

Our Spirit-Shaped Identity in Christ

A Gospel View

Scripture: *Romans 8:1-39.*

Summary: **Romans 8** reminds us that our gospel-shaped **profile** and **purpose**, and the **provision** of our needs as Christians, are affirmed by the Holy Spirit who imparts into us the very life of Christ.

Introduction

In this SATS Conference, we are reflecting on biblical and contextual perspectives of the third person of the Holy Trinity, who is God the Holy Spirit.

My presentation seeks to draw our attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in our Christian discipleship by taking a gospel view of our Spirit-shaped identity in Christ.

My reflections on this topic are drawn from **Romans 8**. In the book of **Romans**, the Apostle Paul gives us what is arguably the clearest presentation of the gospel that we have in the NT. In the first part of the epistle, from **chapters 1 to 7**, Paul spells out the message at the heart of the gospel by reminding us that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. In the second part of the epistle, from **chapters 9 to 16**, Paul then explains the practical ways in which this good news translates into our daily lives.

In **chapter 8**, which is in the exact middle of the epistle, Paul mentions the Holy Spirit *twenty times* to connect everything he has written in the first part of the epistle with everything he is going to say in the second part of the epistle. This makes **chapter 8** a pivotal and central chapter in this epistle.

In this presentation I am proposing that, from this central eighth chapter of Romans, we are reminded that our gospel-shaped **profile** and **purpose**, and the **provision** of our needs as Christians, are affirmed by the Holy Spirit who imparts into us the very life of Christ.

These **3P's**, I believe, give us a gospel view of our Spirit-shaped identity in Christ.

Read Passage.

I. Profile

- 1) In **verses 1 and 2** Paul declares that the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus sets us free from the law of sin and death. Paul begins **Romans 8** by referring to these two contrasting laws because he ended **Chapter 7** by reflecting on our bondage to sin that is a testimony to the power of the law of sin and death at work in our lives.

To explain what I believe Paul is saying here, let me first remind you that a law is a rule or a principle that has binding force or effect without exception.

The law of gravity, for example, refers to the invisible force that ensures that any object with a mass of a certain weight, without exception, is pulled to the ground.

That being the case, we can ask, how does an airplane, given its enormous weight, defy the law of gravity and stay up in the air for so long?

The answer, of course, is that the law of aerodynamics by which the airplane operates, enables the airplane to overcome the law of gravity. The law of gravity is still there with all its power, but the law of aerodynamics is a greater law that sets the airplane free from the law of gravity.

In this same way, what Paul is saying here is that, when we repent of our sin and we place our faith in Christ to thereby personalize the gospel in our lives, although the law of sin and death is still there with all its power, a new law called the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus now comes into operation in our lives to set us free from the law of sin and death.

- 2) Earlier on in this epistle, in **Romans 5**, Paul has reminded us that the law of sin of death goes back to the Garden of Eden, when our first parents, Adam and Eve, chose to disobey God by eating of the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

By doing so, our first parents introduced sin and death into human experience. In the NT this word, *death*, refers to both a spiritual separation from God, as well as the separation of our souls from our bodies when we die physically.

Because, spiritually speaking, we were all in our first parents when their disobedience from God spiritually separated them from God, every human being is born into this world subject to the law of sin and death and is spiritually separated from God.

This remains true until we are *born again spiritually* by personalizing the gospel in our lives. That is when we are in-dwelt by the Holy Spirit who now transmits into us the very life of Christ Jesus, so that now, at work in our lives, is the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus that sets us free from the law of sin and death.

- 3) This is why Paul declares in these first two verses that there is now *no condemnation* for those *who are in Christ Jesus*. This is also why, throughout his epistles, Paul uses this expression, *in Christ Jesus*, almost one and fifty hundred times to define our gospel-shaped Christian profile.
- 4) This is also why, in the second half of **verse 9**, Paul declares that if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ.

With this declaration, Paul helps us to see that the gospel-shaped profile of a Christian is a person who is spiritually *in Christ Jesus* because he or she has placed their faith in Christ and the Holy Spirit now transmits into them the very life of Christ.

Because we are thus spiritually united with Christ, we simply have no further desire to go back to our old life of sin. Our new life in Christ gives us a new aversion to sin, and a new desire for holiness; our entire spiritual profile changes.

It is not that we cannot sin again as Christians; we can, of course, but we simply do not want to do so anymore. As with an airplane that defies the law of gravity through the law of aerodynamics, in the same way, although sin is still there, we now have the power of the life of Christ in us to resist and to reject it.

This is what Paul means when he says in **verse 5** that: *Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.*

- 5) This explains why, in **verse 14**, Paul boldly declares that those who are thus led by the Spirit of God, are the children of God.

- 6) In **verses 15 and 16**, Paul goes on to explain that the Holy Spirit who has ensured our adoption to sonship, testifies with our spirit that we are God's children, and He, the in-dwelling Holy Spirit, enables us to cry: *Abba, Father*.

