

Life in the Spirit (1)

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[0 : 00] For most of us, life in the church is fairly straightforward. The Free Church of Scotland, our denomination, has a rule book called the Blue Book, which guides most of the things we do.

So on paper, we can write down the way and we order our congregations with elders and deacons, the things ministers ought to do, and broadly speaking, the way in which our services of worship ought to run.

As long as you study our Blue Book, our Book of Rules, together with our history as a church and the relevant acts of the General Assembly, you could say that you understand the Free Church of Scotland.

In fact, you could score 100% in an exam about the Free Church. And I guess the same is true of any Christian denomination, be it Anglican or Baptist, be it Presbyterian or Independent.

As long as you study the documents of guidance, you could say that you understand and know that church. But the thing is, according to the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12, there's something without which you will never really understand how a church works at all.

[1 : 23] That something is not a something at all, it's a someone. That someone is the Holy Spirit, and it's He, not our governing documents, who is the life of every truly Christian church of whatever denomination.

The Holy Spirit is the reason for the church's energy, resilience, faith, hope, wisdom, and love.

Unless we take Him and His work into account, for all that we might score 100% in an exam about the church, we will never understand how the church works at all.

Life in the church might seem straightforward, but the Holy Spirit at work among us makes it, shall we say, at times exciting and very unpredictable.

In a previous letter, which we no longer have, the Corinthian Christians had asked the Apostle Paul about spiritual gifts. The various gifts the Holy Spirit gives to different Christians, which, as we'll see, He uses to build up the church.

There are very few subjects so controversial in today's church as the spiritual, or as some call them, the charismatic gifts. Without them, there is no Christian church.

[2 : 53] And for that reason, among many, we rejoice in them and pray that God would use them and help us to use them for the building up of His church and the glory of His name.

It's such a pity that the charismatic gifts, far from uniting the church, have served to divide us. It was the same in Corinth.

Remember, this section of Corinthians is governed by Paul's instruction in chapter 14, verse 40. All things should be done decently and in order.

All things should be done decently and in order in the church. In our previous passages in 1 Corinthians 11, remember from verses 1 to 16 about head coverings, verses 17 to 34 about the Lord's Supper, it would seem that disorder had crept into the church in Corinth through its misunderstandings of gender and the abuse of the Lord's Supper.

Now Paul is dealing with another feature of the Corinthian church which is indecent and disordered, namely the work of the Holy Spirit in the charismatic or spiritual gifts.

[4 : 05] In today's confused church, we need more than ever to heed the Bible's teaching on this issue. While always bearing in mind that 90% of the church's growth in the world today comes through so-called charismatic churches.

This calls for deep humility on our part and great thankfulness that God's Holy Spirit is at work powerfully in the church and in our world today.

Well, we can neatly divide 1 Corinthians 12, verses 1 through 11 into three sections. Speaking by the Spirit, verses 1 through 3. Showing the Spirit, verses 4 through 10.

And strengthened by the Spirit in verse 11. Remember, without the Holy Spirit, there is no church. But with the Holy Spirit, the church not only lives, but grows and thrives. First of all then, speaking by the Spirit, verses 1 through 3. Before they were Christians, all of Paul's readers were idol worshipers.

[5 : 22] If they were Gentiles, they were worshipers of different gods made of wood and stone. If they were Jews, they were worshipers of the laws and the culture and the tradition of their forefathers.

But one and all, they were followers of gods who had no real existence. And for that reason, these gods were unable to speak. Verse 2, they were mute.

Paul is introducing here the influence of the Holy Spirit upon our speech. The Holy Spirit at work in the church so inflames our view of Christ that we want to exalt and glorify Him in all we say. We want to proclaim Him as Lord. In the Corinth of Paul's day, other religious figures in the community would engage in ecstatic announcements and they would work themselves into a frenzy and appear to speak on behalf of their gods.

Some of these ecstatic announcements from outside the church would concern the Christian church and what it believed about this messianic figure, Jesus. Influenced by who knows what, they would loudly shout blasphemies in the name of their gods.

[6 : 39] But the Holy Spirit at work in the church wants to exalt the name of Jesus by its songs and its prayers and its readings and its sermons.

