

A church reliant on the Holy Spirit

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[0 : 00] 1 Corinthians chapter 2 verse 6 to 16. We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or the rulers of this age who are coming to nothing.

No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.

None of the rulers of this age understood, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written, no one has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.

But God has revealed to us by his spirit. The spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him?

In the same way, no one knows the thoughts of God except the spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world, but the spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.

[1 : 31] This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom, but in words taught by the spirit, expressing spiritual truth in spiritual words.

The man without the spirit does not accept the things that come from the spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

The spiritual man makes judgment about the things, but he himself is not subject to anyone's judgment. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him, but we have the mind of Christ.

Amen. Thanks, Lucia. That's great. Thank you. Well, keep that passage open. We're going to work our way through it together this morning.

And I wonder, as we do that, if I can ask you to think about what is a successful church? Have you ever thought about that? What is a successful church?

[2 : 46] We know, don't we, what a successful business is. So a successful business is one that earns lots of money for its owners. We know what a successful athlete is, don't we?

Someone who wins lots of games, lots of tournaments. They get all the cool Nike gear because they get given it as sponsorship. Maybe you even know what a successful parent looks like.

You know, they have their kids in bed asleep by 7pm and are sitting in a tidy flat drinking a cup of tea in front of the television. I wonder whether you've thought about what a successful church looks like.

I guess if we use those same measures that we were talking about for a church, we might say that a successful church is one that maybe has a lot of people coming along to it.

Maybe they've got a lot of money. Maybe the church meets in a fancy building. They have some funky music or a celebrity pastor that everybody knows. But even when you express it like that, you sort of know, don't you, that doesn't really kind of sound right for a church, does it?

[3 : 51] I mean, there are lots of churches like that, especially in London, and you wouldn't want to go to any of them, really. It would be safer not going. So what then is success for a church?

What is it that we are aiming for? You know, we're at the start of a journey of church revitalization.

What is it that we're hoping the destination will be? Well, I want to suggest to you this morning from the passage that we've just read together that a successful church is not necessarily rich.

It's not necessarily meeting in a fancy building. It doesn't even have to have funky music. Instead, what I want us to see together is that successful church is a church that is relying on and experiencing the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

In other words, the church, a successful church, is a place where God is obviously at work, opening people's eyes and hearts to see the wonder of who he is and what he's done, and empowering church members to live that life together.

Now, just think about that with me. If that's right, if that's what a successful church is, if a successful church is relying on and experiencing the regenerating work of the Spirit, then here's the central thing about a successful church.

[5 : 11] You and I can't make one, can we? There's nothing that we can do to make church successful, because the success of a church relies not on us, but on God, on a movement of the Spirit.

And I want to suggest this morning that that has a profound impact on what church should look like and what church should feel like for all of us this morning. Now, if you'll wind back with me a moment and come back to 1 Corinthians chapter 2, which we read together, I want us to see that there, but we're going to walk through the passage first, and then I'm going to pull out what I think are three implications for us as a church.

So let's just walk through these verses first. Let's walk through them. In verse 6, Paul tells them that although his preaching isn't with conventional wisdom, that's what we were thinking about last week, still it is a message of wisdom among the mature, as he calls them.

It's important that we get what the word mature is there. It doesn't mean people of a mature age. I'm sorry if you're of a mature age this morning, but what he's not saying this morning is that once you arrive at a certain age, you will then understand what he's saying.

So this is for older folks and not for younger folks. That's not what he's saying this morning. Really, literally the word there is perfect. And this is Paul's description of the church.

[6 : 29] These are the saints or the sanctified or the holy people, as he calls them in chapter 1 verse 2, the saints in Corinth, the mature in Corinth.

Again, that's not because every single church member or any church member is absolutely perfect. Rather, it's to contrast them with the world. The world are the perishing, chapter 1 verse 18.

So the mature are really just Christians, those who more often than not were weak and nothing in the eyes of the world, but who have now been saved by God and brought into his kingdom, made holy, mature and perfect.