This word, *Abba*, is an Aramaic word that is best translated into English with the affectionate term, *Daddy*. In Aramaic, little infants used this word as a primal and instinctively affectionate way of addressing their fathers.

In the Gospels, for example in **Mark 14:36**, we see that this is how Christ Himself addressed God the Father.

By using this word, therefore, Paul is confirming that when we personalize the gospel in our lives, the Holy Spirit gives us a new gospel-shaped profile in Christ.

- 7) So, I believe we can summarize **our first P** from **Romans 8** by saying that the Holy Spirit, who transmits into us the very life of Christ, defines our gospel-shaped Christian **profile** as those who are spiritually in Christ, who are the children of God, and who now have power over sin in our lives.

II. Purpose

- 1) From **verses 17 to 30**, Paul explains that our new spiritual profile now makes possible the outworking in our lives of God's primary purpose of bringing us to spiritual maturity in Christ.
- 2) In **verse 28** Paul reminds us that Christians are *those who love God* because they have responded to His salvation *call* through the gospel, and they have therefore been *justified* and they are sure of being *glorified*.

This word, *justified*, means that God has pronounced us as being righteous and in right standing with Him because of our faith in the work of Christ on the cross on our behalf.

This is why in **verses 33 and 34**, Paul reminds us that no-one can succeed in bringing a charge against us before God, because God, who is the Divine Judge, is the one who has chosen us and justified us based on what Christ, our defense lawyer, has done for us on the cross!

In other words, God justified us with His eyes wide open, knowing the worst things about us before, and after our salvation, and His decision to justify us is a final decision that no one can change! This is one of the glorious blessings of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The word *glorified* here in **verse 28** means to be made spiritually mature and perfect. The word *mature*, or *maturity*, means to become fully grown and developed.

Maturity is what every parent wants for their children. According to Paul in these verses, this is also what God wants for us as His children; God wants our full spiritual maturity in Christ. This spiritual maturity is the purpose Paul is referring to in **verse 28** when he writes that Christians *have been called according to God's purpose*.

From **verses 28** to **30** Paul explains how God brings us to spiritual maturity in Christ. Many Bible readers disconnect **verse 28** from **verses 29** and **30** and they end up thinking that **verse 28** means that when we face difficulties, things will somehow work out well in some general abstract sense.

However, here in **verse 28**, the word *for* at the beginning of **verse 29** means *because*, and it connects the meaning of **verse 28** to what Paul says next in **verses 29** and **30**.

- 3) So, I believe that, here in **verse 28**, Paul is not saying that things somehow work together for good by themselves for Christians. Instead, I believe that Paul is saying that God makes all things work for the good of conforming us to what he refers to, in **verse 29**, as the likeness or image of Christ.

Paul is saying that *the good* that God is always working for us in all the good and bad things that happen to us is a change in our character so that our character becomes more and more like the character of Christ. This is what Paul means when he goes on to write this in **verse 29**: *So that Jesus might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters*.

Brothers and sisters resemble one another because they share the same genes obtained from their parents. Their likeness comes from within. Christians are being made to resemble Jesus Christ from within because the Holy Spirit, as we noted earlier, spiritually imparts into us the spiritual genes of Christ.

This is much in the same way that siblings share the same genes. This is why in **verse 17** Paul refers to Christians as *co-heirs* with Christ. We are co-heirs with Christ because it is the very life of Christ that is transmitted into us by the Holy Spirit at our new birth.

This life of Christ becomes progressively manifest in us until the very likeness of Christ begins to be reproduced in our lives as we become more patient, more loving, more self-controlled, a kinder, and a gentler people. In **Gal. 5:22-23** Paul refers to this likeness or character of Christ that we are being conformed to as *the fruit of the Spirit*.

- 4) This is why, still in **verse 17**, Paul goes on to remind us that, as co-heirs with Christ, as part of the process of God bringing us to maturity in Christ, we will experience some of the suffering in our lives that Christ suffered during His earthly life, and that these sufferings assure us that one day we shall also share in Christ's glory.
- 5) This means that our suffering is never the last word in our Christian lives. Instead, the last word is the maturity in Christ that God is working in our lives now, and our final glorification in heaven one day. This is why Paul goes on to write in **verse 18** that *our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us*.

This is also why in **verses 26** and **27** Paul tells us that whenever we feel overwhelmed by our hardships and our suffering, if we find that we do not even know how we should pray, instead of thinking that God has abandoned us, we should rely on the Holy Spirit to *intercede for us in accordance with God's will*.

- 6) This should give us the comforting assurance that when things become rough and tough for us as Christians, as they often do, we should experience less fear and anxiety than we normally do because God is working even in those tough situations and circumstances to conform us to the image of Christ.

In other words, Christians are not at the mercy of fate, and our Christian lives are not a game of chance in which random good or bad things just happen to us without purpose.