It wants to proclaim, Jesus Christ is Lord. Here's the mark of a Spirit-filled church, its proclamation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

These words, Jesus is Lord, are but a summary of the influence of the Holy Spirit upon the proclamation of the church. They are to be unpacked and applied into the daily lives of Christians within the church.

Jesus Christ is Lord. What does that mean for my day-to-day employment? What does that mean for my relationships? What does that mean for my private life?

And so on. Thomas Chalmers, the founder of the Free Church, was a minister for many years before he became a Christian. His sermons were moralistic discourses on how we might live better lives and by so doing earn God's favor.

[7 : 51] He held up Jesus as an example of a perfectly moral man whose example we must strive toward. He did not preach the Lordship of Christ, but the ability of human beings to reach up to God by their own moral efforts in trying to be like Jesus.

Later, having been brought close to death by an illness, he came to see Jesus not primarily as an example we must follow, but as a Savior in whom we must trust.

He saw the cross as the place where his sins were forgiven, and he was given a new heart empowered by the Holy Spirit to pursue holiness and righteousness. Chalmers, who was from Anstruther and Fyfe, became a preacher not of empty morality, but Scotland's loudest proclaimer of the Lordship of Christ.

When we hear ministers in the church preaching empty morality, we must conclude that the Holy Spirit is not in what they say, because they are not proclaiming the Lordship of Jesus.

Years later, there was a very old man, when asked about his earlier moralistic, Christless preaching, Chalmers hung his head in shame and said, I was wrong.

[9 : 23] I was most terribly wrong. I spent a couple of months towards the end of last year wrestling with a strange question.

I wrestled with the question of whether ministers like me could be replaced with chat GPT and artificial intelligence. So, we can ask computers now to produce a sermon in the style of the famous Welsh preacher Martin Lloyd-Jones on a particular text, and it'll spill out a better sermon than I could write.

Then we could get the computer to show a holographic image of Lloyd-Jones in the front. You know, many congregations would dispense with mediocre ministers like me in favor of an AI ministry of Martin Lloyd-Jones at the front.

This, however, although it can be done today, is not a danger to a spiritually sensitive connexion. For in all seriousness, what AI lacks is the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

AI's words may well educate and teach, but they will not do anything spiritual for the power of the Holy Spirit has been replaced by coding languages.

[10:53] We're going to come back to this in our last point, but I want to stress this so that none of us misunderstand what I'm saying. There is so much more to preaching than communication skills. Certainly, there's not less, but there's far more. The Holy Spirit points us powerfully to Jesus Christ as the Word is preached and powerfully draws sinners to see their need of the cross for eternal salvation.

A preacher of empty morality cannot do this, doesn't have the Holy Spirit. An AI program can't do this, doesn't have the Holy Spirit.

Only the power of the Holy Spirit speaking through a Spirit-filled man of God can do this. The message of the cross of which we spoke earlier in the 1 Corinthians, delivered by the Spirit-appointed messengers of the cross, it may appear weak and foolish to the world outside, but it's the power of God unto salvation for all who shall believe.

As the Holy Spirit powerfully proclaims the wisdom of the cross through His appointed preachers, the congregation does not hear the words of a man, but the very words of God, and is challenged, convicted, converted, and comforted.

[12:18] I clearly remember the words of the late principal Donald MacLeod, Colin MacKey's, late Colin MacKey's best friend, warning us against preaching in our own strength and according to our own abilities.

Donald was quoting the 18th century Scottish preacher Thomas Boston, who said, you know, a man may preach like an angel, but be useless.

A man may preach like an angel, but be useless. The mark of the Spirit at work in the church isn't the ability and strength of its preacher. It is that he is powerfully at work in the preacher's words to bring sinners to Christ.

The first duty of the Holy Spirit in the church is to influence its speaking and its proclamation. Speaking by the Spirit. Second, from verse 4 to 10, showing the Spirit, showing the Spirit.

We've said the whole way through, the church in Corinth was an imperfect church with a perfect Savior. One of the ways in which it showed its imperfection was by the disorder and indecency of its public worship services.

[13:33] Now, as Christians, we're all of different temperaments and abilities. In the early church, before the canon of Scripture was complete, some Christians possessed spiritual gifts which we don't often see today, gifts such as healing and prophecy and tongues.

