

The living Church is energized by faith

[Romans 8:9-18](#) | 23rd July 2017

Volvo will be the first major car manufacturer to phase out cars which have an internal combustion engine as their sole power unit. From 2019 all Volvos will either be hybrids, or fully electric. It's a challenging step, and interesting because only two years ago Volvo's boss, Håkan Samuelsson, wrote off electric cars as a technology. What changed his mind? He said in Autotrader magazine two weeks ago: 'People increasingly demand electrified cars and we want to respond to our customers' current and future needs.'

I bet Mr Samuelsson wants his company to be successful. He knows one route to this is being customer-focused. He certainly thinks customers won't be persuaded to buy Volvo just because Volvo tells them to. They can't rely on their tradition, track record or badge.

I retain a soft spot for Swedish style: my first car was a Volvo. Thirty years ago, the focus wasn't on the environment so much as safety. My 340 had bars in the doors and crumple zones when these were still fairly innovative. They came at a price: it was so heavy that it struggled to get thirty to the gallon and, when the starter motor failed on holiday, my wife had a terrible job push-starting it in the cold mornings. Well, someone had to sit in the driver's seat who knew when to bring in the clutch.

Volvo could have kept the 'safe, strong and dull' sentiment going. But they didn't. They've gone green because they see that's the future for sales. They aren't energized by tradition, or even by

solid and well-loved principles of being safe, and somewhat staid. They are taking a risk, because the future rather than the past is where they set their sights.

We move from cars to church and to Christ. Like Volvo, church might be thought to be a bit staid, to emphasize traditional values, to be 'safe' rather than 'sporty' if you like. At least, that's how it has been for a long time. That has been true in your history, here: what we do, now, is not so far in essence from what has always been done. I value much of it: it's familiar to me, comfortable and safe. However life has changed hugely since the turn of the twentieth century. People's use of time and technology, the place of women and family activities, and issues of science and faith have developed in ways which could hardly have been anticipated in 1900. What clues are there in today's Bible passage which help us discover where our energy for our progress might be found?



Paul's first, and challenging, idea is that you don't simply look around you. The translation unhelpfully contrasts 'flesh' with 'spirit' but the real distinction is between looking at things with a purely 'this world' perspective, and bringing in to view a larger, spiritual dimension. If we do that, we might recognize the energizing presence of God,

powerful enough to resurrect Christ, draws close to us in the midst of this life we're living. So, don't discount spiritual perception, being energized by faith. That's Paul's message when he enjoins the Christians in Rome not to live 'according to the flesh'.

If we think only in 'this-world' terms we run a much higher risk of missing God's mark. A significant mistake we might make is one of relation: it becomes harder to see how we're connected to God, and to one another, if we leave out of the picture this additional spiritual dimension to life. It's not simply that God has created us (that could be quite impersonal). It is that God takes to do with us, relates to us as whole people, invites our lively engagement with God in worship and service, and offers us a bright, though perhaps different future from what we anticipate. Our future is meant to be lived conscious of God's Spirit: deeply engaged and empowered by that engagement to make a positive contribution that the world might be changed for the better.

In this way of seeing things, the Church focus is on being energized by faith rather than just keeping things going or trying to survive. Attentive planning, resourcing and reflection is given to worship to enable worshippers to experience God's grace, love and call to commitment expressed in lively action. We aim to serve God and one another. We engage with scripture in creative ways which connect with life. Faith in Christ is nurtured and

people at all stages of faith exploration and development are supported to grow in, and share their faith.

That doesn't mean the appearance need necessarily change, though neither does it provide a good basis for keeping things unaltered. It does suggest that we work hard at developing relevant, lively worship which meets the needs of all (and probably needs all to contribute, in different ways, if this is to happen). It suggests that we don't relegate Christian ethical thinking to the sidelines, or downplay the sorts of activities that help nurture faithful living, or remain airy-fairy and irrelevant to life's challenges and struggles. If we thought last week that we need to get out more, this week we are, perhaps, being encouraged to get more real. And to become more God-sensitive.

Where we might doubt there is a spiritual force, Paul encourages us to look even more closely and be more attentive, and recognize what's God-given in 'ordinary' living.

The Volvo illustration is helpful here, too. Their cars will still look like cars after 2019 - they will still have doors, and a wheel at each corner. But what's underneath the bonnet will be a bit different. Maybe it's similar with us. Perhaps much of what we do won't look so markedly different, but what's going on underneath may develop significantly. What if we were increasingly connected faith and Bible and church activities with real life - and admitted where this was difficult? What if we encouraged each other to think about how we live connected to God, and perhaps to speak about that, or put it into action together? We might find a renewed energy which could have an impact of the whole of our lives. And we might find that, like Volvo, this new energy source is quite attractive to other people. Like the car firm we will need to explore and develop, make mistakes, carry out a deal of research and development and get to know each other, and our world, a bit better.

This has happened before. The Alpha Course was traditional in its content but with a much more relational and welcoming setting; it proved enduringly popular. Living the Questions is a traditional church setting (people meeting to discuss in small groups) but enables more challenging and radical ideas to be aired and shared. You have found both to be valuable through they years.

What if it is true, then, that this spiritual engagement with God in God's world is worthwhile, and rich, and life-giving and deeply energizing? The evidence of countless people over a consistent period of centuries is that it is, and that it can be explored and expressed in a large variety of ways. Maybe we have an obligation, to ourselves and each other as much as to God, to live in ways well-connected to God and our neighbours. Maybe that's just the spark - to use a somewhat old-fashioned metaphor in the age of electric vehicles - we all need. What do you make of this?

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Seven Marks of a Healthy Church - summary.

Available at [http://www.livinggodslove.org/downloads/Seven Marks of a Healthy Church 1.pdf](http://www.livinggodslove.org/downloads/Seven%20Marks%20of%20a%20Healthy%20Church%201.pdf)

Living God's Love The Anglican Diocese of St Alban's Faith and Mission vision until 2020.

Available at <https://www.stalbans.anglican.org/faith/living-god-s-love/>