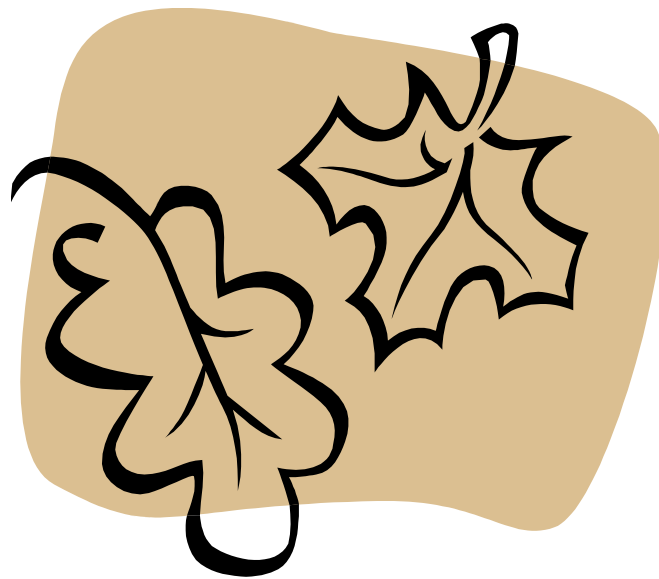


# AUTUMN LEAVES

Volume 5



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Eva Publications  
Hamilton, South Lanarkshire, Scotland  
2014

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## Foreword

I have much pleasure in presenting the fifth volume of my *Autumn Leaves*, drawn mainly from the 1970s but also, on this occasion, containing some more recent items. There is no one particular theme.

As always, I trust that my long-suffering friends will enjoy these contributions and will also forgive their many shortcomings.

They make no pretensions to be scholarly works!

Alasdair Gordon

Hamilton  
South Lanarkshire

August 2014

## The Church Today <sup>1</sup>

I want to thank your minister and Kirk Session for the kind invitation to lead this workshop today. I come to you simply as an ordinary parish minister rather than as the Clerk <sup>2</sup> to Aberdeen Presbytery.

The first thing I want to say is that I have not come to tell you how to do your job as office bearers or elders or committed members. Some of you have been faithfully serving in the Kirk for a lot longer than I have and there are many things that you could - and hopefully will - tell me. In fact, as we open to discussion later on, I welcome all of your input. You all have experience, insight and knowledge, so let's not be shy in sharing these resources.

And let me state something that is perhaps only too obvious. What the church is today will greatly affect the church of tomorrow. But we do have to live in the present and make decisions in the present. We cannot live in the past, although it is always good to look back and see how far we have come. I find that people in the church are actually just as guilty of living in the future. We will agree to almost any change as long as it does not mean any changes right now! We will agree to change things next year, but like tomorrow, next year never comes. I let that thought simmer and we may come back to it later.

In proceeding, I want to simply flag up some points for possible further discussion, some more important than others.

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<sup>1</sup> Outline of office bearers' workshop lead by me at Ferryhill North Church, Aberdeen on 29 September 1974.

<sup>2</sup> I was acting as Clerk at the time. I formally succeeded Rev John Mowat MA JP as Clerk to Aberdeen Presbytery on 1 January 1976.

At the moment we have a slow but steady numerical decline in the number of active ministers. The average age of a Church of Scotland minister is around 55. Whilst that is scarcely "old", in twenty years time the situation may become more serious.<sup>3</sup> It is encouraging to see that there are still a good number of younger men coming forward for theological training. The less encouraging aspect - and I lead a few tutorial classes at Christ's College, so I do see something of the wider picture - is that many of these younger folks do not see themselves going in to traditional parish ministry.<sup>4</sup>

Even since I myself trained as recently as in the last decade, "things" have begun to change.<sup>5</sup> We do need to think about some of the implications of this. It would be nice to be able to ignore these uncomfortable facts, but this is not an option. But let me ask you this - is this only a problem or is it also an opportunity? We could, of course, just give up. Unfortunately, some people already have. It is hard not to feel a touch of discouragement at times when we see declining numbers and so many churches closing their doors. I remarked to a friend recently that the centre of Aberdeen bears an uncanny resemblance to Moscow with all its empty churches.

I suggest that we (and that includes me) need to have a bit more confidence in who we are, what we do and what we stand for. It is so easy to talk ourselves down. As ministers, office bearers and elders we have a duty to remember to encourage one another and build one another up in the faith.

Whilst I do believe - and believe strongly - that there has to be a much higher input from lay people, I am not suggesting that all the tasks that ministers don't want to do should be dumped on

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<sup>3</sup> In 2014, it was recorded that there were only two ministers under the age of 30.

<sup>4</sup> Currently there are only a handful of candidates for Church of Scotland ministry.

