

ECCLESIOLOGY 101
How the Local Church Lives and Breathes
Part 3: Led by the Spirit

This is our third installment of a series titled ECCLESIOLOGY 101.

OXFORD DICTIONARY — Theology as applied to the nature and structure of the Christian Church.

The point of this series is not so much a to lay out a formal and systematic look at the nature of the church — but rather to get a street level, organic look at what the Bible has to say about the way the local church lives and breathes.

In our first study we looked at how a community of believers is to relate to those who lead within a local church.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 ...respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you,

and the ways each member of a community relates to others within it.

1 Thessalonians 5:13b-15 Be at peace among yourselves. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. ¹⁵ See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

In our last Monday night together, we zeroed in on the two very direct and very important commands Paul gave the community of believers in Thessalonica at the close of his first letter to them. Both of them were DO NOTs — and they shed tremendous light on how a local church lives and breathes. Tonight I want to go deeper on them.

The first was

1 Thessalonians 5:19 Do not quench the Spirit.

Wuest's Expanded Translation of the N.T. — *Stop stifling and suppressing the Spirit.*

That “DO NOT” gives us a HUGE insight into the very nature and essence of authentic Christianity and authentic Christian community. The Christian life is not a matter of forgiven sinners doing the best they can within the scope of their natural abilities to follow Jesus and live on mission with Jesus. The whole of the Christian life is something supernatural. It a life that begins by the Holy Spirit bringing us to an inescapable awareness that we are sinners — and then revealing Jesus to us as the sinless Son of God who died in our place and rose from the grave who alone can save us from our great enemies of sin and death. The moment we believe with our heart on the Lord Jesus we are *born again* — made alive to God — by the power of the Holy Spirit. That new life is carried along by the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit who, day by day, is at work in the life of that man or woman *giving them the desire and the power to do what pleases God.*

Philippians 2:13 (NKJV) for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

I want to build on that a bit. The life of each and every believer will be a reflection and expression of the things the Holy Spirit is passionate about.

The scripture makes it very clear that the Holy Spirit is passionate about three things: Jesus — Holiness — and Mission.

The Holy Spirit is passionate about Jesus. He is always looking to reveal Jesus to us, exalt Jesus in our hearts, in our lives and in our world. And in that we discover that the Holy Spirit is humble, always pointing away from Himself to Jesus, always deferring to the Father and the Son.

Because the Holy Spirit is pure and undefiled, the Holy Spirit is passionate about holiness in our lives. He is the one who convicts us of sin, frees us from sin, leads us in sanctification, conforms us to the image of the Son.

The Holy Spirit is passionate about mission. He is active and compassionate when it comes to the world. He cares about the plight of the world and the people in

the world — He's active in the world. The Book of Acts is the story of the Holy Spirit on mission in the world through the church.

The Holy Spirit is **always** going to work in the life of **the individual Christian** to reveal and exalt Jesus, create personal holiness, and direct, empower and equip him or her for mission — the proclaiming of the gospel to all the nations.

The local church is the **collective expression** of the Holy Spirit's passions. It's a divine collection of individuals who **together** will live and breathe **in response** to the Holy Spirit's passions.

A community of believers will live and breathe in a way that puts the beauty and grace and mercy and love of Jesus on display.

The way a community of believers lives and breathes in their personal relationships, the way they serve Jesus together will be *holy* — based on a totally different operating system (if-you-would) — not rooted in self advancement at the expense of others — not rooted in self gain.

The local church will live and breathe mission! It will be lit up by the fire of the Holy Spirit's passion to make Jesus known to every man and woman in the world, beginning with the people that are in our world (where we live, where we work, where we go to school, where we shop, where we hang out, where we work out). But God's mission doesn't end there. He desires to make Jesus known everywhere, to everyone!

I want us to ask ourselves a few questions —

Have you been drawn into His passions? What has the Holy Spirit done in a tangible, measurable, experiential way **in your own heart** in regard to the exaltation of Christ, personal holiness and movement into mission?

Can you say that within your sphere of influence the Holy Spirit has caused you, to exalt Christ, pursue holiness and engage in mission?