But really the question is then, where is this wisdom from? If this wisdom isn't worldly wisdom, it's not the wisdom of this age from the rulers of this age, a wisdom that's coming to nothing, as he puts it in verse 6, then what kind of wisdom is it?

Well, look down at verse 7. You're told this is God's wisdom. We declare God's wisdom, he says. Wisdom that he tells us has been hidden, but has now been revealed.

[7 : 40] It's a bit of an aside, but I think it's worth noticing that the wisdom of God has not been hidden because God was making his mind up about it. You and I can be like that, can't we? You know, we wait until the very last minute to make a decision because we don't want to get a wrong decision.

So someone asks you to do something and you wait for ages and ages and ages before you decide whether you're going to say yes or no to doing it. Someone's not very happy with me so far this morning.

Please don't worry about it, it's absolutely fine. I don't mind a bit of crying. It's not that here though, is it? It's not that God can't make up his mind why the wisdom's hidden.

The wisdom has been hidden, but it has been decided. Look at the end of verse 7. You notice there that it has been planned for the glory of God's people before time began.

In other words, this message of wisdom for the mature, although it's been hidden and now revealed, is about the eternal plans of God. Plans which he established in eternity past and is now working out in history.

[8 : 45] But despite the fact that these plans are ancient and have been working out in history, still, verse 8, none of the rulers of this age understood them. Why? Well, because they crucified the Lord of glory, which had they known and understood and believed the plans of God, had they been mature, to use Paul's phrase in verse 6, they would not have wickedly killed God's Son in human flesh.

Again, it's worth seeing the implication of Paul's point here. The message of wisdom for the mature, founded on the ancient plans of God from before time begun, focuses where?

This hidden mystery from eternity past has its focus where? There, on the cross of Jesus Christ, where the eternal Son in human flesh handed himself over to the wicked intention of his enemies, who unbeknown to them, while going through with their wicked intentions, actually accomplish the eternal plan of God to provide a sacrifice of sin so that he might forgive and save.

Now, that plan, we're told, is so glorious we could never have conceived it, verse 9. He says what? No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for his people. But verse 10, that's the message that's now being revealed to Paul by the Spirit, and it's the message he's now preaching. Now, we're going to move on just to look at some of the other bits in a moment, but just think about what this means.

[10:15] Notice here that God is not frantic. God is not stressed, is he? He's not running around trying to accomplish his purposes in the least amount of time possible.

Instead, he's patient. He is mysteriously patient, isn't he? He's had a message of salvation decided before time began and worked it out in thousands of years of history, building up to the cross of Jesus Christ.

A message that was foreshadowed and role-played out in the temple for thousands of years before God the Son arrives in human flesh.

A plan that was achieved not only despite, but because of the ignorance of those who achieved it as they drove the nails into Jesus' hands. And now for thousands of years, he's patiently working out Christ's victory and giving his spirit to whoever he wills.

God is patient. I wonder if you notice that's how God works in your life too. He's not in a rush.

Instead of giving quick answers and fast fixes, he is content, isn't he, for you just to keep coming to the Lord Jesus in the midst of unanswered prayers and confusion.

[11:29] But not because he's forgotten you or because he doesn't love you, but because he's patiently doing by the Spirit through the cross something so wonderful you wouldn't even understand it if he explained it.

Now, back in 1 Corinthians 2, Paul goes on in verses 11 to 16 to explain how God's Spirit has revealed this message, how the message of wisdom centered on the cross has come to the church by Paul.

And there are two parts to it, which we saw, didn't we, with Lashire in the family Bible slot. The first part is about who the Spirit is, and the second part is about what the Spirit does. So firstly, verse 11, the Spirit knows the message of wisdom because he is God the Spirit.

Who he is, he is God the Spirit. This is the doctrine of the Trinity, right? So although Paul can talk about the Holy Spirit as a separate person from the Father and the Son, he is distinct from the Father and the Son, yet still he's fully divine.

He's a partaker in the divine essence of God. So that the Father can't plan anything that the Spirit doesn't know. The Son can't do anything that the Spirit doesn't empower.

