

The community of the Spirit

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. So every true Christian has a conversion story. Because we saw last week, didn't we, if you were here, that the Holy Spirit is in the business of makeover, extreme makeover.

He changes people on the inside. He gives them new life. And so the definition of a true Christian, not my definition, but Jesus' definition of a true Christian is someone who has been born again, as he puts it, who has started that new life.

And if that's happened to you, you will know it. You'll be able to tell more or less when and how that new life began, what the Holy Spirit did in your life to bring rebirth to you.

If you're a true Christian, that is. Every true Christian, I believe, has a story to tell. Now, I shared a bit of my story last week, if you were here. And this week, I'd like to tell you a little bit more about it. Not because I like talking about myself, because it's not really about me at all.

You see, a Christian's conversion story has nothing to do with them. It's the work of God, and it glorifies God for us to share what God has done to give us new life.

[1 : 15] And so I want to tell you a little bit more about my story. We must tell people, as I say, what God has done in our life to magnify who he is and what he does.

And it helps people to see the reality of God working in this world. Anyway, so I told you how I came from a nominal Christian background. By nominal Christian, I mean someone who goes to church culturally as a Christian, who's been brought up as a Christian, but has no internal change.

And so I was brought up in a nominal Christian background. And so, as I told you last week, when I was converted, my life on the outside didn't change much because I was already doing Christian things.

But my life on the inside changed completely. I was born again. I was made new. I had new priorities. I had a completely new direction in life, a new orientation, a complete spiritual makeover. But today, that's where I ended off last week. Today, I want to tell you how that happened. What the Holy Spirit used to bring me to that point. Because on reflection, as I look back on my story as a Christian, and I'm sure is very similar to many of your stories, what I realized is that the Holy Spirit, the primary thing the Holy Spirit used to bring me to new birth was the Christian community that I belonged to.

[2 : 40] A Christian community that I was part of was key to the whole thing. A group of Christian people who loved me, I could never work out why, who showed me grace, who helped me to taste what grace really was, and showed me what being a Christian really was.

Now, of course, there were particular individuals along the way. The Bible teacher who preached at a student retreat that I went on, the authors of books that I read that God used to open my eyes. But behind all of that, behind the particular ingredients of God's work in my life, there was this Christian community I belonged to who helped me to see the reality of their gospel in their relationships with each other and their relationships with me.

And the grace in those relationships that I had never tasted in the world out there. And that's what made it real for me. That's what took the gospel off the pages of the Bible and put it into my world. But it's not just me. I've since discovered that is actually the normal way the Holy Spirit converts people. Through the experience of genuine Christian community.

[3 : 52] Reformed, renewed relationships that God gives within the Christian community that you only find in there. Grace. That you don't find anywhere else in the world.

And yes, it's the gospel word that saves. It's the gospel word where we discover where that grace comes from. And the gospel itself is the power of salvation. I'm not denying that.

But it's the Christian community through whom the Holy Spirit not only makes that gospel known, but makes it real. Makes it tangible in their relationships with each other.

And so, you can think of it like this. It's the Christian communities, the little Christian groups of people that God has put in this world like this. He's put in different communities around the world. It's those Christian communities that are the epicenters of new life in this world. You know, we remembered from our first session on the Holy Spirit how the Holy Spirit is in the business of bringing life into darkness and chaos.

[4 : 53] And he's doing that in this world through the church. But if you can imagine it as kind of beams of life coming down into this world. But it's being concentrated in the church, in the gathering of believers.

And then that's going out into the rest of the world. We are the epicenters of new life through the Holy Spirit. The Christian community. The substations of the Spirit's power distribution system in this world to change lives.

But it's not just me and my observations which affirm that. You see it in the New Testament. Throughout the New Testament, you see the central place of the Christian community in the Spirit's work.

If you trace how the Spirit works and what he's done in history. You start to realize that the Christian community, gathered believers, are key to the Holy Spirit working effectively in this world.

So take, for example, the first thing Jesus did before even teaching his disciples the gospel of the kingdom. What did he do? He brought them together in a new community.

[5 : 52] They didn't really like each other. They were from completely different walks of life. There was a Levite and there was a tax collector. There were people who would have hated each other in ordinary life.