Is **Metro** (as a community of believers) — lit up by the fire of the Holy Spirit's passions? Do we live and breathe in a way that is an outlet for His passion for Jesus, holiness and mission?

We might revisit the **order** and the **trajectory** of His passions on another Monday night before school starts up again.

In our last Monday night together, we also zeroed in on the second DO NOT.

1 Thessalonians 5:20 Do not despise prophecies,

They were not to **despise** or **hold in contempt** someone coming to them and saying — *I believe the Lord is putting this on my heart for you.*

We had a great time walking through what the Bible says about prophecy, and the *gift of prophecy* in the New Testament. PLEASE grab the resources from that study because there was so much that we learned about the operation of the gift of prophecy and the value of the gift of prophecy. We learned that **one of the most needful and common** forms of prophecy in a community of believers is TELLING FORTH the mind of the Lord. We should value and be open to that person who walks says — I believe the Lord has spoken to my heart — He's led me to share it with you. We should value and be open to the Lord speaking to us — leading us to share a word with someone or with the church.

Tonight, I want to build on the idea of **hearing from** the Holy Spirit and **being led by** the Holy Spirit.

I want to hear from and be led by the Holy Spirit. Valerie and I want our marriage and family to hear from and be to be led by the Holy Spirit. The pastoral leadership at Metro desires to hear from and be led by the Holy Spirit. All of us collectively should want to hear from and be led by be led by the Holy Spirit.

BUT HERE'S THE DEAL — There are inherent challenges and messes that we face when a collection of men and women, none of whom are infallible, are endeavoring to **hear from** the Holy Spirit and **be led by** the Holy Spirit. There is no formula for this. There's no Step 1, Step 2, Step 3. We **learn** to hear the Spirit and be led by the Spirit. It's a life-long process in which we come to know His voice more clearly, discern His ways and His promptings more clearly. And along the way **no one** gets it right all the time! All of us are going to make mistakes — and I believe that when we look at the Scriptures we see that the local church is the context in which we experience the Holy Spirit's design for accountability.

Being led by the Holy Spirit **requires** humility and **creates** humility!

DON'T MISS THIS — We need to be very intentional to hear, and be led by, the Holy Spirit.

There are a few essential spiritual disciplines we need to foster

Are you intentional, purposeful, disciplined about giving yourself to spiritual practices? By experience, everyone here knows the general rule: If we don't schedule something — it's not going to happen. The things that we don't prioritize never seem to materialize!

The truth is that we do prioritize our lives. We can be very intentional about working out — the reality of having to wait for an open treadmill or a certain piece of exercise equipment proves the point that people prioritize taking care of their bodies. And by the way — that isn't inherently a bad thing. We can be very intentional about hanging out — all you have to do is go to any of the local coffee shops and you find tons of people that planned to meet and hang out there. And that isn't inherently a bad thing.

FIRST — Prayer and the reading and studying of Scripture.

Let's ask ourselves this question: Are we that intentional about prayer — about reading the Word, going to Bible study? We are disciples of Jesus Christ. We are followers of Jesus Christ! **Getting to know Jesus**, putting ourselves in the place of hearing from the Holy Spirit — should be THE priority of our lives. Most Christians pray, read, go to Bible studies when they're in a crisis! Again — not a bad thing to do when you're in a crisis. It's the right thing to do when you're in a crisis. But our relationship with Jesus is not a crisis driven thing.

Crisis should not be the tone and tenor of the Christian life. The tone and the tenor of the Christian life is set by this: we are radically, incomprehensibly, loved by Jesus! Because Jesus first loved us, we love Jesus. We haven't been saved to religion; we've been saved to a loving, life-changing, personal relationship with Jesus. I get to turn to Jesus in the moment of crisis. But that doesn't define the

way I relate to Him. I want to meet with Jesus, draw near to Jesus, so I can know Him, love Him because **that** is what Jesus died for me to have!

Think back to God's intention in creating man. God walked with man in the cool of the day. It was an appointment, an appointed time. The eternal, infinite, omnipotent creator of heaven and earth prioritized time to be alone with man!

