



Season 11: Episode 9 | James Pedlar | How the Fruit of the Spirit Brings Unity to the Church

Hello and welcome to Scripture Untangled, a podcast by the Canadian Bible Society. My name is Joanna la Fleur. I'm a friend of the Canadian Bible Society and I'm going to be your guide for today's episode.

Today's guest is James Pedlar and he's being interviewed by CBS Ambassador Reverend Dr. Andrew Stirling. So, the Reverend Dr. James Pedlar is Professor of Theology at Tyndale Seminary, where he holds a Bastion Chair of Wesley Studies. He also serves as Chair of the History and Theology Department and directs both the graduate students of Historical and Theological Studies programs.

Dr. Pedlar is widely respected for his work and writing on theology of the Church and he has served as President of the Wesleyan Theological Society, is a Fellow of the Manchester Wesley Research Centre and contributes to numerous international projects. As an ordained minister in the Free Methodist Church in Canada, Dr. Pedlar is the Worship and Teaching Pastor at Wesley Chapel Free Methodist Church. He and his wife Samantha live in Ontario with their two daughters.

So today we're going to hear what it means to be the church in a divided world, how renewal movements shape Christian history and what unity might look like for the church today. So, enjoy this conversation between Reverend Dr. James Pedlar and Reverend Dr. Andrew Stirling.

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Andrew Stirling: James, I'm so delighted and honored that you would take the time to be on our CBS podcast, Scripture Untangled, and it's a great honor to have you, and I know that everyone's going to look forward very much to hearing what you have to say today. To give our audience a sense maybe of who you are and of your faith, can you tell us something briefly about your background in the faith, and who were the main influences in your walk with Christ?

James Pedlar: Certainly. Thank you, Andrew.

It's my joy and privilege to be with you for this conversation today. I grew up in the Salvation Army. That was my church community in the Kingston area, and I had a wonderful church family that nurtured me, and a lot of older folks who took an interest in me, and a good intergenerational kind of context there, and very thankful for that.

Now, I think as I've gotten older, I've become more appreciative of the number of adults who took an interest in me and mentored me maybe informally, but that was my community of faith. I had parents who were professionals, but very, very dedicated lay people who modeled Christian service and faith and high levels of involvement in the church community; and I had grandparents on both sides who had been Salvation Army officers who had served in different places all across Canada. So, there was that heritage, I guess you could say, of service, and especially through that denomination.

And so that was where I came to faith, through the local church, also through camping ministries that I was very involved in. Salvation Army had big camping ministries. Probably about age six, when I first really consciously embraced my faith, and then drifted a little bit in early adolescence.

And then there was a kind of a reawakening, you could say a recommitment, when I got to be about 16 years old. And it was really, I don't say it was one particular

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moment, but a series of things that led me to take my faith more seriously, and friends, thankfully, at the same age, at the same time, who were in the same boat. And so from there, I was given ministry opportunities, I was mentored, and so thankful for all those things that brought me to faith, especially, of course, parents and family members, but also, again, all those other people who really invested in me, and modeled Christian service.

And even, there was a lot of, of course, music ministry. If you know the Salvation Army, you'll know there's a lot of different musical groups you can be involved in. I was in brass banding, and choir, and contemporary worship.

And that was all wonderful opportunities, but also a chance to serve alongside older Christians, right, and to get to know them through doing ministry together. And that really shaped me into the person I am today, although I'm not currently involved in the Salvation Army. I'm so thankful for that heritage, and for that church community that brought me to the faith.

Andrew Stirling: You mentioned, sort of, when you were 16, there was sort of a reigniting, in a sense, in the faith. I mean, what precipitated that? Because that seems to be a very key time in young people's lives. They either drift away from the faith at that age, and start to question it, and then go into other places.

Or they, in fact, start to embrace it with a greater depth.

James Pedlar: Yeah, that's a good question. It's 30 years ago now, so I try to remember.