<sup>5</sup> There have been many changes both in ministry and in training for the ministry since this time.

them. There has to be full cooperation at all levels. I am only too aware that churches can sometimes be manipulative places and people can be put into situations where they feel they cannot refuse a request. That is not fair. It is one thing to encourage people to stretch themselves and indeed to challenge them in an appropriate manner. It is quite different to force people to do something with which they are less than happy, even worse if we resort to guilt spinning. Similarly, if someone genuinely wants to stop doing something, they need to have the freedom to do so. A senior minister once gave me the advice that if any member of the congregation submits his or her resignation from some position of responsibility, the default position should be to accept.

The trouble with ministers (well, one of the troubles!) is that we are not actually perfect. We do not belong to some remarkable sub-species. Now, congregations do have high expectations of their ministers and they have every right so to do. However, the expectations have to be reasonable and congregations in their turn should not play the guilt card. The minister is entitled to a wee bit of personal space even if he is on call day and night. He should be allowed to make mistakes or misjudge situations like anyone else without it being a big issue. You cannot have two standards of morality, one for ministers and another (lower standard) for everyone else, can you?

When a congregation is looking for a minister, invariably they want someone who has the virtues of all their past ministers within living memory but without any of their shortcomings. This is scarcely realistic! And, of course, many congregations assume that the minister's wife will act as an unpaid assistant and receptionist, lead the Guild and generally dispense good works throughout the church and parish. Increasingly, ministerial wives

want to have careers of their own and are entitled so to do. I make this point but I won't labour it.

However, speaking about ministers, I would make the point that Kirk Sessions have it within their power to make or break their minister. It does not mean that everyone has to agree all of the time. That would be impossible. Indeed, I would go further and suggest that a bit of appropriately expressed and managed conflict within any group can actually be a good thing. It means that different views can be spoken (not just thought) and aired. Sometimes out of two or more apparently conflicting ideas something new can emerge. What can be incredibly frustrating is having people come to a session meeting with a definite viewpoint, say nothing and then "beef" all the way home.

The Gospel is all about reconciliation. If Christians cannot hold together in difficult times, who can?

And still speaking about ministers, they also need to learn to let go at least occasionally and show that they actually do have confidence in their own members. So, if (say) an elder visits someone in hospital, it is not necessary for the minister to race round the next day. That merely duplicates the work. It certainly does not reduce it.

In the New English Bible (which is not actually my favourite translation) the heading above the First Letter of John is "A Recall to Fundamentals".<sup>6</sup> We all need such a recall at times. What is this church stuff all about? Is there really any difference between you and the nice moral person next door who never darkens the Kirk door?

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<sup>6</sup> This last word did not have the negative connotations that it does today.

It is easy to play at churches and to be content with the green leaves of "churchianity" rather than the fruits of the Holy Spirit. We can get so bogged down in "church stuff" that we forget why we even exist, far less what we stand for.

The First Book of Discipline says that elders shall be "*...men of the best knowledge in God's Word, of cleanest life, faithful and of most honest conversation that may be found in the church.*"

In the early times of Knox and the Reformers, elders were elected annually. Is this a good idea? Would it be an opportunity for re-commitment or merely an irksome interruption? <sup>7</sup>

I frequently experience office bearers and elders telling me, often with a degree of genuine regret, that they feel very untaught and ill prepared. It is easy to look at whose "fault" this is but it is more important to know what to do about it. Knowledge is not everything, of course, but some knowledge must surely be helpful. How good an account can we give of why we are disciples of Jesus Christ?

It has been said that spirituality (in its widest sense) is like a bank account. Of course there are times when we need to draw on it but we need to pay in as well. In many ways, in the Kirk today, it is as though we are living on the spiritual capital of previous generations and putting little back in. Is that an unfair or mistaken perception? How can that be changed?

Have you considered Study Groups or House Groups? Would these be for office bearers or would you also include members and even non members. Like it or not, the "habit" of church attendance is on the decline. We won't get people back to church by nagging them or making them feel guilty for not coming.

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<sup>7</sup> Women were admitted to the eldership in 1966 and to the ministry in 1968.



Many churches, in spite of declining attendance on Sundays, report thriving organisations. The Guild, the Boys' Brigade, the Guides, the badminton club and such like are often well attended and even enthusiastically supported. We used to look to the organisations for young people as vehicles for bringing them into full membership of the church. That is no longer happening. What do we make of this? Is there a way of using these organisations to encourage people into membership or is that a lost cause?

So far, all I have done is throw stuff at you and given you no opportunities to respond or discuss. I know that the plan now is to break into one or two groups and then come together for a plenary session. Remember that you will inevitable have quite a lot to think about and you may well feel that you need to go away and do some more thinking. We do not need to come up with quick and easy answers to everything today.

