the lake in your full combat fatigues and come back here. So we all run and dive in the lake. We're now soaking wet, and then we spend the day with squelchy boots and heavy gear, running, shooting, in lectures, smelling of lake pond water. But as we worked together, we were the weaker group.

We had most women in our group. We had the youngest in our group. We were slightly smaller than the other groups, and therefore physically and maybe psychologically weaker. And with lots of challenge and eventual support, we started to win everything, and we won the whole week. And it wasn't about who we were. Oh, thank you. It's 38 years ago, but I appreciate the late applause. It wasn't about any individual strength. It was about the quality of connection between us. It was that we had been formed into a unit, into one body. Here, Paul says, but God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it. So there should be no division in the body, but its part should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is honoured, then every part rejoices with it. And then in Matthew 22, Jesus replied to the question of, teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law. And Jesus replied, love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.

[8 : 30] And the second is like it. Love your neighbour as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments. So as we're tasked with being the feet and the hands and the voice of Jesus on earth, of those around us in Clevedon and in this community, Jesus says to us, love one another.

Our love is the quality connection between us that enables us to form a body. It raises a question for me, I think for you. How do we love each other? Just those who share our thinking or like us? Do we prioritise talking to those we don't know? Do we really engage with those who are guests or newer in our community? Do we pray for others in the week? Do we share our time? Do we share our own tables with them? Do we suffer and rejoice when they suffer and rejoice? Do we believe that none of those in our gathering are trivial and unimportant as it says in this verse?

Let's really allow the Holy Spirit to stir us with that call to be one body with many parts, with a quality of connection being between us, love in action.

To the second session, many parts. The starting point for any group that I might work with is to ask this question, what is it like on the receiving end of you?

[10 : 22] It's such a crucial question for any team, any group of people trying to pull together and fulfil a mission. Because what it's like profoundly affects what happens next.

At times I run a large programme in the NHS and we, five as us, facilitators gather and then run a week with 40 leaders from across the country. They gather, we start off in a large group and then eventually we break into smaller groups by the afternoon. And so we have these eight, five smaller groups of eight people who will now work together for a year. And as a facilitator, you're using the dynamic between people as the learning bed, as the place to really explore their leadership effectiveness and also a place of support for each other as well. It's a really beautiful thing. It's enormous fun. At the end of the first day, as facilitators, we gather and we just reflect on any individuals in our groups we think of a particular need or a particular challenge or where we want input from others. And we discussed them. And I had one of my group that I was trying to explain to the others and no one could picture who I meant. And I explained their name, I said their role, I said what they were wearing, I said what they said earlier in the room, but the other four had no idea

who I meant. And so I said, is this going to sound completely inappropriate, but it's the one that looks like a bulldog chewing a wasp. And they all went, we know exactly who you mean in that split second. And it felt awful saying it in one sense, but they all could see here is someone who's really wrestling with their own place in the group and carrying with them a sense of irritation and frustration, but behind it, worry, anxiety, a bad experience in the past. And as we work together in this group, what was wonderful and what to see by the end of our time together, a change in their face as they dealt with the past hurt and challenges and found that they were embraced by a group. But it's a wonderful question for all of us to consider what is it like on the receiving end of us. And so this quality of connection between us and others requires us of each part of the body to play our part, to take responsibility for the impact we have on others, to attend to this quality of connection.

It's essential for us to see the potential in the others around us, no one greater, no one lower. And to do this, we have to build enough relationship for this to be possible.

[13:11] And relationship is really built by, first of all, having enough rapport. And rapport is, oh, I've got to know you a bit. You're familiar to me now. I know some things that you've done that we have in common, or I can really appreciate the things you've done I've not done at all, and I have an interest in that. That creates some foundations then for the buildings of trust.

And then we have the foundations for a sense of relationship. I don't know if you've ever had this. I remember working with someone who everyone tends to avoid in the workplace. And you're like, you know, I don't want to get caught by them.

Their nickname was the Dementor, which is if they got hold of you and talked, it felt like your life was slowly being sucked out of you. And so you found ways of seeing them coming and think, I'll nip into this office if I can. Or maybe I'll walk really fast so they can tell that I'm really busy and I don't have time to talk. But I remember getting over my own poor attitude one day and being in a conversation with them and realising actually how fascinating they were. I discovered this personal challenge overcome. I discovered that I even tried to climb Mount Everest at some point.

And my view of them changed. My openness increased. And I had this completely new view of them. And so making a connection with others requires us to have enough rapport, to build the trust, to make the connection, to appreciate the parts of the body, the value that we each bring, so we can combine that.

I noticed that one of the things that when I work in different contexts that destroys that, that undermines that sense of body, the different parts coming together, is gossip.