METRO — It is from the place of intimacy with Jesus that all the rest of the Christian life flows. It's from the place of personal intimacy with Jesus that mission flows; ministry flows, faithfulness flows, fruitfulness flows. That radically informs the point of meeting like this.

We need to see corporate gatherings as a time when a bunch of redeemed rebels come to be intimate with Jesus. That radically informs the point of our times of personal prayer and reading.

Having the grace to forgive, the grace to humbly confess our sins and be forgiven, the grace to love, the grace to receive love is how a community of believers is supposed to live and breathe! That IS real community! THAT is how a community of believers is supposed to live and breathe!

A community of believers that lives and breathes like that doesn't just happen by merely hanging out! If a community of believers is lacking in the grace to forgive, the grace to humbly confess our sins and be forgiven, the grace to love, the grace to receive love — it's owing to the absence of intentional, prioritized time to be with Jesus in the individual lives within the community of believers. Community doesn't just happen by hanging out!

On this side of heaven it's not a matter of **if** we are going to fail in hearing the Holy Spirit or being led by the Holy Spirit; it's a matter of **when** are we going to fail. I say that not to condone sin. We will fail in our Christian life. We will fail when it comes to hearing the Spirit and being led by the Spirit — and we need to come to grips with that. Jesus saved us knowing that we would. We need to come to grips with the reality that others around us are going to fail — and their failure can result in us getting hurt, just as our failure can result in them getting hurt

There **will** — not might — be times when you and I get the leading of the Holy Spirit wrong. My failure to get the leading of the Holy Spirit right is going to affect you. Your failure to get the leading of the Holy Spirit right is going to affect us. Please don't misunderstand me when I say this. I'm not saying that to lay some heavy trip on you. I'm saying these things because there is a sense in which we need to give each other permission to fail in regards to being led by the Holy Spirit. In fact, part of learning to be led by the Holy Spirit happens when we fail to rightly discern His leading.

Can you think of a time when you were **sure** that the Holy Spirit was leading you in a particular way, in a particular course of action — then you stepped out in that thing and then you found yourself thinking... *Uhhh, this is **not** the leading of the Holy Spirit.*

Hopefully, in that moment of failing to get the leading of the Holy Spirit right, we learn what the leading of the Holy Spirit does not sound like, doesn't look like. That begins to refine our sensitivity to the voice of the Holy Spirit. Please remember — Being led by the Holy Spirit is a lifelong process. We **will** get it wrong. And because of that, we **need** to give each other room to fail, cover each other's failures with love, and by God's grace help one another to see how we missed it, got it wrong. THAT is how a community of believer lives and breathes!

Here's another discipline we want to foster in our lives to better hear, know and be led by the Holy Spirit — It's rooted in the fact that God wants to speak to us in the normal course of daily life.

Living ready for God to speak to you.

STORY — Our friend Britt Merrick was talking to one of the ladies at Reality Santa Barbara. She's a woman used radically by God in the realm of intercessory prayer. Because Britt has such deep respect for her he wanted to know if she had any insight on the way the Holy Spirit can speak to us in the course of a normal day. She said, "Yeah, I have an example. Last Sunday I was walking to church and I walked by a piece of trash and I just felt the Holy Spirit tell me to go back and pick it up." Britt was thinking, *Okay, then what happened? Did the heavens open and giant sheet came down with all sorts of trash and pollution that needed to be picked up directing her and challenging her caring for creation?* So he pressed her

and said, *Then what?* She said, *Well, I went back and I just picked it up.* Britt said, *Okay, so what was the point of the Spirit telling you to do that? Did He want you to pick up trash?* She said, *No. That's the way that the Holy Spirit trains me to hear His voice. He will give me what appear to be meaningless, small, suggestions throughout the day, and then I'm always presented with the opportunity to ignore or obey.* Then she said, *"You will not be entrusted with more until you're faithful with the little things."*

Fallen culture conditions us to respect and expect the spectacular. That influences the church in a very real way. We are conditioned to confuse the spectacular with the supernatural. The Bible says this:

Zechariah 4:10 *Do not despise these small beginnings, for the LORD rejoices to see the work begin,*

So the Holy Spirit will speak to us in the littlest things to train us to discern his voice and to be obedient. You never know when the habit of the seemingly small acts of obedience will have a life-changing outcome.