[12:40] So the Spirit knows what the Father has planned from eternity past, because he's divine. And what the Son does, the Spirit then enables, so that Paul knows, verse 12, the message of wisdom from God, because the Spirit who is at work in him is not the Spirit of the world, who knows only things about the world, but the divine Spirit from God who knows the things of God.

So look down at verse 13. What does he say? He says, this is what we speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words.

In other words, the first thing to know, says Paul, when it comes to this revelation of the message, is that the message comes from a reliable source. It comes right from the top.

This is right from God himself. The Spirit is divine. The second then is what the Spirit does. So look down at verse 14. Here you'll see that not only the Spirit has access to the mind of God, but also the Spirit has been at work in Paul.

So Paul is with the Spirit, or the Spirit is with Paul. So he doesn't consider the things to come from God as foolish, but now as wisdom. Look down, these I think are important verses.

[13:52] Look down at verse 15. The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject merely to human judgments. Literally, he doesn't make worldly judgments, nor can he be judged by human judgments.

He's not here saying, listen, I'm no longer accountable to the law or to anybody. He's not saying that. He's not saying, listen, if I get caught speeding on my camel, it comes to nothing because I'm

above all of that.

That's not what he's saying. Rather, this is about how Paul now thinks and how he should be thought about by others. With the Spirit in his mind, with the Spirit of God at work in him, he now thinks God's thoughts with the mind of Christ, verse 16, which he couldn't do before.

In other words, human judgments can't explain Paul anymore. You can't explain who Paul is and what Paul does simply at a human level because he has the Spirit and knows the mind of Christ. This, I think, is really, really helpful. You've got to make sure that we get this straight in our minds. Paul is saying that understanding the message of the cross by the Spirit of God dwelling in our hearts changes everything about how we think and view the world.

[15:11] It literally becomes the lenses through which you see everything. So much so that decisions that would have made no sense before now make perfect sense because you see and understand what God is doing through the cross of Christ.

There's a famous verse in 1 Corinthians 15, just a bit later on in the letter, and Paul talks about if the resurrection hadn't happened, he would be to be pitied above all men.

Do you remember that? If the resurrection is not true, then Paul's life makes no sense at all. It's to be pitied. But of course, the resurrection has happened, so his life makes perfect sense.

And so it should be for us. You know, the question for us if we're a Christian this morning is if our lives and decisions make perfect sense without the gospel being true, then we're not really living the Christian life because the message of the cross is the big truth through which everything is filtered.

There's another important aside here as well, which I think I want us to get before we come on to the implications. Look again at verse 14. Let me read the first part of verse 14 to you again. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, but considers them foolishness.

[16:33] Notice that Paul assumes here there are two types of people in the world. There are people without the Spirit and there are people with the Spirit. And those without the Spirit cannot accept the gospel, but consider it what?

Foolishness. And by implication, those with the Spirit do accept the gospel. In other words, and this is important, Paul doesn't say there are two types of Christian in the world, those with the Spirit and those without the Spirit.

He's saying there are two kinds of people in the world, those without the Spirit who therefore don't trust Christ and those with the Spirit are those who do trust Christ. In other words, if you love the Lord and you think the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified is the best news ever, that's because the Spirit has made you alive, not because you've worked it out.

No Spirit, no life. So let me ask you this morning, have you experienced that? I'm not asking if you've had some kind of weird, unexplainable experience of what you think might be the Holy Spirit. No, I'm not asking that. What I'm asking you is, have you had your eyes open to the beauty and wonder of the plan of God? You and I live in a world where from eternity past, God has a plan of salvation for people like you and me.

[17:54] Have you seen that your happiness, your eternal life, lie not in the fulfillment of your own dreams and aspiration, but in the accomplishment of God's plans?

Have you experienced new life by the Spirit so that your eyes and your heart are open to that, to love that and trust that? Because if you haven't, you need to understand there's nothing you can do to kind of generate that from inside of yourself.