[14:59] There's one kind of gossip I think is great. It's really useful. It's where we give updates, where we bring people into our thinking. I might say, did you know that Jim's son got married in Singapore not long ago? It was just the most amazing time they had. I might say, did you know that Peter used to be involved in the BAP process of discerning who should be ordained or not? And has this incredible experience of really discerning actually what is God doing in this person's life? And how might they be prepared to be successful in the process? You might say, did you know Jill was a police officer who dealt with some of the most challenging things, yet carries it with a peace and a lightness? This is the good stuff of gossip, where we want to know more about each other, and it invests in this connection between us. It strengthens that sense of the body. But the one that destroys it, the one that I think the enemy really uses, is when we enroll others into a negative viewpoint about somebody else. We have criticism, and we draw others in to share that negative and undermining viewpoint. We must absolutely share a concern. We must share our thinking. We must test what's going on. It's a really healthy part of community. But the unrolling to undermine is where the enemy does the work.

And from this passage, we see Paul speaking into that for the church in Corinth. Therefore, I want you to know that no one who's speaking by the Spirit of God says, Jesus be cursed. And no one can say, Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit. And our challenge for us, are we living with that same fruit of the Spirit in our lives, with kindness and goodness?

And let's just talk about the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Paul writes, now to each one, the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

I cannot see the gifts of the Spirit here without looking at the fruit of the Spirit. In the same way, one body has many parts. I think the gifts will require the fruit of the Spirit to be of value. In 1 Corinthians 13 verse 1, Paul writes, if I speak in the tongues of men or angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries or

knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. So as we consider the gifts of God and the use of those gifts given by the Holy Spirit, I think we have to consider the level of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives first. For this is the marker, the extent to which that gift is in service of the community, in service of the work of God, or meeting a personal need. So a question of our love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control that Russ talked about last week.

Further in the verse, to one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are a work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one just as he determines. So I've experienced the gifts described here really operating for the common good, being used to equip the church. And the day that I became a Christian, I was in a packed church, and the pastor in that context said, I think there's a young man here, I feel God's really speaking to me about this, you're on the right-hand side of the church, and God is challenging you to where he is in your life.

[19 : 21] Packed church, he interrupted the worship, and I was stood there thinking, wow, I can't sing these worship songs, but I kind of want to, and with tears streaming down my face, I ignored it, but he said it again later, and I eventually responded, and that's the day that I really met with Jesus and gave my heart to God.

Helen and I have mutual friends, Nancy, who runs a conference for women, and every year, I think 200 or so women come to the conference, and she prays in advance and says, Holy Spirit, what are you saying for this person? And then writes a script for them. So when they arrive in the hotel room, on their bed is a scroll written with a personal word. Incredible testimonies of how that verse that she has for them speaks into the very heart of their challenge they're facing to in that moment. Year after year, she's been doing it for over 25 years. A sense of that expectation that the Holy Spirit is wanting to meet with us, speak to us, to equip us to be community, to be one body.

I remember praying for someone, and as I'm praying, getting the picture of a baby with the umbilical cord around the neck and said, I don't know if this means anything, or this is too much cheese, but I'm getting this picture. Does this mean anything? Absolutely. This is how I came into the world. And the problem they were wrestling with was fear. And so as we prayed, they experienced a sense of that being released from them. In a very small way, just recently, Kate and Tim and I were speaking about the life of the church, and he had a picture of the pump being primed, and we talked about how do we make sure we provide enough giving for the church to work. And then without talking to Russ, Russ then spoke the next day and shared this image of the pump being primed, and a sense of nudging, noticing what the Holy Spirit might be doing to us.

There are many stories of wisdom, knowledge, healing, discernment, discernment of spirits, tongues, interpretation of tongues, of God acting in discernible and tangible ways in our lives through the Holy Spirit. And there's so much more to explore about this. But as Paul says, as we so eagerly desire these, I also want to reinforce that really it starts with the fruits of the Spirit, which is the foundation for these gifts. What is our motivation? What is the source?

[21 : 58] What's the driver? From love they're a gift. From ambition, personal ambition, they are not. And as we read in James 4.10, Jesus says, humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.

And so we come at this topic with a humility, with an openness, saying, Lord, lead us in this, guide us. And as a community, we discern that together. Many parts, one body and gifts of the Holy Spirit. Lord, we thank you for the wisdom in this chapter.

For the wisdom from Paul encouraging the church to seek equality amongst themselves. To absolutely put you first, Lord Jesus, at the centre of what they're doing.

To open their hearts to what you might bring into that community, to enable them and to equip them to do your work. But also that encouragement that is the fruit of the Holy Spirit that is so essential essential for a community, for different parts of the body to be a body in the name of Jesus Christ. And Lord, we ask that you would speak to us. You would nudge us. You would encourage us where we need that. Help us notice where we can be our parts of the body to those around us in this building and in our community and in our homes.

[23 : 46] We ask Holy Spirit, lead us in this week. Draw us closer. In the power and authority of your name, Lord Jesus. Amen. Amen.