The problem was that those who possessed these more extraordinary gifts were lorded over those who had, shall we say, less extraordinary gifts. Oh, look at me, they were saying.

I can speak in tongues. I can heal people with a touch. I can tell you what's going to happen in the future. What can you do?

Among the many things this section teaches us, I want to focus on verse 7 as its central theme. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

And there's three brief points I want to make from this verse which will help us to understand the role of the Holy Spirit in the church. First, to each has been given gifts.

[14:41] To each has been given gifts. Every Christian in this church has been given gifts by God. Gifts they may or may not have had by nature, but they most certainly have through the Holy Spirit.

No one who is a Christian today can say, well, God's not given me a gift. Paul lists some of these gifts in this section your gift might not be here. Nevertheless, in other places, Paul lists other gifts like hospitality, administration, prayer, and words of comfort.

Every single one of us has been gifted by God in our own ways according to His wisdom and His grace. If you do not yet know in what way God has gifted you, ask a close Christian friend for their advice.

Now, we might wonder to ourselves, who are the most gifted people in our congregation? And the answer is, all of us are equally gifted just in different ways. I stand in awe of your spiritual gifts. Helena's gifts on the piano, Archie's gifts with a screwdriver, a saw, and a hammer. Heather's gifts with words, Donald's gifts of project management, Laura's gifts of administration, Lisa's gifts of welcome, and so on and so forth.

[16:12] We all have spiritual gifts, every one of us. The important thing is that we use them for each other. Second, these gifts have been given to each of us for the common good, for the common good.

The word Paul uses here is literally benefit together, benefit together. God has given each of us gifts for this purpose that we might use them for the benefit of the whole congregation. The life of the church here is a joint enterprise with each member benefiting from the other's use of his or her gifts. God may have given each one of us spiritual gifts, but he's given them to us for the benefit of the other.

We might ask ourselves the question, and we should ask ourselves the question, how can I use what God has given me for the good of others so that the church, this joint enterprise of his, may benefit?

There's no place for selfishness in the church, just selflessness. Though it may cost us dearly, we are compelled by verses like this to put others before ourselves in the use of the spiritual gifts God has given us.

[17 : 43] We cannot emphasize this enough. God had someone else in mind when he gave you the spiritual gift he did. It is said of any church that 80% of the work is done by 20% of the people.

That's true here in Corona Prechurch. in light of how God has given us all gifts, is this fair? Should not others be stepping up to help with youth work, music ministry, welcome rotors, visitation, etc.? If that goes on that only 20% of people are using their gifts to serve us, they'll burn out.

And this is especially relevant in our particular situation where for the good of the gospel and under the leading of God, our church plants have removed hardworking and gifted people from among us. We need new people to step up and take responsibility and use the spiritual gifts God has given them for the common good.

[19 : 00] Well, thirdly, from verse 7, these gifts have been given to us as a manifestation of the Spirit, as a manifestation of the Spirit. The Spirit declares His presence in the church by the presence of these gifts among Christians.

You might ask the question, where can we see the Holy Spirit at work in our church? And we answer, we see Him as each Christian uses the gifts God has given him or her for the common good.

Now, perhaps we don't think of it that way, but that's what it is. When we are using the gifts God has given us for the good of others in the church, the Holy Spirit is manifesting Himself.

He is showing Himself. He is, as it were, taking human form in our actions and in our words. Rachel Tate was a member of Glasgow City Free Church until her death in 2017.

Many of you here will remember her. She could be formidable. She'd often shake her fist at me. But it's what people didn't know about her which made her very special.

[20 : 10] She was a modern-day Dorcas, a very kind lady who went about doing good. She took a special interest in older people. When they were in hospital, it was Rachel who'd be there first, volunteering to take their dirty clothes home, wash them, and return them clean.

Now, some of the older people to whom she was very kind were very awkward. She was always very patient with them. You know, when I think of Rachel, she was a living manifestation of the Holy Spirit, using the gifts God had given her for the benefit of others.

