



Some of us can identify with that story more than others!

It's important to know and remember where we are going, where we are headed, on a personal level. It's also important for a church. That's where clear goals come in. At the end of November last year, the church adopted three goals, and I know Belinda has spoken on each of these over the last three Sundays.

Let me quickly remind you of what they are. I haven't put them up on a slide because they are on the front of your bulletin.

- First is to explore together what it means to follow Jesus today.
- Secondly, to build an inclusive, caring community.
- Goal 3 is to share God's love and justice in words and actions.

Throughout last year, I was involved, along with many others, in the process of coming up with those goals. Let me give you a little behind-the-scenes glimpse.

At one point, getting towards the end of drafting the goals, the observation was made that the first goal mentions Jesus, and the third goal mentions God, but what about the Holy Spirit? Perhaps we could make the statement more Trinitarian and include the Holy Spirit in the second goal – for e.g. *“build an inclusive, caring community through the Spirit”* or *“led by the Spirit”*.

In discussion, it was agreed that we need the guidance and leading of the Holy Spirit in all areas. So in the final version, we put the words *“led by the Spirit”* in a preamble – *“Led by the Spirit, we will”: goal 1, goal 2, goal 3*. And that's what the church adopted. It indicates the importance we place on the Spirit's leading. If we are truly led by the Spirit, then each of these goals will be actualised.

So what I want to speak on today, on this Anniversary Sunday, are those words *“led by the Spirit”*.

Baptists have always claimed to be Trinitarian, but sometimes that Trinity in practice is the Father, Son and Holy Scripture. Sometimes the Spirit is overlooked or minimised. After all, we are Baptists, and some don't want to risk appearing Pentecostal or Charismatic. But I'll take that risk today. I think you can handle it.

To extend the application of the Einstein illustration, we not only need to know where we are going, but where we are going needs to be led by the Spirit.

There are three instances in Scripture where we get that phrase *“led by the Spirit”*. There are many more instances where we get similar expressions or see it working out in practice, but those exact words... three times.

### **(1) The first is at Jesus' temptation.**

Matthew says: *“Then Jesus was led by the Spirit (or “led up by the Spirit” in some versions) into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”* (4:1)

That's very dramatic, and perhaps a bit puzzling, in its context. It comes straight after Jesus' baptism. Jesus is baptised, the Spirit descends upon him like a dove, and then the Spirit leads him into the desert to be tempted!

The leading of the Holy Spirit doesn't mean we will be immune from temptation, living in some rarefied environment where we no longer experience that struggle. In fact, the Spirit's leading may well mean that we are taken to spaces where temptation is even more of a reality. The temptation may be a testing that helps us grow, or it may just be a fact of life. But the encouraging thing is that if we have the Spirit's leading, we also have the Spirit's presence to get us through.

This is clearer in Luke's version, which says: *“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness”*. Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit, as well as being led by the Spirit. And Luke says led *“in”* the wilderness. Many versions have *“into the wilderness”* but the preposition here is different to the one in Matthew and literally means *“in”*. One translation puts it: *“The Spirit led him while he was in the desert.”*<sup>3</sup> The emphasis in Luke is that the Spirit was with Jesus and led him *in* the wilderness, and through the temptations there, not just *into* the wilderness and temptation.

I've heard many sermons and read many commentaries that explain that Jesus was able to overcome temptation and defeat the devil because of his knowledge of Scripture. It is true that Jesus quoted Scripture in response to each temptation. But that's only part of the answer. He was also full of the Holy Spirit and was led *by the Spirit in the wilderness*.

The temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness are ones we face too – different in substance, but not in essence. We face them individually and as a community of faith:

- to focus on our own physical needs and comfort rather than our calling and mission;
- to doubt and test God;
- to take matters into our own hands and do things our way rather than God's way.

We need the presence and leading of the Holy Spirit, especially in the wilderness times.

**(2) The second instance of that phrase “led by the Spirit” is in that passage from Romans 8 that was read to us earlier.**

V14 says: *“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.”*

That highlights the supreme importance of being led by the Spirit.

The following verses continue with those well-known and well-loved words:

*“When we cry ‘Abba, Father’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ.”*

The preceding context of this passage is significant in the light of what I've already said about Jesus' temptation. Paul here contrast two ways of living:

- according to the flesh, setting our mind on the things of the flesh. Live like that and you will die, he says.
- according to the Spirit, setting your mind on the things of the Spirit and putting to death the deeds of the flesh. That's the way to life and peace.

