

## Spirit-led Ecclesiology: Following the Spirit thru Church Planting

Jonathan K. Dodson | Acts 29 Dallas Bootcamp | Nov 20, 2008

This session is devoted to Spirit-led Ecclesiology, which depending on where you sit, will sound exciting, Biblicist or just downright arrogant. I mean, who am I to assume that my ecclesiology is led by the Holy Spirit and everyone else's isn't? Is that what I am advocating? Not *exactly*. Bear with me. This afternoon I'd like us to consider the role of the Holy Spirit in church planting. As a generally Reformed, Evangelical group, if we're honest, we treat the Spirit more like a silent partner than the third person of the Trinity. We have a nasty habit of assuming, not asking, the Spirit's direction and energy, guidance and power. When it comes to the role of the Spirit, many of us describe ourselves as "open-but-cautious" or as 'charismatics with seatbelt." Well, I'd like to teeter across the edge of caution, to loosen the seatbelt a little this afternoon, maybe even click-and-release it in order to consider how we follow the Holy Spirit in *planting churches*. What does it mean to be led by the Spirit as a church planter, as a pastor? But before we do that, we need to consider *what we are actually following* in lieu of the Spirit. As a church planter, you're going to lean one of two ways in order to plant your church. The first way is by relying on do-it-yourself, **apostolic moxie**. Just put your head down and plow and then look up once you have a church. The other way is by relying on by-the-book, **academic models and methods**. You read every book, blog, and manual on the face of the earth and calculate every step of the way. Whether you lean on apostolic moxie or academic models and methods, we can easily lean away from the Spirit-led center of planting and pastoring Christ's Church. So, in the time that remains let's consider three things: 1) What we tend to depend on (Divergences) 2) Whom we should depend on (Holy Spirit) 3) How we depend on the Spirit (Practices).

### Apostolic Moxie & Academic Models/Methods

Let's consider two directions that can diverge from the Spirit-led center of church planting in two ways: *discernment and resistance*. The first divergence is dependence on apostolic moxie. I talk to a lot of church planters both inside and outside of Texas. I'm part of a Network called the *Austin PlantR Network*. We have about 40 planters in the network from different denominations, all along the spectrum of planting from checking it out to several years in. One of the things I have noticed is that we all tend to lean on something other than the Holy Spirit in order to plant and shepherd our churches. Some tend to lean on their innate apostolic moxie. What's moxie? Moxie is courage or determination. It is that self-starting, self-motivating quality, often present among entrepreneurs, which enables them to push through the odds of failure with determination for success. When we link moxie up to an apostolic gifting, we get a church planter. This drive to plant is moxie and moxie is often mixed with sin. Moxie is the drive to plant no matter what the odds. Sin is moxie without humility—to plant without embracing the wisdom of others. Do-it-yourself moxie might get a church planted but the planted church will be very unhealthy. Why? Because it was planted in unbelief in the Spirit and belief in yourself. Planting by making little of the Spirit and much of Yourself. Church planting takes more humility than it does moxie, humble reliance. We need less moxie and more Spirit. Self-reliant planters often lack **discernment** because they rely on moxie, instead of asking the Spirit questions. They don't ask the question: "*What is the Spirit already doing in this city, town, and*