I don't have a dramatic story to tell, which many people do, and that would be helpful at this moment. But I think there was a sense of conviction, the Holy Spirit speaking to me over various times, saying that I needed to change, that I needed to change the way I was living, that I needed to wrestle more with my faith, and to allow it to really be at the center of who I was. And having, as I said, friends, a good friend who was all of a sudden taking his faith seriously, kind of made me stop and think.

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But I think there wasn't any crisis, in a sense, except that sense of conviction, and that sense of calling into something deeper, that probably over a series of months sort of moved me into a new phase of my walk with the Lord, we could say.

Andrew Stirling: It's interesting, James, in the conversation I have with nearly everybody that I know who's actually ended up in pastoral ministry and so on, that the influence of family and the influence of friends has been paramount and has been really important. But you received a very definite call into the ministry, and what were the key motivators to your positive response to the Lord's calling? And I think from our point of view in the Bible Society, what role, if any, did the Bible play in helping with that decision and steering you towards a call into the ministry?

James Pedlar: Well, I would say not long after I started to be a more serious Christian, I sensed that calling to ministry.

And again, I don't have one specific story, but there was a growing sense that the Lord wanted me to serve Him, and that I think probably having that heritage helped me to envision that kind of future of full-time service. The Bible wasn't one particular verse or one sermon that I remember, but certainly I had a deep love for the Bible that was ignited in me at that age. I spent a lot of time immersed in the Scriptures, a lot of time journaling, praying through the Bible, memorizing the Bible.

And in all of that, I think the thing that excited me the most when I was gripped with the Scriptures, when some truth came home to me in a personal way, what excited me was, now, how do I share that? How do I preach this? Or I could imagine this turning into a message that I would share with others, and that was, I guess, a passion that God implanted deep within me. And I would say, even to this day, although my full-time job is as a scholar, that that's still what would excite me the most about any idea that I encountered would be, how do I communicate this now to the people of God who need to know this truth? I also think, again, as I mentioned, having opportunities to serve, even as a young person, both in the local church and music and other kinds of ministries and in camping ministries, it was great leadership

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opportunities there, that really helps to give people a chance to exercise their gifts and to discern through practice to see, is this what God wants me to do? And that is sort of the Methodist ethos of ministry, is it bubbles up from the ground. You have people in the local church who get involved, and people see gifts in them, and they give them opportunities, and they see how they do, and then you sort of test the fruit of that ministry.

So typically, we will talk about grace, gifts, and fruit, or I don't remember the exact order, but those three things. So, does this person have the grace of God at work in their life? Is there that fruit at work in their life? But also, do they have gifts for ministry? Has God given them specific gifts that could be used in a kind of ministry? And then is there fruit from the ministry? And so, when you see those things, and then that needs to be confirmed by others. It's not just about me saying, I think I should be doing this, but other people coming into my life and saying, I see this in you, and I see these gifts, and I want to encourage you to follow in that path.

And I always saw my role as preaching and teaching in some way, and I didn't know exactly what that might look like in the end, and so I continued and followed in through an academic path that would prepare for scholarship. But in the end, I ended up, you know, as a full-time serving at Tyndale Seminary as a professor. But I don't primarily think of myself as an academic.

This is not a departure from that calling I had when I was 16 or 17 years old. I'm a person in ministry. I'm a teacher in church, and I just happen to be blessed to serve at Tyndale and to be able to spend my time studying and then trying to communicate the deep truths of theology and the Scriptures to other people who are training to be in ministry, as well as being able to, as I'm able, serve in a local church capacity as well.

Andrew Stirling: James, since your ordination, you've had a wide experience serving the church and are now an ordained minister in the Free Methodist Church. What is

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the relationship between the Salvation Army, which was your upbringing, and the Free Methodist Church, and what's the relationship between those two confessions?

James Pedlar: Well, we're cousins, I guess you could say, ecclesiologic-ally and historically and everything. It's not a big leap theologically from the Salvation Army to the Free Methodist Church, although in terms of the denominational culture and what you might encounter, it might seem different, but the core convictions are very similar, and both come from a similar root.