Jesus brings them together, helps them to overcome their boundaries, gives them one thing in common, and makes a new family. They lived together. They shared life together. And he caused them to form a new community before anything else.

Because he knew they didn't just need him to have new life. They needed each other as well.

Because that little community of believers, that first little community, was what the Holy Spirit was going to make his base of operations for his transformation project in this world.

And that's why Jesus went on to tell them it's their relationships with each other that's going to show the world that they're his disciples. Remember that in John? And that's why before he even gave the great commission in Matthew 28 that we're all quite familiar with, you know, the commission to go and make disciples.

Before he gave them that great commission, he gave them another great commission, which we often overlook, which is in John 13. What is that great commission?

[7 : 05] He told them to love one another. He knew unless they are loving each other, unless they learn to share life and learn to be a Christian community, they will not be able to fulfill their later commission to go out into this world and make disciples.

So you see the central place of the Christian community. And it goes on. Think of when the Holy Spirit actually arrived at Pentecost. What were the disciples doing when the Holy Spirit arrived? What were the disciples involved in that triggered the Holy Spirit's arrival to this world? Well, I'll read it. Acts chapter 2. Yes, it was prayer, but it was something else.

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together. Community. Togetherness. They were all together in one place.

Suddenly, a sound like a blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house that they were sitting. What triggered the Holy Spirit was the gathering of believers. I don't think we realize what a powerful thing believers gathered together is.

[8 : 14] That's what triggered the Holy Spirit coming with power. But then what was it later that caused the ongoing growth of the church? Well, Acts chapter 2 from verse 42. A little bit later on, we read this.

Verse 42. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship. To the breaking of bread and to prayer. I'll read on. Everyone was filled with awe at many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.

All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day, they continued to meet together in the temple courts.

They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Why? What was the key to the growth of the early church? Because they devoted themselves, we're told, to a number of things. Firstly, to learning the Bible, the apostles' teaching. Secondly, to prayer.

[9 : 14] And we've already learned the Holy Spirit works primarily through those two things. To us communicating to God and God communicating to us. But also, we read, just as important was fellowship and the breaking of bread.

Now, that breaking of bread could refer to the sacrament of communion, the remembrance of the death of Jesus. Or it could just refer to eating together, doing life together, being in each other's homes.

But either way, the point is, it was the gathered community of Christians as they came together where the Holy Spirit did his work. I need you to see this. I need you to see the importance of the gathered community of believers for the Holy Spirit to work in this world powerfully.

But now I just want you to think about why that is. Why does the Holy Spirit insist on the gathering of believers in order to do his work of transformation and rebirth in people's lives?

Why is the Christian community so important for this work of converting people? Well, think about it. I want you to step back. And I want you to think for a second of the purpose of the gospel.

[10 : 25] The gospel that we proclaim from this church. The gospel we sang about this morning. The gospel we're going to remember later in the Lord's Supper. The gospel that we are everything about us is the gospel. But what is the actual purpose of the gospel?

Why did God put that whole thing into place and put that whole plan into being? What was God's end game in the gospel? I wonder if you've ever thought about that.

What was his end game? What was his ultimate objective for sending his son to die for us, to take our sins, to send his spirit, to give us new life, to make us born again?

What was it ultimately all for? Well, we don't have to speculate because the Bible tells us. Galatians chapter 4 says this. It tells us what it was all for. And I want you to listen carefully.

But when the set time had fully come, that is the time in God's timeline of his plan to come to fruition. What happened? God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law.

[11 : 24] That was the gospel in a nutshell. So we're not under law anymore. We're under grace. Even though we've sinned. Because Jesus kept the law for us. And so by his death on the cross and our faith in that, we attain his righteousness.

That's the gospel. But why did that all happen? Well, we read on that we might receive adoption to sonship or daughtership, if you like. So that's telling us the reason God sent Jesus to save people was because God wanted to build a family.

God, that's always been his end game. That's always been his objective, to build a divine family. Now, he didn't need to do that.

Just as much as an earthly father and mother didn't need to have children, right? Earthly parents, we don't need to have children. In fact, it's far less trouble to not have children.