*village?*" You barrel into town with a "vision from God" and in the process you burn your family, polarize your community, and disregard the city. We need to learn to listen to others, to God, and to the city. You need to find out what God is already doing where you want to plant. To ask the Spirit to lead you to key people and places so that you can learn how to contextualize the gospel. This requires humility; this requires questions, both of the Spirit and of the City. You need humility to learn from the city, to be discipled by the city, to ask her and her citizens questions. A second reason we need less moxie and more Spirit, is because apostolic moxie pushes through **barriers and resistance** instead of asking the Holy Spirit why the barriers are there. When suffering, conflict or unplanned change occurs, you gather up your apostolic moxie and fight through the barriers without pausing to ask the Spirit or his people why the barrier is there. For example, a sin issue arises in your church that may require church discipline. Instead of pastoring the individual through the circumstance, you throw down the gauntlet: repent or get lost. Sometimes we have to do this. But there is always more to be learned from God in church discipline than learning how to throw down the gauntlet. Church discipline will affect the direction and momentum of your church. If you rely on moxie, you will miss what the Spirit is trying to tell you about your church/community and the direction he wants to take you. Apostolic moxie chalks suffering up to "spiritual warfare" and fights through the resistance. Apostolic moxie decries conflict as a form of mutiny insisting that *you are either in or you're out*. This is sinful apostolic moxie---pushing through the barriers of suffering, conflict, or unplanned change without relying on the Holy Spirit. Okay. That's apostolic moxie. What about the other divergence from the Spirit-led center of church planting? Dependence on academic models and methods. There are planters who rely less on apostolic moxie and more on academic models and methods. Instead of relying on self-determination, they rely on books. They diverge from the Spirit-led center by relying on academics or personal knowledge. Those who depend on models and methods are, perhaps, more submissive to God's call, but slowly attach their significance and success as a planter to *what they know not to God's calling*. They think to themselves, *"if I learn enough then I'll be ready to plant."* When it comes to **discernment**, asking what the Spirit is doing in the city, you assume the questions and fill in the blank. You have a plan to reach your city. That plan does not include the Holy Spirit; it includes your research. You pull out your church planting prospectus, strategic plan, your CP model and methods and say, "This is what God is doing in the city." You have a plan, you have the answers. You assume that you have the answers to the needs of the city, town or village. **You overthink and outplan the Holy Spirit.** Your church planting timeline is jam-packed and well-timed but there's no place for spiritual retreat or the Spirit. You answer the questions for the Spirit, for the city. Instead of relying on moxie we rely on models, we rely on ourselves. What we need is fewer books and more prayers. How do I know this? Because I'm split down the middle; I lean on moxie and models instead of the Holy Spirit. And what about when you encounter **barriers**, instead of pushing through them you *reroute around them*. If you hit resistance you turn to authors. Why? Because you can plan. Suffering, conflict, and unplanned change freak you out and then drive you back to the drawing board, to books, to manuals, and articles. You gather up your academic models and methods, your chapters on suffering and conflict, and reroute around resistance...and in doing so you run a detour right around the Holy Spirit. Instead of asking the Spirit of God and the church for wisdom, you turn to your books, your methods, your plans. *Church discipline* is an inconvenience. *Suffering* is surprising. *Conflict* is a detour. And

difference is something to be reasoned with. The third person of the Trinity, or any persons of the Trinity for that matter, are subtly ignored as we reroute around God-ordained barriers. So, you see, we lean one of two ways—sinful reliance upon apostolic moxie or sinful reliance upon academic models and methods. And if we begin by relying on apostolic gifting or academic knowledge, we will plant spiritually malnourished churches, churches that rely on themselves, not the Holy Spirit.

### *The Spirit and the Gospel*

Now, some of you are probably thinking that the Gospel is the center of church planting, not the Spirit. But what is the gospel? It's God's redemptive plan for all creation; it is God's gospel. Who is God? Most of act like he is Jesus...but he's not. God is more than Jesus. God is three persons—Father, Son and Spirit. The Early Church formulations that describe the trinity as "consubstantial," sharing the same substance are, in my opinion, misguided. God is not some invisible substance that is shared by the three persons of the Trinity. Rather, the Cappadocians got it right. God is essentially persons-in-relation, a divine community. God is irreducibly personal and communal. In Acts 29 we all too often reduce the gospel to Jesus, Jesus who died and rose from the dead, but the gospel is more than that. The gospel is not a Jesus only message. After all, who raised Jesus from the dead? The Spirit (Rom 1). The gospel is the good news of the Father who elects, as Son who redeems, and a Spirit who recreates. We can preach Jesus all day long, but if we aren't relying on the recreating power and directing of the Holy Spirit, then we are not preaching or living a whole gospel. It's truncated, requiring one person, maybe two, but not the whole God, the Trinity. And that is an offense to the God of the gospel; the God who is essentially three persons in community, not some shared divine substance. So, how then do we lead from the center of Spirit-led church planting? How do we avoid the sinful extremes of moxie and models, and plant from the center of Spirit-led planting? In order to answer this questions, we need to consider just what the center is—the Holy Spirit.