You might not think the Holy Spirit is leading you. You might not think He is speaking to you. Listen — If you are a son or a daughter of God, He is leading you. So many times it's in that moment when you think about someone and you think, "I should pray for them." It is in those moments when we stop and pray that we find our spiritual ears getting fine tuned to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

HERE'S ANOTHER DISCIPLINE involved in being led by the Holy Spirit — Wait on the Lord, wait for more clarity. The weightier or bigger the course of action, the more clarity you want to have before you act. As we wait on the Lord for clarity it's all right to ask good questions. Let's define what we mean by "Good questions." The question ***Why?*** is generally not a good question. It's not a good question because there's hardly ever an answer to that question that will satisfy a human being. Let me ask you a question — When someone you love dies, and you ask that question, will any answer God gives to you change the sense of loss, erase the pain? So we need to ask good questions, like: *God, what are you doing here? What do you want to show me? How should this thing roll out?*

Those kinds of questions are great because many times what we see of the Lord's leading is not always what it appears to be. Most of you know the story of how the Lord spoke to me about ministry in England. Clear as clear could be: Richard, you are going to minister in England. I took that to mean — Valerie and I need to sell our car, pack your bags because we were moving to England. So we sold our car and began to make plans to move to England. NEVER happened. But Valerie and I've been to England nearly 70 times since then. We have seen thousands of high school kids profess faith in Jesus. We have life-long friends in England that we love and count as family.

Back to what I said earlier — There are inherent dangers and messes in this business of hearing from the Holy Spirit and being led by the Holy Spirit. Here's how it gets messy. Not everyone around us will always agree with what we believe to be the leading of the Holy Spirit! Amen?

It's very rare that a legit Christian will say "I know this isn't God's will, but I'm doing this anyway." Most of the time brothers and sisters will say that as best as they can discern the voice of the leading of the Spirit, they believe they are being led by the Spirit and they are going to move prayerfully and carefully in that direction. The first is a for sure a mess. The second has the potential to be messy.

Here's where it gets messiest (is that a word?! It gets really messy when a brother or sister, or you or I, pull the "God told me" card! Has anybody ever done that to you? You hear the person out, and in love you say, *I'm not sure that's the Lord*. Then they throw down the trump card — *God told me*. There are going to be a lot of times when that is exactly the case.

And here's the how it gets so incredibly messy. When you or I or anyone else uses the "God told me card" — what we're really saying is this: *"In no uncertain terms — you may not question me. You may not say anything that opposes my action."* There are times when the "God told me" card negates everything that God has wonderfully designed and put into place to help us be truly led by the Holy Spirit. The "God told me" card can be used to lock out pastoral care — avoid spiritual authority in your life and disengage **the purpose of God in community to love us and protect us from ourselves and from the deceitfulness of sin.**

What are we to do when faced with that kind of messiness?

The over-riding issue of discerning the leading of the Holy Spirit is **the issue of accountability**. The spiritual authority and leadership within the local church, the community of men and women within the local church are God's divine economy to provide Christ centered, grace driven accountability. We are accountable to one another for FIVE things.

Motives

Direction

Fruit

Faithfulness to Scripture

Authentic Community

1. MOTIVES — The moment you and I claim to have heard the Holy Spirit speak; claim that we are being led by the Holy Spirit, **we can expect to be accountable for our motives**. Don't miss this — In any decision there is always the issue of motives: pride, power, a position, financial gain, or the currency of self gratification. That is so true that James says this concerning our motives in prayer.

***James 4:3** You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*

Decisions are worship driven. Remember that sin blinds, and then blinds us to our blindness. It is possible for us to be pursuing an idol while claiming to be led by the Holy Spirit. When we are being led by the Holy Spirit we are driven by the exaltation of Jesus, growth in holiness and the mission of Jesus! It is so important that we be open and accountable for our motives!

In Acts 10 Peter is a great example of this — Peter said, *The Spirit told me...* and then you look at the way he conducted himself and you see that everything fully lined up with the passion of the Holy Spirit for mission and for the exaltation of Jesus in the saving of souls. It wasn't driven by ego or self-preservation or self-promotion.