Am I right? Not waking up five times in the night. No cleaning up baby vomit at three in the morning. No school fees and school uniforms and stationary bills.

[12 : 35] No crazy teenagers going through puberty. I mean, it's actually much simpler to not have children. So why on earth do human beings do it? Why do we have children?

Well, because we have a life that we want to pass on. It's an innate desire of human beings. Not just to live, but to pass on life.

And so why did God make us? Knowing all the mess that that would cause. Because God knew that. When he made us, he knew what was going to happen.

He knew the fall was going to happen. He knew sin was going to come. And he knew we were going to mess up his good creation. Why, knowing that in advance, did he make us at all? Why was he willing to do that?

Well, because how is God described? What is his ultimate attribute that the Bible describes him as in the Trinity? He's described as a father. And part of his fatherhood is his desire to pass on his life.

[13 : 33] To help, to want others to experience the divine life and bliss that he and the Son and the Holy Spirit have always experienced in eternity past.

God the Father has always desired not just to have that life, but to pass it on. He wants others to experience that life. He wants to adopt people into his eternal family.

That is at the very center of his heart and his will and his desires. And that's why he did all this. And that's the point of the gospel. For adoption, to bring us into his family.

And so now, it starts to make sense that the way God brings people into that family is through that family. Because that's what salvation is, by the way.

We often think of salvation as something you've been saved out of. We've been saved out of sin.

We've been saved out of wrath if we believe in Jesus and if he is our Lord. We've been saved out of God's judgment.

[14 : 34] We've been saved out of death. But actually, just as much, the Bible describes salvation as something you've been saved into. More so, in fact. You've been saved into God's kingdom.

You've been saved into God's family. And so we can't expect people out there to be saved without experiencing the new family that God saved them to be a part of.

Right? And so that's why the Holy Spirit works primarily through the Christian community to do his work of regeneration. To do his work of new birth.

His speciality, in fact, is Christian fellowship. That's his thing. The Holy Spirit's thing is fellowship.

And we've spoken about all the other attributes and the work that the Holy Spirit does in this world.

And there are many to illuminate, to convict, all of that. But his speciality, where his heart is, is fellowship.

Have you ever wondered why the benediction at the end of 2 Corinthians says, May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you.

[15 : 46] Because the fellowship of Christians is where the Holy Spirit is working. That's his department. That's where he loves to work. That's his speciality. Because he knows that is where, that is where the powerhouse is of transformation of this world.

The gathered Christian community. And that is also where he gives us special power for us to do his work. When we're gathered as a community.

In the form of spiritual gifts. Yes, the Holy Spirit gives us special powers. Special powers. It sounds like a superhero movie. But actually it's true in a sense.

We are given special abilities that we don't have before. Spiritual gifts they're called. Which the Bible talks about. For us to use in the Christian community. Now spiritual gifts are awesome.

They're abilities. Things that you cannot do. Other than the Spirit giving you that ability to do it.

Things you couldn't do before. But when you read about spiritual gifts in the Bible.

[16 : 50] What you'll notice about them is that they're only really useful if they're used in the context of the Christian community. That's what they're designed for. Not to make individuals into effective witnesses.

But to make a group of Christians into an effective witnessing community. I'll say that again. It's that important. Spiritual gifts are not given to us to make us into effective individual Christians.

Spiritual gifts are given to us to make us into an effective witnessing community. Which means that if any church like us at St. Mark's for example. Is not an effective witnessing community.

If we're not seeing conversions. If we're not celebrating new people coming to life. If we're not baptizing people up here on a regular basis. Well it's probably because we're not using our spiritual gifts yet.

Nearly as much as we should be. Because that is the key way the Spirit has designed for us as a church to be an effective witnessing community.

[17 : 54] To be an effective center of new life generation for the community around us. If we are using our spiritual gifts. And only if we are. Because the Bible says every believer has at least one spiritual gift.

Every true Christian has at least one spiritual gift. And they must use it if their church is to be effective. So again. I'm not making this up. 1 Corinthians says. A manifestation of the Spirit is given to each believer for the common good.

Each believer. Ephesians 4 says the body of the church grows when each part does its work. Each part does its work. Only then will the body effectively grow.