- 7) So, I believe we can summarize **our second P** from **Romans 8** by saying that God is carefully working in all the good and bad things that happen to us to accomplish His primary **purpose** of bringing us to spiritual maturity in Christ as we daily yield to the leading and guidance of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

III. Provision

- 1) Three times in this chapter, the Apostle Paul uses the word *groaning*. In **verse 22**, he writes that the entire physical world is *groaning* in throbbing pain like a woman in labour just before childbirth.

In **verse 21**, Paul has already explained that, as a result of sin, the whole creation, or physical world, is subject to decay, meaning that everything material in this life eventually falls apart.

In **verse 23**, Paul goes on to write that, for this reason, we, as Christians who have the Holy Spirit, also *groan* inwardly as we go through all the problems and suffering of this life. In **verse 26**, Paul writes that the Spirit Himself intercedes for us through wordless *groans*.

All the way from **verse 19**, Paul is explaining that, with God's eventual consummation of history, all creation will be freed from this *groaning*, when Christians will fully experience, spiritually and materially, everything that we are in Christ in the *already and not yet* tension in which we now live in this fallen world.

- 2) So, from **verses 31** to **37**, Paul then goes on to remind us that, in the meantime, the implications of the Holy Spirit imparting the life of Christ into us to define both our gospel-shaped profile and purpose, is that we can be assured of God's adequate provision of all our spiritual and material needs, which, in **verse 32**, Paul refers to as *all things*.

In the same way that parents provide everything that their children need to ensure that they become fully grown and mature, Paul's *all things* here include all the beneficial spiritual and material things that God can think of for us as He works in our lives to bring us to spiritual maturity in Christ.

- 3) In **verse 31** Paul draws from **Isaiah 50:8-9** to remind us that because *God is for us* nothing that is not allowed by God can prevail against us. This expression, *God is for us*, refers to God's covenant commitment to uphold and to protect us when people and circumstances are threatening our safety or our peace of mind.

I suggest that this is what this phrase, *God is for us*, should remind us that whenever we are in any kind of trouble, we should carefully assess the forces that are massed against us in the form of temptations, or ill-health, or financial problems, or difficult people, or disappointing situations, and then we should say to ourselves: *But God is for me!*

Having said that, we should then look at the problems we are facing and ask ourselves how those problems or people compare with the power of God who is for us.

- 4) This explains why, here in **verse 31**, after saying *if God is for us*, Paul then goes on to say, *who can be against us*. Paul is asking us to take a realistic look at whatever opposition we are facing and compare that to the power of God and His covenant commitment to us!
- 5) In **verse 35** Paul goes on to ask: *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?* From **verses 37 to 39** Paul then quotes from **Psalms 44:22**, and he presents a list of different kinds of problems and disasters we can face in this life and he concludes with the glorious statement that in all these things *we are more than conquerors!*

In **Romans 5:5**, Paul has already reminded us that the Holy Spirit enables us to experience the love of God deep in our hearts. So, here in **verse 35**, by this phrase, *who shall separate us from the love of Christ*, Paul is confirming to us that none of the troubles and difficulties he lists in these verses can come to us unless they have passed the test of God's love for us.

- 6) Paul's assurance in these verses leave us no excuse for the kinds of imagined fears that we often allow to torture ourselves and cause us to doubt God's ability to adequately provide for us and to protect us.

7) So, I believe we can summarize our **third P** from **Romans 8** by saying that we can daily depend on the in-dwelling Holy Spirit, who imparts the love of God into our hearts, to frequently reassure us deep in our hearts, of God's **provision** of all our spiritual and material needs.

Conclusion

I trust that these **3P's** from **Romans 8** help us to see why I have proposed in this presentation that our gospel-shaped **profile** and **purpose**, and the **provision** of our needs as Christians, are affirmed by the Holy Spirit who imparts into us the very life of Christ.

I'll end by pointing out that Paul began **Romans 8** in **verse 1** with the phrase, *no condemnation*, and he ends the chapter in **verse 39** with the phrase, *no separation*. With these two phrases, Paul is reminding us that the gospel assures us that, in Christ, there is now no condemnation for us, and there is never going to be any separation between us and the love of God!

These two phrases with which Paul begins and ends this phenomenal chapter of his great epistle rest on the firm gospel foundation in **verse 32** where Paul declares that God did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us.

I say that because, first, it is because Christ went to the cross to lose His life for us that we can have His life in us that changes our spiritual **profile** to the children of God who are now averse to sin. Second, this is why God is bringing us to maturity in Christ as His ultimate **purpose** for us. And third, it is because Christ went to the cross to lose everything for us that we can be assured of God's adequate **provision** of all our spiritual and material needs.

May these thoughts from **Romans 8** enhance, in every area of our lives, our holy celebration and worship of the Son of God who loved us and gave Himself for us!

Let us pray!

*Rev. Canon E. Kwasi Amoako, PhD.
Tigoni,
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