Both come out of Methodism. Of course, Free Methodism, it's in the name, but came out of a Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States in 1860. And the Salvation Army didn't come directly out of a Methodist denomination, but it formed with mostly Methodist leadership who'd been formed in Methodism in 1865 in London, England.

So similar historical timeframe when they originated, similar Methodist kind of perspective, but also associated with what was called the Holiness Movement, a movement of churches that were part of a revival of interest in Christian holiness and pursuing that and teaching about it. Not initially just Methodists, there were lots of churches that were part of a Holiness Movement, but then eventually it birthed some denominations that were especially associated with this Holiness Movement. So, we share that heritage and continue to have relationships.

There's lots of connections between the two denominations. And in terms of my role now, both the Free Methodists and the Salvation Army are two of the denominations that sponsor my position at Tyndale, along with the Wesleyan Church and the Church of the Nazarene, which are also cousins. So, we're all from the same family and a similar set of core convictions and many similarities in theology and spirituality.

So, I still have that professional and formal connection with the Salvation Army, but it's nice to have that ongoing relationship to Salvationists and to see a way to serve them through my role at Tyndale, teaching about John Wesley and the Wesleyan tradition. And how I came into the Free Methodism was really through personal

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connections and people that I knew who were involved there. And then it just sort of fit for where I was at and what I think God was calling me to do.

And growing up in the Kingston area, there's a lot of Free Methodists there. So, I just, I knew that.

Andrew Stirling: It's a hotbed for it really, isn't it?

James Pedlar: It is.

Behind every tree, you're going to find a Free Methodist. So, it wasn't a great leap for me to join the Free Methodist Church.

Andrew Stirling: So, you also, though, I mean, in academic circles, look broader than the tradition that you're in.

And you've been very involved in ecumenism, and you've been involved with the Canadian Council of Churches, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada. You've been in dialogue with the Roman Catholics, James. I mean, you've had a very broad brush on which you have used on a very wide canvas.

What do you see as the Biblical mandate for such sort of inter-confessional cooperation? And what really, and this is the key, I think, for so many of us, what is the source of that unity?

James Pedlar: Yeah, well, I didn't have a broad ecumenical experience growing up, but I studied at the University of Toronto, Toronto School of Theology through Wycliffe College, an Anglican school. And that was my first exposure to really beyond my Salvation Army roots to other perspectives. But then the nice thing about the Toronto School of Theology there at the University of Toronto is you can take classes at other colleges.

And so, I took classes at St. Michael's and Regis College and Trinity College and got to know people from different perspectives, got to learn from even Roman Catholic

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professors, as well as other mainline Protestant professors. So that was one thing, sort of reading more broadly, studying more broadly, brought me to have an ecumenical interest. But also, and maybe more importantly, getting to know Christians from other confessions, from other perspectives, and recognizing in them a genuine faith, a deep love for the Lord, and a real Christianity, the substance of Christianity that's there despite differences.

So that gave me an interest in that. And it was both academic, but also personal and spiritual in trying to understand what can I learn about the truth? How do I understand who I am as a Christian in relation to these others? And how can I learn more about them and help them to understand me? Now, why do this? Why care? That's sort of your question, right? Why should anyone do that? And frankly, a lot of Christians today aren't very concerned about unity with other Christians. They're just happy to go to their local church and not think much beyond that.

Well, Biblically, of course, the motivation for the ecumenical movement broadly was rooted really in John 17, and the high priestly prayer of Jesus, when He prayed just before He was betrayed, that they may be one as You and I are one, praying to the Father. And so, it's a powerful prayer, and its deep theological truths in it about the Trinity we can unpack. But to say that the unity that the Father and the Son share, that Christ wants us to taste something of that, that Christ wants us to experience something of that in our relationships with one another.