And so according to these verses. If you are a believer. Sitting here this morning. And you are not regularly using your spiritual gift.

You are actually holding back your church's growth and effectiveness. Okay. So. Given that. What are these spiritual gifts? And how do we use them? Well.

[18 : 53] Let's look at one of the passages that talks about them. Romans 12. That Eliel read for us earlier. You can turn there in your Bibles. If you are not there yet. This is the passage I want us to concentrate on for the rest of this morning.

Romans 12. 4 to 8. And I will read it again. Listen carefully. For just as each one of us has one body with many members. And these members do not all have the same function.

So in Christ we though many form one body. And each member belongs to all the others. You do not belong to yourself. If you are a Christian. You belong to your church.

We have different gifts. According to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying. Then prophesy in accordance with your faith. If it is serving. Then serve.

If it is teaching. Then teach. If it is to encourage. Then give encouragement. If it is giving. Then give generously. If it is to lead. Then do it diligently. If it is to show mercy. Do it cheerfully.

[19 : 53] Okay. So some observations that I want to take out of this passage. We learn here about seven distinct spiritual gifts. And there are other lists in the Bible by the way.

That list other spiritual gifts. In fact. None of the list of spiritual gifts we get in the Bible is exhaustive. None of them actually is the same. They all talk about different gifts. Which means that.

That all of the lists together aren't exhaustive. There are more than just. The gifts mentioned in the Bible that exist. But the main key ones. Especially in the early church. Are listed.

For us. And so Paul gives. Seven of these key gifts. And they are. Prophecy. That is speaking God's words. Serving. Teaching. Encouraging.

Giving. Leading. And acts of mercy. In other words. Social work. Going to where there is a need in the community. Okay. So the first thing that really strikes me about these gifts.

[20 : 49] Is that. I don't know if you have spotted it. That many of them just seem quite ordinary.

Quite day to day. I mean typically when we think of spiritual gifts. What do we think of? We think of the supernatural gifts.

The healing. And the tongues. And sure. Prophecy is mentioned here in this list. And other passages do mention healing. And tongues. And things like that. And these are obviously supernatural gifts. But often.

In fact. The majority of gifts. Listed in the Bible. Are quite ordinary. Quite ordinary. And yet not. Ordinary. Because they are abilities given by the Holy Spirit.

For a particular task. And so while they might seem ordinary. And natural. They are done with supernatural effectiveness. And that's what makes them.

Extraordinary. Even though they seem ordinary. So. For example. Take. From our Old Testament reading. Bezalel. Bezalel. Bezalel better. He was given the supernatural.

[21 : 49] Spiritual gift of decoration. That was his gift. That's what God wanted to use him for. For the Lord's tabernacle. And so he was amazing at artwork.

Out of silver and gold. We're told. Cutting gemstones. And carving wood. Now these are very natural activities. They're the activities of jewelers and carpenters. And yet. When there were.

When. When. When. Bezalel was given. This gift of decoration. He did it with. Supernatural.

Enabling. Which made the tabernacle look amazing. It made it look out of this world.

It made it reflect the beauty of God. I mean. I often wonder what his home would have looked like. Like. His wife probably gave up doing home decor. A long time ago.

You know. Look. Look love. I've made this quilt. Oh. Well I just carved the garden of Eden out of gold. For our living room. Fine. Hard act to follow. Anyway. In the Old Testament.

[22 : 43] God. God only gave. Um. Gifts to select people. For select purposes. For a particular time. But now. In this age. He gives gifts like this.

To all Christians. It's amazing. Like the gift. Bezalel had. God has given a particular gift. To every believer. For the beautification. Of his church.

And the gospel. To the world outside. And. Many of them might seem quite ordinary. You might even. Miss them. You might even. Um.

Not notice. That you have this particular gift. And yet. God puts. In people. A desire. And a skill. To use. Those ordinary. Gifts.

In extraordinary. Ways. For the building up of his body. And for doing amazing things. In this world. But then of course. There are.

[23 : 38] So. I'm talking about the ordinary gifts. Which are probably the majority. But then of course. There are some obviously supernatural gifts. Things like tongues. Healing. And prophecy. Now.