As an aid to discussion, I have agreed three possible questions with your minister and these are to be issued to the group after the tea / coffee break. Remember that there are no right or wrong answers nor is there such a thing as a silly question. Everyone's input is of value.

In the meantime, let me finish this part of the proceedings by reading out the three questions so that you know what is coming! Thank you for your patience so far. Your minister and I will look forward to sitting in on the groups and hearing what you have to say.

1. What do you feel is the greatest challenge facing the average parish church today and how best can it be equipped?

2. As office bearers what form of training would you find most useful for carrying out your duties?
  
3. What special contributions (if any) can women elders <sup>8</sup> and office bearers make?

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<sup>8</sup> Ferryhill North Church was one of the first churches in Aberdeen to ordain women elders. Even in 1974 they were still considered as somewhat of a novelty. It was presumed at the time that women elders would offer a different model of eldership from men. This presumption might not apply today.  
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## Get your Harp in Tune <sup>9</sup>

*Text: We hanged our harps upon the willows. [Psalm 137: 2]*

This is a powerful and highly emotional Psalm, well known for its poetic beauty. One of the easiest ways of understanding the figurative and metaphorical language of the Psalms is to put the words into their context. In other words, to what historical situation in the religious experience of Israel does a particular Psalm speak?

The context for this Psalm is actually quite simple. It refers to the period when Israel was in exile. This basic fact not only helps us to understand what was happening to the people of God at that time of history, it also encourages us - in a quite different situation - many hundreds of years afterwards.

Now, God's people had been in exile before. For many years, they were in exiled in Egypt and it had been a terrible experience for them - slavery, brutality, starvation, even murder. Finally, to cut a long story short, God had turned Pharaoh's heart by sending the angel of death over the land. God had then led them out under the leadership of Moses on an incredible journey, even to the parting of the waters of the Red Sea. God promised to take them to home to their promised land from which they had been absent for so long.

But the children of Israel were, as we are told, a stiff necked people. No sooner were they free of the tyranny of Egypt, than they wanted back again. They preferred the security of slavery to the freedom of being the children of God. And, it is nothing new that people often refer back to the "good old days" which,

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<sup>9</sup> Outline of the sermon preached at the communion service at the close of the day at Ferryhill North.  
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if more closely examined were not just quite as good as they remembered.

This is a game we are quite good at in the Kirk, harking back to days that will never return and possibly never were in the first place, those days when the Kirks were full twice on a Sunday! But for the children of Israel, the eventual repossession of the land some years later, under Joshua, was the culmination of their nation's history for those who experienced it and also for subsequent generations. It was the climax of the national dream. It was almost too wonderful to be true; they had arrived.

But as the years had gone on, something had happened, just as happens today. Prosperity dulled their acute dependence on God. They became preoccupied with things and possessions. Their zeal cooled off and their faith became more nominal and formal.

But God did not cease to love or care for his people and so he had to allow them to learn the hard way. The majority of the people were carried away into exile in Babylon. In that distant land, they were to be tried and tested, refined and made ready for the day when a remnant of the people would be able to return again to the homeland and build up a new nation to fulfil God's gracious purposes.

Once the people had been victors; now they were victims. Once they had been their own masters and now they were slaves. Once they had lived in their own homes. Now they were aliens and strangers in a far-off land. Once they had been happy but now they were sad. Once they had sung with joy and made a happy noise before the Lord. Now they had hung their harps on the willow trees and wallowed in self pity. Even worse, they are taunted and ridiculed by their captors. They feel utterly broken

by their environment and completely demoralised by their troubles.

So, they quit; they no longer sang. *"How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"* Their harps hung silent and unplayed.

Well, that's all in the past, you might say. It is something that happened centuries ago and we don't associate easily with harps. In fact, few, if any of us will even know anyone who plays a harp. It has become very much a minority instrument. However, harps have great symbolic significance. The harp is, for example, the emblem of Ireland. Traditionally playing the harp is a kind of metaphor for practising what is most important to you - your faith!

I suggest that, at the present time, many people have spiritually hung their harps on the willows. Once they knew the joy of a true and happy Christian experience and greatly valued Christian worship and experience. Then something happened. Maybe there was bad experience in church. Maybe there was some major setback or disappointment in life. Perhaps the faith has got squeezed out by work or by the cares of this world. But the end result was that they quit.

And an uncomfortably high percentage of our congregations include quite a number who fit into the category. I don't want to sound harsh or judgmental and it is always easy to be critical of people who are not here and cannot even respond. In fact, if I may dare say so, it is always easy to sit and listen to sermons that we think apply to other people, rather than to ourselves.

But what is our response to the (if we are being honest) absent majority in our congregations? They will prefer to remain

inactive. They desire status without work, membership without service, receiving without giving and identification without participation. Again, I am sorry if that sounds unduly harsh.