And in terms of the arc of Christ's life, this is a very important moment after he's had that wonderful set of teachings that he offered before his betrayal, and then to climax it all with this prayer, and this was his desire for the believers. And so that, of course, so that the world may believe, right? That was the purpose of it, that we would be one so that the world would know about the truth of the Gospel and who Christ was. So that's obviously a key motivating Scripture for pursuing Christian unity.

Christ prayed for this; Christ wants us to experience it. 1st Corinthians, of course, is another Biblical book that has a lot to say about this and about division in the church,

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and I've wrestled a lot with that. And of course, what Paul says is, is Christ divided in 1st Corinthians, right? There's only one Gospel; there's only one Christ.

And we don't follow Paul, we don't follow Apollos, we don't follow John Wesley, we follow Jesus together, right? And to always keep that in mind. And then, of course, Ephesians 4 is another one that's, you know, "There's one body, one Spirit, one hope, one baptism, one God and Father of all." And so there can only be ultimately one church, because there's only one Gospel, there's only one Savior.

There can only be one body of Christ in an ultimate sense. Now, on the other hand, we have churches, we have different local fellowships, we have denominations, and how do we understand what they are in relation to that ultimate reality of what the church is? That's, for me, just an interesting question to wrestle with. Theologically, it's complicated, but personally too, you know, how much should we care about this? And I think, on the one hand, having said all that, that we have this Christ has prayed for unity, that we know there really is ultimately only one true church in the ultimate sense.

And we could say even that's our future. In the end, what churches we belong to now are provisional.

Andrew Stirling: Yes, they pass.

James Pedlar: Yes, they will pass. And some of them might pass in the near future, or perhaps in a generation or two. Some of them may endure for much longer, but ultimately, they will all pass.

And so, to keep that in mind is important when we think about our loyalties, when we think about how we relate to other Christians, how we understand them, to avoid a kind of denominational idolatry, I guess you could say. And that's not a huge temptation in today's church, because I think most people aren't that loyal to their denominations, perhaps. But still, there's that challenge.

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So, I think we're still called to pursue unity as far as we can. However, having said all of that, there are serious sometimes disagreements which prevent us from being fully united in ministry and fellowship and worship. And that's perhaps also to be expected on this side of eternity, because we're all frail people and we all have a limited perspective.

And as we can see, we can't always agree on everything. And in some cases, it might be better not to be constantly together fighting. So, there's a delicate balance to be met there between what are the legitimate and important things that do keep us apart, and what are sometimes just bigotries or bias or other things that might be keeping us apart.

Maybe they're not that important, but maybe we could be pursuing greater unity. And so, I think for me, the question is, as a Protestant and as an evangelical Christian growing up, I didn't worry about this at all. But as I've come to wrestle with what Scripture says, and as I've come to meet and know other Christians and respect them, I don't want to get over the scandal of division in the church, that really, we are divided.

And ultimately, we know this will not stand forever. And ultimately, we know it's not what should be in the end. And so, we should never lose sight of that.

Even if we can't be fully united today, we shouldn't become too comfortable with that and lose sight of that challenge to us and to our witness to the world.

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Andrew Stirling: Yeah, exactly. It's interesting being in an inter-confessional body like the Canadian Bible Society, having left denominational ministry per se, I am amazed at both the breadth of engagement with Scriptures, how I see the signs of the Holy Spirit at work, meet people of immense faith and conviction.

But like yourself, wonder at times whether or not some of those differences actually both either stand in the way of the Kingdom, or in fact, within those differences, have a profound witness to the Kingdom. I've heard you personally as a preacher of some note, I must say. And in listening to some of your sermons myself, I'm struck by the way that you weave the Biblical text into the worldly situation.

And in one fascinating sermon that you preach called the *Word of Truth*, which was just last July, you made a fascinating point, James, and I'd like to remind you of what you preached. "We don't arrive at the truth about God," you said, "the truth about God has come to us in Jesus Christ." Now this for me addresses one of the key issues of our time for young people, where we're always talking about our truth and my truth, and that's very much in vogue.