Do gifts like this. Still exist. In our church today. Well. To find that out. You're going to have to go to growth group. This week. Because that's exactly what we're going to be discussing. But for now. All I'm going to say. Is that the need. For those particular gifts. Has admittedly changed. Since the first century. But. That doesn't mean that supernatural gifts. Aren't around. Today. If and when. God requires them. We can't tell God. What gifts. To give us. And not to give us. And God may well. And does use. Supernatural gifts today. For his purposes. But. The point that I want to focus on this morning. Is whether or not. These spiritual gifts. Are supernatural.

[24 : 35] There is one thing. That they all have in common. And you know what that is. They all in some way. Contribute to the witness of the community. Whether that's. At formal gatherings.

Like church. Or at informal gatherings. Around a meal. At someone's house. Christians have spiritual gifts. To bolster the witness. Of the church. In all of those gatherings. Whenever Christians are gathered. Let me run through some examples. That I've come across. So. A church runs an outreach event. Where people are invited from outside.

To come and learn about Jesus. In a relaxed setting. Over a meal. And churches have often done this. And often it's quite successful. In exposing people to the gospel. For the first time. But what makes an event like that.

A success. Well. If you're. If you've been listening. To the sermons. Then you'll know. You'll say. Well it's the Holy Spirit. That makes it a success. Yes. Of course. The Holy Spirit is needed.

[25 : 30] To make any event like that. A success. For people to. Understand. And believe the gospel. But. How does he do that work? What particular instruments. Does he use? Well. I'll tell you. He uses one person.

With a gift. Of leadership. To set in motion. And drive the event. He uses another. With a gift of organization. To plan. And get people together. Around the event. He uses another. With a gift of generosity. To pay for what's needed. For the event. He uses another. With a gift of serving. In the kitchen. To make great food. He uses another. With a gift of decoration. To make the hall.

Really welcoming. And he uses another. With a gift of teaching. To explain the gospel truths well. So that it all works together. All the different gifts.

Work together. To achieve. The spirit's work. In the lives of people. Or another example. A more informal example. Just as important. And just as much a place.

[26 : 25] Where the spirit is present. And working. A bri. A group of Christians. Having a bri. Where they invite. Their non-Christian friends. You think. Oh well. This is not the Holy Spirit's. Area.

He's a church. No. No. No. He's there. Where the Christians are gathering. Wherever Christians are gathering. The Holy Spirit is ready. And willing to do his work. And so how might he do that. At a bri. With a mix of Christians.

And non-Christians. Well. One couple. Is gifted in hospitality. And they've got a great way. Of welcoming people. In their home. And making them feel comfortable. And they've set up their home. Really well. To be hospitable.

Another person. Might have the gift of encouragement. Or motivation. To get other Christians. On board with this event. And to tell them. Phone them. Hey. You're coming to the bride. It's going to be great. And it's going to be an opportunity.

To meet people. Outside of the community. Of believers. Another might be gifted in prayer. And intercession. Praying for those who come. And praying for the conversations.

[27 : 22] That happen. Another will be gifted in evangelism. Standing around the bride. Taking opportunities. To explain the good news. Naturally in conversations. Because that's their gift. But you see.

Whatever the gift is. The point is. No single individual. Would be able. To be used. Without all the others. In those situations. And that's.

Because that's how God designed it. He's made the effectiveness. Of your particular gifts. Dependent on the Christians around you. Using theirs.

Which means. That spiritual gifts. Are pretty useless. Outside of the Christian community. You. You can't really. Benefit much. From your spiritual gift. If you're alone.

If you're not spending time. With the Christian community. And not just at formal gatherings. But in. Other kinds of gatherings. As well. Which means that if. If you're not using. Your spiritual gift. If you don't.

[28 : 18] Even know what your spiritual gift is. And you. You're frustrated. Trying to use it. But you can't use it. If you know what it is. It's probably because. You're not spending enough time. With the Christian community.

Because that's where the gift. Is designed to be used. And so. Assuming that you are a Christian. And therefore have a gift. How do you find out.

What that gift is. I'm sure that's what you're wondering. This morning. Well. To some. Extend. I've just answered that. You spend time with other Christians. Formally.