### **Concise Biblical Theology of the Spirit**

I'd like to take us through a quick, concise biblical theology of the Spirit. Where do we see the Spirit first? In Gen 1:1 "*The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.*" What was the Spirit doing? Hovering over creation. Together with the Father and the Son, the Spirit created all things. In 1:28, "Let Us make man in our Image" is probably a reference to the Trinity. The Spirit makes man gives him a mission to rule and subdue the earth, to be fruitful and multiply. Man fumbles his mission, worships a false god, and is sent into exile, expelled from the garden. Things go from bad to worse and God floods the world with a watery judgment. Noah is rescued via the ark and when it stops raining he sends out a what? A bird. What does the bird do? It hovers over the waters looking for dry land. Eventually, it returns with new life in its mouth to announce God's re-creative activity (8:8ff) and humanity is re-commissioned to be fruitful and multiply. When do we see the bird, the Spirit, again? In the creation of Israel:

*But the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. "He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading*

*out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, the LORD alone guided him, no foreign god was with him."* Deut 32:10-11

God is depicted as a bird rescuing Israel from a wasteland, hovering over her with love and redemption. In this text Moses deliberately uses several words from Gen 1:1-2 to echo the role of the Spirit in creating and re-creating. It is called an *inclusio*. This time, however, the Spirit is creating a new people with a new mission. Not only is Israel to be fruitful and multiply, but also to be a light to the nations. The Spirit creates a new people with a renewed, redemptive mission. They are to be an attractive people whose faithfulness and kindness attracts the nations to worship YHWH. But Israel fumbles their mission, worships false gods and is sent into exile. Who will carry on the mission? How will it be carried out? Where does the bird, the dove, the Spirit, appear again? At the baptism of Jesus (Luke 3:22). Jesus undergoes the water judgment and emerges with the favor of God, indicated by the hovering presence of a dove and the voice of God. In Jesus, a humanity/Israel will be re-created to carry out the redemptive mission that Adam and Israel failed to complete. How? What will ensure their missional success? How will they avoid the failures of their forefathers? The entire people, the church, will receive the Spirit, not just isolated individuals. Thus we see in Acts a hovering of the Spirit over the early church at Pentecost: "*And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind (pnohs), and it filled the entire house where they were sitting*" (Acts 2:2). A mighty rushing wind—pnohs—a word related to pneuma/spirit came from heaven to re-create and release the people of God into the mission of Christ. Do you see it? The Spirit empowering, recreating, directing presence of God among the people of God. The Spirit will ensure the success of the mission of God? Now, here is the interesting thing. The disciples of Jesus had already received the mission of Christ at the end of each gospel and in Acts 1:8—to be the witnesses of Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, to the ends of the earth. They had been given a global mission, but remained local. They were waiting in room, huddled, fearful, hopeful, and prayerful. What were they doing? Waiting for the holy bird to descend upon them as he had done in their rich history. They were waiting for the Spirit to hover over them, to re-create and empower them to fulfill the mission of Christ.

### *The Spirit and the Church*

Two points from this all too brief BT of the Spirit: 1) The Spirit **creates/re-creates** for mission. Apostolic moxie does not create the church. Academic models do not create the church. 2) The Spirit **directs** the people of God in mission of Christ. So the Spirit created and the Spirit directs. **The Holy Spirit is the creative and directive presence of God among the people of God.** What does he create? The church, a new humanity, a new Israel gathered around Jesus. Where does he direct us? To the mission of Christ. The Spirit creates and directs a missionary community grounded in the gospel. Missiologist Craig Van Gelder appropriately describes the church as "*a missionary community created by the Spirit.*" If we are indeed a missionary community created by the Spirit, and we are lead missionaries, lead pastors, missional community planters, how should we lead? How should we respond to the Spirit? Moxie or methods? Neither. How should we respond? We should repent for minimizing the role of God the Spirit in creating a missionary community on the mission of Christ. Those who diminish the Spirit by relying on apostolic moxie are called to deep repentance at this breathtaking survey of the creative and re-creative

work of the Holy Spirit. It is not our moxie but the grace of God in Christ through the Spirit that creates the church. Those of us who quench the role of the Spirit by relying on academic models and methods to create missionary community should repent and ask for forgiveness and a fresh filling of the Holy Spirit. It is not our models; it is not our methods; it is not our moxie that creates a missionary community; it is the power of the Holy Spirit that makes men new and builds the church. Ezekiel 36:26-27: *And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.* God takes the broken, sin-hardened, heart of stone out of our chests, the heart that consistently desires the wrong things, and he gives them new hearts, hearts of flesh, hearts that beat with the purpose and mission of God. How does this heart beat? He puts his Spirit within you to animate and vivify it, to give you new life, so that your heart can beat, in love, for him and for others and exile is undone. The Spirit animates and empowers the people of God, the Church, to carry out the mission of Christ. We are united with a missionary God. Exile is undone because you have been changed, by God. Because you have a new capacity to relate, to love, never possible before! How, then, do we practically follow the Spirit as we plant our churches? How can we actively trust the Spirit?