Can you tell us more about your concept of we don't arrive at the truth, but the truth has come to us?

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James Pedlar: Yeah, thank you. And it's a big encouragement to me to hear you saying kind things about my preaching and not coming from yourself as a great preacher as well. Well, I think when people say, "my truth," and, you know, "I'm telling my truth, or please tell me your truth."

What are they saying? I think partly they're just saying, be honest about your experience, be authentic, tell us your perspective, which is a good thing. But calling it my truth, of course, is problematic. We do recognize that we all have a limited perspective.

I was just talking about this in relation to Christian divisions. We all have limited perspective, we all have, we could say biases that come from our background, our experiences. It's important to take that into consideration.

But there's a danger that it becomes a kind of a defeatism, that becomes a kind of cynicism, that says all there is, is perspective. All there is, is culture. All there is, is bias and positionality, and so forth.

And so, it's important from a Christian perspective to say, there is a truth that exists outside of ourselves. Well, not even just from a Christian perspective, of course, from a societal perspective, we can't have a justice system if we don't think there's matters of truth that exist beyond the perspective of particular people. That's why we would have a court case and a trial where we test witness testimony against one another and try to arrive at what's the truth.

There's a truth that's beyond the perspective of particular people. Now, so as any person wrestling with these questions, we could get into sort of philosophical issues about what's truth and everything. But from a Christian perspective, more basically, we can say, there's truth outside of ourselves because God is the source of all truth.

And God is outside of ourselves. We are not God. And to think that our perspective completely encapsulates the truth would be a kind of idolatry.

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But also, to sort of cynically say, there is no truth, would leave us hopeless. So, recognizing that we all have those limited perspectives could lead us to despair. And especially when we think of, well, how can we then come to understand God? I mean, it's hard enough to understand the truth in a contentious court case.

How would you understand the truth of a God Who's greater than any of us can imagine, Who our language can't fully encapsulate and so forth and so on. But this is the Good News that we don't have to struggle to reach up to God using our mind and just try to arrive at the truth. Because the God of the Bible is a God Who comes to meet us.

The God of the Bible is a God Who sent His Son, the Truth, the Way, the Truth, and the Life to live amongst us, to reveal truth to us. And so, the direction is really in the other way. And that's the Good News of the Gospel, that this is a God Who loves us as creatures so much that He speaks to us.

Even though He's transcendent and beyond anything we can grasp, He comes down to our level. In theology, we would talk about this in the language of accommodation. The language of the Bible is an accommodation on God's part to us, in a sense that it's God's... Just as we do when we are speaking to a baby or a toddler, we sometimes embarrass ourselves by acting silly or using funny words, but we're trying to communicate to them on their level.

We're using baby talk. And so even the most profound theology that's based on the deepest insights of Scripture, I would say its baby talk from God's perspective, if we could have God's perspective. But that's because God, like a person loves a child and wants to communicate to them, God loves us and wants to communicate to us.

And so, He comes to us and reveals Himself to us in Christ in the truths of the Gospel and in the Scriptures, which tell us the answers not to every question we might have, but to the most important questions. Who are we? What is our purpose? Who is God? How can we be in a relationship with God? How can we walk with God? Why is our

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world so broken? And God has chosen to, in His mercy and kindness, to reveal these things to us in the Bible. And that's a wonderful thing that we need to continue to celebrate in this time where we're in something like a post-truth age, as people might say.

Andrew Stirling: Yeah, absolutely. James, you've described it beautifully. And I'm thinking about young people hearing what you say.

And I'm thinking about another issue that has a direct relationship and impact to what you're saying. And that is to talk a little bit about the gifts of the Holy Spirit. You know, Jesus promised, the Paraclete.