You know, we didn't know the half of what Rachel Tate did until after she died. A spirit-filled church isn't necessarily exuberant in its worship with everyone throwing their hands in the air, exemplary in its preaching, and excellent in its strategy, although surely we should strive after some of these things at least.

A 1 Corinthians 12 spirit-filled church is where every single member is using the gifts God has given him or her for the common good. And in so doing, the presence of the Holy Spirit becomes manifest for all to see.

It is where every spiritual gift no matter how menial or common is valued. So the question for us tonight is this, in what ways has God gifted you?

[21 : 48] And are you ready to use those gifts for the common good of others? Showing the Spirit. Well then, lastly, strengthened by the Spirit.

Strengthened by the Spirit, verse 11. I have been on many Kalmak ferries. I love the scenery while crossing the inner and outer Hebrides, and you know what?

I've eaten many fish suppers on Kalmak ferries, and so has Peter Morrison, because we've shared some together. One thing I've never seen are the engine rooms of a Kalmak ferry.

Now, I know each ship's got one, not because the ship is moving, but because you can see the water trail behind it, well, when it's working anyway, but I've never seen the engines themselves.

In verse 11, we're taken into the engine room of the church where it gets its power. This is a place no blue book has been, and no act of assembly can reach.

[22 : 49] It is the hidden energy empowering all activities, and especially the use of our spiritual gifts. We may know that God has gifted us in certain areas, but all of us feel insufficient.

Even Paul asked the question, who is sufficient for all these things? He may have gifted us as preachers, but it's a hard calling to be a preacher.

We cannot, we must not do it in our own strength, but we have the promise of the empowerment of the Holy Spirit here in verse 11. He is the engine room of our hearts, working powerfully to make the ship go.

It was the Holy Spirit who transformed Thomas Chalmers from being a lecturer in morality to becoming one of the greatest gospel preachers Scotland has ever seen.

Remember Donald McLeod's words? A man may preach like an angel, but be useless. they give preachers great hope because it's not our angelic voices or our academic expositions which God uses.

[24 : 10] It's the Holy Spirit that work in us. No one looking on and the preacher least of all can understand why a technically expert, passionately delivered sermon falls flat.

But a rather ordinary sermon leads to someone being converted. It's a mystery unless we take into account the empowering influence of the Holy Spirit, empowering both preacher and hearer to engage in genuine spiritual business.

It was the Holy Spirit who empowered Rachel Tate to tirelessly and compassionately visit and care for the elderly and vulnerable. She didn't have the gift of administration.

She most certainly didn't have the gift of tongues, but she knew that the gift God had given her was not for her benefit but for the good of others. Even when those she was serving were awkward and ungrateful and mean, she joyfully persevered.

I can only put this down to the empowering work of the Holy Spirit within her. No one can account for her patient endurance. There were times when I would visit some of those that she was looking after, names excluded for obvious reasons.

[25 : 31] Frankly, after half an hour of them grumbling, complaining, and gurning at me, I'd be glad to read, pray, and then to say my goodbyes. But for Rachel, nothing was too much.

we put this down only to the empowering influence of the Holy Spirit in her heart and life. As each of us use the spiritual gifts God has given us, God promises that his Spirit will give us strength and power in their use.

You know, we may feel like giving up, I often do, but just at that very point, the Holy Spirit will give us new strength to keep going. Are we scared to use the gifts God has given us for fear that we'll fail?

That's not a bad place to be because it's in our weakness the Holy Spirit will give us power to keep going for the common good of the whole church. One last thing before we conclude.

Notice how Paul ends this section. the same Spirit who apportions to each one individually as he wills. You know, I may wish that I had your gifts, and you may wish that you had mine.

[26 : 52] We may wish that the Holy Spirit was calling us to a different task in the church from the one he has done, but it's he who has willed to give us the gifts we have.

And it's he who promises to empower us as we use them for the good of others and for the glory of his Father. For as much as we might understand the history and laws of the church, we'll never really get past first base unless we take the work of the Holy Spirit among us into account.

When is the Holy Spirit at work in our church? You know, you will not see him in the exuberance of our singing. You'll see him in the exercise of spiritual gifts.

As for the common good of each other, we, depending upon the Holy Spirit, love and serve each other the way Jesus self-sacrificially loved and served us.