### **Following the Spirit Thru Church Planting**

Faith in the Spirit does several things: *Believes* the promises of God, not the promise of moxie or models. *Makes Plans* with the Spirit to Accomplish Mission. *Expects* the Spirit to do Unplanned Things to Accomplish the Mission of God. First, scour the Bible for texts that tell you who the Holy Spirit is and what he does. Find promises like the ones in 1 Corinthians 2 and hold them up to God and ask him to make good on them. Bank on the promises regarding the Spirit for wisdom and power to plant churches that honor Christ. Second, I am not anti-methods. In fact, the Spirit uses academic models and methods for effective, gospel-centered, Spirit-led church planting. The Apostle Paul clearly had a strategy for planting churches in urban centers. In *Paul's Missionary Methods*, Roland Allen pointed out Paul's deliberate church planting strategy—influential cities, apostolic bands, westward movement towards Rome. David Hesselgrave develops this further in his *Planting Churches Cross-culturally* and develops what he calls the Pauline Cycle of church planting. To be sure, Paul was strategic. He had plans to go to cities, synagogues, and Rome. We get this. We are Western. However, Paul also encountered *unplanned change in accomplishing his mission (Third)*. The Spirit did things and led Paul in ways that he could not have predicted or planned.

#### *The Spirit and Suffering*

The Spirit also uses unplanned change—**suffering**—to advance the mission of the church. For example, Stephen's stoning led to the Eastward expansion of the Church (Acts 7; 11:19). Paul's planting strategy was directed westward, towards Rome. The Spirit made sure that the church expanded eastward through the martyrdom of Stephen. By the blood of the martyrs the seed of the church was sown. This made church planting a global movement. It was unplanned change, suffering. How many of us have martyrdom written into our church planting timeline? How will you respond when suffering comes? Will you ask the Spirit for direction when it comes, or will you blow through in moxie or ignore it by taking methodological detours around the God-

ordained suffering? When I planted Austin City Life, one of our early disciples was a guy I met in a computer lab. He was a former hermit of sorts, very lost spiritually. I spent 6-8 months discipling him and seeing tremendous growth. He began to share his faith and joined our missional core team. It was remarkable, enjoyable, until he flipped out on me. There I was sitting in a core team meeting in our home, wondering where this guy was. An outlook email pops up on my laptop with a subject line that read something like: "Your Poison." Do I share it with our team or just ignore it? I decided to share it. The email was dismissive, curt, and attacking. He was cutting us off and calling me out. The emails kept coming, accusing me of money laundering, of spouting poison, of deceiving others. It was horrible, heart-wrenching. From a guy I had spent months pouring into. The emails kept coming with increasing venom. I couldn't even show some of them to my wife. He disappeared. How would I respond? Moxie or Methods? Or would I ask the Spirit what he wanted to teach us. As I tried to listen to the Spirit, we were bound together as a community in prayer for this man. I decided to introduce more financial controls and transparency, even though we were already totally above board. We learned, we grew, we did not bust through the barrier or reroute around it.

### *The Spirit and Direction*

Unplanned change in the form of **redirection** occurs in Acts 16, where Paul was planning to preach the gospel in Asia but that the Holy Spirit prevented him. He attempted to go to other cities but was redirected to Macedonia/Greece/Europe by the Macedonian man! *Your plans may not be God's plans.* When I first started researching where to plant, I drew up a prospectus for planting in Allston-Brighton, Mass, a multiethnic township of greater Boston. A year later I was planting in Austin, Texas. I never thought I would return to Texas. It was against my missionary impulse, but then my understanding of God's mission began to expand and I learned of the vast unchurched numbers in Austin. I continued to pray and ask the Spirit for wisdom and direction. My target moved from multiethnic Bostonites to the Creative Class Austinites!