Instead, you need to turn to the Lord and say, please God in heaven above, give me eyes to see and a heart to trust the wonder of Christ, to turn from the horror of my selfishness to love and trust you instead.

That's a really quick run through, 1 Corinthians 2. Let me try and draw out three implications for us as a church. What does it mean for us as a church to be relying on the Spirit and living out these realities?

Let me suggest three things. The first one is this. Spirit-powered faith will trump intelligence. Spirit-powered faith will trump intelligence. I was a student at Sheffield University quite a long time ago now, and I studied geography, which has turned out not to be incredibly useful, but anyway, I studied geography at university, and one of the things that they enabled you to do was you could pick a certain number of modules from any other department in the university.

[19 : 18] So at the beginning of the year, you go and queue up to register for your optional modules. One of my friends decided to just join the shortest queue and ended up doing some weird course in ancient history.

Most people did a computer science module because everybody knows computer science is easy, and if you get a good mark, it boosts your mark in the degree you're actually doing. Anyway, I decided there was a biblical studies department at Sheffield University at the time, and so I took a module in New Testament Greek, so I thought that would be interesting and helpful.

I hasten to add I wasn't actually very good at it, but the striking thing was in the biblical studies department at Sheffield University was some of the brightest people in the university were there. They spent their lives studying the scriptures, but they hadn't got a clue what the Bible or the gospel was about. It was incredible to me.

Here were men and women who were spending their lives reading everything that was written about the Bible and the Bible itself, but still they didn't trust Christ and the whole thing was foolishness to them.

[20 : 24] That's 1 Corinthians 2 in action, isn't it? Because it's not intelligence, but it is spirit-powered faith that counts, and so it must be for us as a church.

We must learn to treasure not so much great thoughts about God, but great faith in Him. Not because academic learning isn't important or because Christians shouldn't use their brains when it comes to understanding the Bible.

No, we must, and we must train people to do that. While the point is that as a church, we should be quicker to listen to a brother or a sister in Christ who turns us to God in the Scriptures, then we are listening to the latest expert on the God channel who's full of their own self-importance.

This idea gets expressed in our church covenant or constitution that states we're a church that's led by elders, supported by deacons, but owned collectively by the church membership. And the church membership are all those who having shown evidence of new life in Christ and being baptized, covenant together to be a church family, to look out for one another, to care for one another, to take responsibility, to meet together regularly, to appoint leaders who will teach the Scriptures, celebrate the Lord's Supper and baptism.

And it doesn't matter whether you've been a Christian for a week or whether you're a professor of theology and you've been a Christian for 40 years. Membership in the local church treats you exactly the same because church is about spirit-empowered faith, not human intelligence.

[21 : 53] You might have heard that phrase, all-member ministry. We're going to think about that some more in a few weeks' time, but really it's built on this doctrine. Every member of the church is a minister of the gospel because every member, by means of their conversion, has the Spirit of God at work in them, enabling them to understand the things of God and apply them to others.

Let me try and put it as provocatively as I can, okay? If the only person you ever see up the front in church is me, or if I'm the only person doing ministry in the life of the church, we haven't made a kind of organizational error.

We've made a theological error because all the members of the church are ministers of the church, not just me. Likewise, if you come to church expecting that there's no contribution for you to make, it's not a laziness problem.

It's a theological problem because all of God's people are Spirit-empowered ministers of the gospel. Not because we all have the same gifts or have the exact same responsibilities, but because we all have the same Spirit.

That's the first implication. Second one, praying to God will trump nagging people. If what Paul is saying here is right, that we can only understand the wisdom and glory of the gospel by a work of the Spirit in our hearts, then what we need to accept is that you and I cannot make anybody a Christian, can we?

[23 : 21] How so? Well, because you and I cannot give anybody the Spirit. It's not in our gift. You know, even with the best explanation of the gospel that we can bring, even with the clearest answers to the questions, even with the best literature and leaflets, none of us can make a Christian.