May I suggest that in the church our problem is not with numbers - it is numbness. It is not so much either that people do not have faith, it is rather that the faith does not have people. Deserted harps, it seems, can be found on every tree.

So, why were (and are) the harps deserted?

Those who were giving out such a negative message were living in the past, so much so that they were unable to look at the present, far less the future. Please don't get me wrong. As I was suggesting to you earlier on, it can be very useful and even encouraging to look back.

The warning note that I would sound is that the greatest lesson of history is that we don't learn from history. However, I confess that I enjoy reading history, especially through biography and autobiography. There are things we can learn and it is clear that some understanding of the past can help us understand the present. But, beware of the "good old days" culture.

The people who were in exile in Babylon could - or would - only look at the past or, to be more accurate, the past as they wanted to see it, the "good old days", which were never as good as we remember them. I remember as a child how the beautiful hot summers lasted for weeks on end. That, of course, is not how it was, but that is what I remember. I expect you all have similar experiences.

The people in exile had (fairly obviously) moved both physically and mentally. In this case they had been moved very much against their will. They were far from home. Again, I suggest that this rings a bell with our contemporary situation. There is no doubt that there is a general feeling of alienation among many people.

Community spirit is not entirely lost but it is much weaker than it used to be. This applies especially in our cities where people can literally live under the same roof and not even know the names of their neighbours.

According to the papers, a large percentage of our population now live in post war housing and roughly one in five families will move house this year. We are a much more mobile society than we used to be. Indeed, many people are on the move and yet, only too often, their faith does not move with them. A new job, a new house, an addition to the family - all these and many more factors cause people to slip away from the faith of their fathers. Sometimes it is hurt pride; people have not got their own way and so they vote with their feet. Sometimes also people have bad experiences in church and feel disinclined to go back.

One of the commonest reasons for desertion is when (like the Israelites of old) people do not get their own way. I don't mean just human stubbornness and again I don't mean this to sound harsh. The children of Israel were fed up with God. They just could not understand why he had allowed this to happen. What had they done that was so awful? They could gladly have sung God's praises in the Temple but how could they possibly do so by the far way waters of Babylon?

They were pretty angry at God. He had not acted in the way in which they thought he should and so they took the easy way out.

It is not hard to sing God's praise when the time seems right, when we are prosperous and apparently in control of our own lives and can spare God the occasional hour. It is also much easier to be religious in a religious age. It is not so easy for us, as we live in a sophisticated modern secular age. It is much easier to be a Christian when our friends, relatives and work colleagues are of a similar persuasion. It is not so easy to dare to be a Daniel and to stand alone.

There are many reasons for people apparently quitting the Christian faith. This is a great challenge to all of us. We cannot be responsible for what other people think or do but we can do our very best to make our churches places of welcome and acceptance and show them in particular that the Gospel does work in our own lives.

But what is so hard anyway about being a Christian at this time in history? I suggest that even in "easier" times there were always challenges. Let us not make it all doom and gloom and give the impression that being a Christian is all about negativity and what people should not do or will have to give up. Jesus said that his yolk is easy and his burden is light and compared with the cares of this world and the deceit of riches there is no comparison.

We are never promised a life that is without difficulty or challenge. To suggest that is travesty of the Gospel. There is a great hymn in our hymnbooks that was been ruined by someone, at a later date, adding the drivelling chorus that ends with the words "And now I am happy all the day." It depends, of course, what you mean by "happy". If people think it means health, pleasure and prosperity, in fact there is no such unequivocal promise given. Jesus himself was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.



Yet it is in Jesus Christ that we see the answer and where the church's message is (or should be) so very different from that of the world. Yes, we can share the attitudes of other non-Christian people in our concern for caring for the less fortunate and helping to establish a just society. But if that is all we do, what use are we? If the church is nothing more than being nice and following certain moral standards, it has certainly lost its cutting edge.

My friends, the church is always at its best and at its strongest when Jesus Christ, crucified, risen and ascended, is at the centre.

Around 635 AD, a Syrian missionary took the Christian Gospel to China for the very first time. For the next century and a half the Christian message spread and flourished throughout China. Then a kind of rot began to set in. People, especially the wealthier, become more nominal in their outlook and only loosely followed a selection of the moral teachings of the Bible. And even these were only "roughly kept in mind". The less convenient teachings were relegated and the person of Jesus was sidelined. For centuries thereafter there was virtually no Christian witness in China.

In a very real sense, it was because they had actually forgotten the very real basics of what they stood for that the Jews found themselves in such a dire position. What they stood for had only been "roughly kept in mind". Their calling was to be a light to lighten the gentiles. Yet they had kept that light hidden and used it only to please themselves.

So, actually, a great deal of the remedy was, humanly speaking, in their hands. It was time to get these harps, the symbols of their faith, down from the trees.

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