2. DIRECTION — This follows from the first. By DIRECTION I mean “the way of the cross.”

Matthew 16:23-25 ²³But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on **the things of God**, but on **the things of man**.” ²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him **deny himself and take up his cross and follow me**. ²⁵For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life **for my sake** will find it.

HERE’S THE DEAL — If we claim that we are being led by the Holy Spirit — and especially if we pull the “God told me” card — we should expect someone to objectively look at the trajectory of your decisions. Are you in the way of the cross — is there denial of self, or is it the way of Self?

When are truly being led by the Holy Spirit it is going to look like **Matthew 16:23-35**. The Holy Spirit can and will lead us into places that will cost us. You can’t hold on to your own life, your title, your position and ambitions and claim to be led by the Holy Spirit. That's why we always need to be asking ourselves the question, and be willing for others to ask us the question: Who is this about, and am I willing to go the way of the cross?

3. FRUIT — Pastors and brothers and sister in a community of believers have the right to be fruit inspectors. We **need** our spouse, our kids, our pastors, our brothers and sisters — not to be sin sniffers, but fruit inspectors! **That** is by God’s design.

When we claim to be led by the Holy Spirit we should look for evidence, look for fruit, fruit that is glorifying Jesus. Kind of like the famous line in the movie Jerry Maguire — **Show me the fruit!** Fruit that brings glory to Jesus proves the leading of the Holy Spirit because that is the passion of the Holy Spirit. (**See how important it was for us to start with** the Holy Spirit and what He’s passionate about!) And, by the way, sometimes we see that fruit more clearly in hindsight.

4. FAITHFUL TO SCRIPTURE — When we claim something is from God we are accountable to scripture, always. The Spirit will **never** lead us in a way that's

contrary to scripture. Listen, millions of Mormons are on there way to hell because they claim to be led into the Mormon church by a feeling. You should expect to be held accountable by your spouse, your family, your brothers and sisters in Christ, and your pastors to be faithful to scripture.

5. AUTHENTIC — You have been living out your Christian life in a community of believers. You have relational currency. You're a known commodity in the church You are relationally connected to the people asking you about what you believe the Lord is leading you to do. They know your falls and failures — and your restoration. They know that you love Jesus, you're living on mission with Jesus and for Jesus. They know you love the church that was blood bought by Jesus.

Are you connected? When someone comes into Metro and refuses to be connected with leadership — pick and choose who they will know and what they will let people know about them — that's not just zero relational currency, that's red ink on the ledger.

CLOSE WITH THIS

It is possible for us to truly hear from and be led by the Spirit — and the people that are most important to us can say, “I don't see it.” What are we to do?”

Here's what a lot of people do — and this causes messes. When they do this there is almost always blood splattered on the wall. They go and begin to lobby others to support them, back their claim. That will **always** involve putting those who don't support them into a bad light.

We're told in the book of James that the *wisdom from above is pure and peaceable and willing to yield (James 3:17)*. When a thing is truly Spirit led, you can trust the Holy Spirit to show all parties involved. That requires time — which requires patience — or as the KJV says, suffering long! But the evidence of being led by the Spirit is humility, **never** haughtiness. That means there will be mutual submission because all parties will recognize that God's on the throne. Because **GOD** is on the throne you can wait. Because **GOD** is on the throne you don't have to build your case — build a consensus by maligning others. Instead, you pray something like, “Holy Spirit, can you show my brothers and sisters? Can you show

my pastors (which implies that you actually own them as pastors)? Can you show me?

James 3:13-18 *If you are wise and understand God's ways, prove it by living an honorable life, doing good works with the humility that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴But if you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your heart, don't cover up the truth with boasting and lying. ¹⁵For jealousy (**don't miss this**) and selfishness **are not God's kind of wisdom**. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and **demonic**. ¹⁶For wherever there is jealousy and **selfish ambition**, there you will find disorder and evil of every kind. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere. ¹⁸And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness.*

Who is the man or woman truly led by the Holy Spirit? The one who is look s most like Jesus! The one who, like Jesus, is gentle, peace loving, always willing to surrender self for the glory of God.