John Stott, in a commentary on Romans, sums it up powerfully in one sentence – *“There is a kind of life that leads to death, and a kind of death that leads to life.”*<sup>4</sup>

Christians have the Spirit of God to assure them they are the children of God and to help them live the way of God and to know the life of God.

**(3) The third instance of “led by the Spirit” is in the second half of Galatians 5, another well-known and well-loved passage.**

V18 has the phrase – *“But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law.”*

Out of context, that mightn't make much sense, and could well lead us down the wrong path. The context is similar to the previous passage we looked at in Romans 8.

Again there is a contrast between

- the life of the flesh, characterised by works of the flesh – such as fornication, factions, envy etc. etc.
- and the life of the Spirit, characterised by the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace etc.

Paul says in v24: *“Those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”*

Sounds a pretty tough call, doesn't it.

It's the same call Jesus made in the Gospel reading we had earlier – Mark 8:31-38.

This is the lectionary Gospel reading for today, the second Sunday of Lent.

It's a very appropriate one because it's just after Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah and Jesus begins to share what sort of Messiah he is, He is one who will suffer, be rejected and be crucified.

But it's also appropriate for how it informs the Church's goals.

V34-35: *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and the sake of the gospel, will save it."*

We often use the idea of cross-bearing to describe the experience of carrying some burden through life. That's not what Jesus meant by it though. It was much more than that. Someone carrying their cross was going to their execution, as Jesus did. Jesus was talking about giving one's whole life over to following him, which, paradoxically, is the way to true life.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

Over its 89 years, this Church has had many great men and women who have been led by the Spirit

- to be disciples in the full sense of the word;
- to build this community of faith; and
- to share God's love and justice through what they've said and the way they've lived.

There are many memorial plaques around to remind us of some of them.

Here's one I've often reflected on as I have sat over there. It's on the side of the organ.  
*"Rev. Harold George Hackworthy. A beloved minister of this church 1948-1952.  
Called, chosen, faithful."*



Here's another, not a minister this time. It's also on the side of the organ.  
*Reginald White. Church organist 1940-1969 and Marjorie White. Loyal and faithful servants of God.*



All faithful – that's the common theme with these.  
And there have been many others.

In a moment we are going to sing a hymn titled *"O Lord, You Called Disciples"* by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. I chose it mainly for the third verse, which says:

*"O Christ, your invitation has reached from year to year!  
Through some who heard you calling, a church was founded here.  
As faithful people served you so many years ago,  
They soon invited others; your church began to grow."*<sup>6</sup>

But I don't just want to ponder what seem like ancient history to some. Let me be a little more current. There are many faithful disciples who are part of this church today, here today. Many of you have been a part of this church for many years, decades, a lifetime for some. And you have faithfully contributed to the life and ministry of this church in so many ways throughout those years.

But time marches on, doesn't it. We are all well aware of the beloved brothers and sisters who have passed away in just the last couple of years I was here.

It makes me, and perhaps you too, wonder about the future. Will there continue to be a growing number of faithful people here led by the Spirit in following, building community and sharing God?

Being led by the Spirit will require prayer, contemplation, an openness to the Spirit, seeking God's presence, direction and will. It will require discussion, listening, sharing, Bible study, discerning together, worship together. I'm convinced that as you are led by the Spirit in these ways and take seriously the challenge of your three goals, then Canberra Baptist Church will continue to be a vibrant community of faith which is a beacon for God in the capital of our nation. May it be so.

## Endnotes

1. *“The Dave Walker Guide to the Church 2018 Calendar”*, Canterbury Press, UK.
2. A friend who is an experienced fact-checker told me after the sermon that this story is hard to verify but could be traced back to Billy Graham. I had found very similar versions of it in a few places but none had specified that link. A missed opportunity for me to reference the recent death of a great preacher and evangelist. R.I.P good and faithful servant.
3. *God’s Word* (GW) translation, Baker Publishing Group, 1995.
4. His commentary on Romans in the *“Bible Speaks Today”* series, page 228.
5. Donald English in his commentary on Mark in the *“Bible Speaks Today”* series makes this point with acknowledgement to others (on page 161).
6. *“O Lord, You Called Disciples”* by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, 2002