### *The Spirit and Methods*

In Acts 10, Peter experienced some significant, Spirit-led unplanned change. He had a vision and the Spirit led him to the home of a Gentile named Cornelius. Through these circumstances he came to realize that the gospel made unclean Gentiles clean Christians. As a result, Peter began preaching to Gentiles and the Spirit fell on them in an unprecedented way. His ministry took on an entirely new dimension. Same gospel, different **expression**. When I arrived in Austin with prospectus and timeline in hand, wife and son on arm, and a baby in the womb, I was quickly confronted with a different church planting methodology. A friend told me I was more wired for Organic Church. I had previously blown off a lot of Cole's stuff off because of his weak governance and polity. As I began to read about *Organic Church*, I became convinced of decentralized church and its fit for urban Austin. Indie church for an indie city. I read anything with the word Organic in it. These authors challenged my inherited thinking about church planting. As a result, I assembled our core team very differently. Instead of holding vision-casts in which disconnected people came to get information and left disconnected with information, I became convinced that we needed to build the church on community from the beginning. So, we had ten people over for dinner and discussion. We kept doing this and we've never stopped. Our core team has now multiplied a rich DNA five times over. All of this was unplanned change,

a significant departure from the way I had thought about cultivating a core team. About this time I found a great church planting mentor in Acts 29 who helped me push organic church through everything. I'd find myself scrambling for core team meetings because I didn't have a plan. The old plans didn't fit the new convictions. He told me I had to make the real shift from thinking that church is what you do not who you are. I had to become comfortable with asking core team members lots of questions instead of giving them lots of answers. I had to understand that I exist for the community first and that the community exists for mission. As much as I liked the word Organic, I began to realize that it was not a process but a person that was guiding me in all of this—the Holy Spirit. Neil Cole's *OC* mentions the Spirit 42xs and Van Gelder's *The Spirit-led Ministry of the Missional Church* 160xs, Clowney's *The Church* 160xs. It is the Spirit who creates and directs the church, not models or methods or moxie. And the Spirit should be free to change your expression of ministry, the way you plant Christ's church. But it was funny, I didn't want to let go of launch. I told our core team that we needed to reach a certain level of missional and community health before we reproduced and went public with services. We changed launch dates like three times. I had it all figured out. We would launch from an indie Austin icon, the Alamo Draft House—indie films and beer. I had a contract in my hands. But then Spirit-led unplanned change occurred. I got a call from our worship leader one morning and he said: "Man, it's an emergency. I might lose my wife. I've dishonored Christ and the church and I need your help." Got wasted and made a pass on a woman who wasn't his wife. Three weeks before we were supposed to launch from my hand picked indie location –the Alamo Draft House. Spirit-led unplanned change. What do I do? Apostolic moxie? Grab one of our other competent musicians and plow through leaving the relational wreckage behind? Academic models, chapter on church discipline? Won't help you! OR do I ask the Spirit what he wants to do in our church? How he wants to change and direct us? And so we sat down as a church, a small core team and we initiated the **discipline** process.

### *The Spirit and Church Discipline*

It was painful and it was worshipful. After our guy shared his story, I opened the floor for words of encouragement. And one of our core people said that she so admired his humility and repentance, and that she had been in churches all her life that either hid or ignored church discipline. And that in that moment in that night she experienced one of the most profound expression of the gospel. And we wept and we prayed. What about Launch? What was the Spirit doing in our community? Renewing it, recreating it, directing it into a no-launch model. I realized that we didn't even need to launch. God was growing us at his own pace and the Spirit was leading us into a different way of church planting. I knew it was right. We scrapped the launch idea and started meeting as a core team in an ugly, Baptist associational office building. Nothing missional or contextualized about the building. We focused on living missionally and developing some basic ministries like City Groups and Kids Life. The unplanned changes in Launch, Expression, and Location were possible because I listened to the Holy Spirit. I didn't gather up apostolic moxie or academic models and bust through the barriers of resistance. I listened to the Spirit, but my flesh wanted to launch from the Draft House (which I still think is a great idea) and to get a hold of an Organic Church Planting Handbook to tell me what to do, step by step. Fortunately, God gave me the Holy Spirit instead.

## **Conclusion**

If we are going to follow the creative, re-creative, directive presence and power of the Holy Spirit through church planting, we must repent of relying on apostolic moxie and academic models and put our faith in the Spirit. If we are to avoid leaning away from the center of Spirit-led church planting, we must scour the Scriptures for texts that tell us who the Spirit is and what he does, and BANK on THEM. If we are going to follow the Holy Spirit through church planting, we must expect unplanned change through suffering, conflict, change of methods, and even church discipline. We have NOT been given the spirit who is from the world but the Spirit who is from God, so that we might understand all the things freely given to us to plant Christ's church, to accomplish God's mission!