At church. And informally. In ordinary life. And you don't just go straight home. After the service. If it's a formal gathering. You. You look for opportunities. To contribute.

To the community. And to the community life. And soon enough. The spirit will make clear. What your gifts are. How you can best contribute. To that community. Now. It might take some time. Of trying out different ministries.

[29 : 15] Trying out different service opportunities. But soon enough. The Holy Spirit. Will make it evident. Often through the observation. Of other Christians. What your gifts are.

Okay. And once you find that out. Once you find out. What your gift. Or gifts. Are. Or if you already know. What they are. This morning.

What then? Well. Paul tells us. In Romans. In this passage. In front of you. And notice. He assumes. Christians know. What their gifts are already. When he writes this passage.

He says. If your gift is this. If your gift is that. He assumes. You know what it is. But he then gives instructions. He says. Now. Now use it. If you know what it is. Actually. You've got to use it.

Look. Look at the passage. Verse 7. If your gift is. Prophesying. Prophecy. If it is serving. Then serve. If it is teaching. Then teach. If it is to encourage.

[30 : 09] Then give encouragement. If it is giving. Then give generously. If it is to lead. Then do it diligently. If it is to show mercy. Then do it. And do it cheerfully. You see his point here.

Just because you know. What your gift is. Doesn't mean you're actually using it. And so it's your responsibility. He's saying here. It's your responsibility.

To make sure. Not just that you know. What your gift is. But that you are finding. Opportunities to use it. That you're not waiting. For the church administrator. To come and ask you.

Pray. And look for opportunities. To use your gift. That is your. That is on you. That is your responsibility. And your church needs you. To do that. And then when you do it.

Paul doesn't just say. Okay. So do it. He implies. You must do it excellently. Once you know. What your gift is. And once you are. You have found opportunities. To use it. Then you've got to.

[31 : 04] Pour yourself into that. You've got to do it excellently. He says. If it's giving. You don't just give. But you give generously. If it is leading. You don't just come to meetings. And make decisions.

You lead diligently. You put aside. Worldly concerns. And you focus on the job. That God has given you to do. If it's mercy ministry. You don't just do it. Like any other charity worker might.

You do it cheerfully. Knowing that the spirit. Is doing his life giving work. Through you. In the lives of other people. So. All that said. I will now. Want to do something.

In closing. As your pastor. I want to make a pledge. With you. And I also want you to respond. With a pledge. But I. I pledge.

That I. In the coming year. Will. Give. Each of you. As much opportunity. To use your. Spiritual gift. As I possibly can.

[32 : 01] And if you don't know what it is. I pledge that I will help you. As best I can. To find out. What it is. But I want. You to pledge something. For me in return. I need a pledge from you.

That you will make. Every effort. In the next year. To find out. What your spiritual gift is. If you do not know what it is. And when you do. That you will find a place.

To use it. In this community. Here at St. Mark's. Will you pledge. To do that. I already pledge. To do my part. Will you pledge. To do your part. This morning. For the sake of your church.

And for the sake of the kingdom. So that over the next year. And beyond. If we are doing that. Then we can get ready. To see the Holy Spirit. Work in this place.

Like never before. Through this community. A bunch of ordinary looking people. But with extraordinary gifts. That are just waiting to be used. And when they are. Oh that is going to be exciting.

[32 : 58] To see the Spirit. Work in power. Will you join us. In that. Let's pray. Heavenly Father. We do thank you. For the work of your Spirit. Thank you. As you have been reminding us.

Over these weeks. How we. Get involved in that. And thank you. Holy Spirit. For giving us. Gifts. Special. Abilities to use.

For the witness of our community. Lord. I pray for this community. It's in Mark's. I pray. That over the next little bit of time. You will help each and every single person. Sitting here. And listening to this recording.

To know what their spiritual gift is. And then to use it. And to use it well. God. We pray Lord. That as we are doing that. As we step up. And as we. Use the gifts you've given us.

For your purposes. That you would do what you said. You would grow this church. You would. You would help us to see lives. Changed in this community. That we would. That we would see conversions. And that you would be glorified through it all.

[33 : 55] In Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.