Only God can. Now, of course, we all know that, don't we? I don't think I've told anyone anything they don't know, but we do sometimes act like we can make people Christian. If you look at your praying to nagging ratio with your non-Christian friends and family, how does that balance out?

I think especially with close family, we find ourselves nagging with them to come to church or to listen to the gospel more than we find ourselves pleading with the Lord that they might turn to Christ.

I think the same applies to holiness or weakness. The gift of the Spirit here in 1 Corinthians 2 doesn't mean that we all instantly know everything that we need to know or that we're all as godly as we need to be.

We haven't been totally liberated from the battle with sin, have we? The Spirit is fully ours, but is engaged in a lifelong battle with our sinfulness. So much so that the battle that we have to be patient or to be humble or to be thoughtful to others or to be hungry for more of the Lord, that battle is won for us in prayer, not in nagging.

[24 : 42] It means that when we talk to one another about those things, we talk to one another prayerfully, knowing that actually it's the Lord by His Spirit bringing the gospel that will change and transform us, not my nagging.

The book of James says, doesn't it, that your anger achieves nothing because it's God by His Spirit that achieves things in our lives. Final implication then, and this is the big one that I want us to see. God's blessing is what success looks like. God's blessing is what success looks like. This is where we started, isn't it? But hopefully you can see it a bit more clearly now. That it is possible, isn't it, for us as a church to have lots of people coming but still to be a total failure.

It's possible for us as a church to have a youth work that's bursting at the seams, a toddler group that's oversubscribed and for us still to be failing as a church. Why?

Well, because what we really need as a church is a work of the Spirit in the lives of people bringing them to know and love and trust Jesus and empowering them to live for Him.

[25 : 54] And without that, we can't do anything worth doing. See, here's the hard truth for all of us and I think it's hard for me but it's hard for all of us this morning. There is nothing that any of us in this room can do to revitalize the ministry of the gospel at West Kilburn Baptist Church.

You know, we might be able to do a few things to see more people coming. We might even see lots more people coming and it might not be wrong to do those things. They might be good things to do. Perhaps we should do some of them but they won't on their own revitalize the ministry of the church because only a movement of the Spirit will do that.

Only a movement of the Spirit in the lives of unbelievers bringing them to faith in Christ and in our lives making us conscious of our need of the Lord. Let me say just really practically how this lands. It's why really the only thing I've changed other than the big TV is the Wednesday night prayer meeting. I've split the Zoom part away from the in-person part as Ray was explaining earlier with the hope of just trying to make them both a little bit better.

Why would I do that? Well, because I am absolutely convinced from 1 Corinthians 2 and from the rest of the Scriptures that actually it's only God's blessing that can revitalize the ministry of the church and we need to ask him for it.

[27 : 16] We need to come and pray and ask for his blessing. So my hope is that if you can come in person on a Wednesday night please come pray with us.

In-person is best for all sorts of reasons. I can explain this to you later. The incarnation happened in person, yeah? It wasn't live-streamed. Coming in person is best.

But if you can't attend in person maybe there's all sorts of reasons for that. Maybe you're housebound maybe getting out in the evening is too difficult. Perhaps you're working away. Then come on Zoom and pray with us there. Because success for us as a church is this and only this. Relying on and experiencing the regenerating power of the Spirit amongst us. We can't do that for ourselves but we can ask God to do it for us.

And wonderfully he delights to answer that prayer. Let me pray. Heavenly Father we come before you this morning and ask for your blessing.

[28 : 31] Knowing that there's nothing in us that deserves it but knowing that without it we can do nothing. We long Lord that you might bless us with the power of the Spirit opening eyes and hearts to trust in the Lord Jesus and moving us to apply the gospel to our lives more thoroughly even in the dark corners of our hearts that our lives would only be explained by us living for the Lord Jesus.

Please do this work amongst us for your glory's sake and help us in the weeks months and years to come to be faithful in asking you for this blessing.

We long to be successful as a church in the genuine sense of that to be a place where your Spirit is experienced in bringing power and transformation to our lives.
And so we ask for that in Jesus' name. Amen.