He promised that He will lead you into truth, that He would point to Jesus as the Truth and confirm this. But the Holy Spirit's also given gifts for believers to be able to live in that truth and to bear witness to that truth and to be empowered to be witnesses. In the church with young people right now, how important do you think it is to talk about the Holy Spirit and the role within the church? We're coming near the end here of our conversation but give us a sense of that.

It's a big question, I know, James, but it's one that's very much on my heart and mind.

James Pedlar: Yes. Well, the Holy Spirit gifts everyone with gifts for ministry.

And it's important to recognize this is, you know, what Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians 12, right? That every person has gifts. And they're not just natural gifts, but sometimes special gifts that God gives to us that are something beyond just natural abilities, but that every one of us has something to contribute to the mission of the church and to the building up of the church. And, you know, this is why he uses that analogy of the body and the parts, right? And that every part is essential.

And so even, you know, if you've ever had an injury to your toe, you'll know this is a very small part of my body, but it can really be a big nuisance, right? So, you know, every part is important and they all work together. And so, I think it's important to be

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sending that message, first of all, to young people that to be seeking those gifts, to recognize you have a part to play, you have a ministry, whatever it might be. But also, that this is done at God's, you know, through God's sovereign purposes.

And so, the Lord knows what gifts are needed in particular times and distributes them according to His purpose and will and raises up people to meet needs that might be, you know, that are in their context. So, I think it's important as we're wrestling with, you know, everyone who's involved in church life, especially is always asking, what do we need to do next? What's the next thing to fix? What's the next way to, you know, and to not to, well, to be seeking the Spirit, not to be looking necessarily for a programmatic answer that fits everywhere. Maybe there's things to learn from programs and so forth, but ultimately, we need the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

And if we're doing Christian ministry, if we understand the task of Christian ministry, we will know we need the Holy Spirit because it's a tremendous challenge often, even living in Christian community with others, no matter what ministry we're doing. And so, to be seeking the Spirit's guidance, I would say is essential for everyone and to be open to perhaps surprising moves of the Holy Spirit. We don't know what God might need to do in our life.

But also, I would say the important thing about gifts of the Spirit is to also look for the fruit of the Spirit that comes from them, to be discerning. If it's a genuine move of the Spirit, it will work towards unity in the church. It will work with other gifts that God has given to other parts of the body, and it will produce fruit, and God will be glorified in that way.

Andrew Stirling: Absolutely. Beautifully stated, James. My ordination service, a Methodist from Ireland preached and he talked about prevenient grace and he talked about the Holy Spirit also going before us and that we don't lead the way, we follow the way that has been set by the Holy Spirit who's in advance of us and how important it is then to follow the leading and the prompting and to discern the Spirits.

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When we talk about the Holy Spirit, we also talk about really the relationship between the Holy Spirit and prayer. And just finally, James, what would you like us and our audience to pray for you and your ministry and your outreach to young people or your family, whatever's on your mind? What do you want the Bible Society people to pray for you?

James Pedlar: Well, I need wisdom as a teacher of theology, as someone who's trying to help people along who are a next generation perhaps in ministry or who are already in ministry. How do we teach these enduring truths which the church has always proclaimed in an ever-changing context, in a time of increasing fragmentation of the culture, in a time of technological challenges declining not only Biblical literacy as people in the Bible Society would be concerned about, but how about just literacy and how our technology is perhaps undermining some of the skills, the ability to concentrate, the ability to give our attention to something over long periods of time that's essential really for deep learning.

So, for me, what do I need prayer for is how to continue to adapt and respond to that context in a faithful way and in a way, that's going to serve Christ and His church for the next generation that's coming.

Andrew Stirling: Well, James, be assured of our prayers and our gratitude to you for your clarion calls that you've made today and for the guidance you're giving us. And we would ask in return, please, that you continue to pray for the ministry of the Canadian Bible Society as we seek to reach out to all the ages and all the churches that we can.

So, thank you, James. This has been a real privilege to talk to you. God bless you, and thanks once again for your friendship.

James Pedlar: And you as well. Thank you for the opportunity.