

Essential Church

Essential Church



Three Problems to Acknowledge
A Revelation to Comprehend
And Some Wisdom to Walk In

es sen tial:

~adjective~

absolutely necessary;

indispensable:

~noun~

a basic, indispensable,

or necessary element;

chief point:

Steve Highlander

The Domestication of the Spirit

Copyright 2010-2021 Dr. Steven L. Highlander and Emmaus Road Ministries, all rights reserved. Permission granted to use or share this material as long as it is presented in its entirety, unchanged, and the copyright notice remains intact. For bulk reprint rights, contact the author at steve@stevehighlander.com.

Published by Emmaus Road Media
232 North Huttig, Ave.
Independence, MO 64053 USA

Copies of this and other free resources are available at
www.SteveHighlander.com

About the Author

Steve Highlander has been in the ministry for nearly forty years and has served as pastor, church planter, chaplain for at-risk youth, and now as a missionary in Papua New Guinea in the South Pacific with his wife, Brooke. As an apostolic teacher, Steve has taught in Bible colleges in the USA and overseas. He is heavily involved with ministry and maintains several websites, including TalktoAPastor.com and EmmausRoadInstitute.org. His focus is on leadership development and mentoring your ministers and leaders. He is licensed and ordained through the Foursquare Church in the USA and Papua New Guinea. Steve has a doctorate in Pastoral Theology.

The Domestication of the Spirit

Man is good at domesticating things. From mighty elephants to small dogs and cats, we have learned how to make naturally wild things tame and subservient to us. It is little wonder we try to do the same thing with God's Spirit. While that may sound strange, I've been around churches long enough to know that man likes to be in control of what happens. We humans also like things predictable and routine—for the most part.

Just step into just about any church on Sunday morning, and you will find a bulletin with an *order of service*. You will find a list of songs to be sung, who will do a special number, who will preach, and usually the topic. Do not forget the predictable offering. I would almost bet if you timed it, the same things would happen within a couple of minutes from week to week. Far be it for anyone to deviate from the schedule. Oh, and let's not forget: Church gets out at noon. (Isn't that in the Bible somewhere?) Have we not "domesticated" the Church and made it serve us? We even call it a "service." My question is, "who is being served—God or man?" Haven't we told God when He can do something and when He cannot? Many churches would claim to let the Holy Spirit

move, but each week there is the same number of songs, the same person (or two) will preach a sermon for the same amount of time. The offering will be taken in the same way at the same point in the service. Communion is usually taken on a regular schedule and in a prescribed manner that cannot be deviated from because of tradition.

God can do whatever He wants as long as He fits it into our predetermined order of service and tradition. That is domestication. The definition of domestication so closely parallels how we try to control the Spirit, it is scary. The Holy Spirit longs to fly free in our fellowships, but we have to learn to loosen our grip of control, tradition, and the performance-oriented attitudes we have developed.

In His book *Wild Goose Chase*, Mark Batterson writes:

"The Celtic Christians had a name for the Holy Spirit that has always intrigued me. They called Him An Geadh-Glas, or "The Wild Goose." I love the imagery and implications. The name hints at the mysterious nature of the Holy Spirit. Much like a wild goose, the Spirit of God cannot be tracked or tamed. An element of danger and an air of

unpredictability surround Him. And while the name may sound a little sacrilegious at first earshot, I cannot think of a better description of what it's like to pursue the Spirit's leading through life than a wild goose chase. I think the Celtic Christians were on to something that institutionalized Christianity has missed out on."

"A Wild Goose indeed." (I can almost see the sneer and hear the "hmmmp" in the voice of those stodgy traditionalists) "The Holy Spirit is dignified!"

Well, let's consider our first introduction to the Holy Spirit as He relates to the Church. Acts chapter two paints a vivid picture. Those witnessing the outpouring of the Holy Spirit accused the disciples of being DRUNK!

They were all preaching and speaking in a bunch of different languages. No doubt, some people were weeping with conviction when they realized they had crucified the Messiah. Others, freed from the burden of sin and religion, were laughing, and smiling. No doubt they were rushing around finding friends and family to bring them the message. While the Bible does not say so specifically, I am sure there were

many healings, and deliverances as the Spirit of God testified to the preached Word "with signs following," just as Jesus promised He would. The book of Acts does not paint a picture of a decently ordered service with a slick bulletin.

The apostle John records a conversation Jesus had with a religious leader named Nicodemus. Jesus used the wind to symbolize the Spirit. He said the wind blows where it wants, and you can hear the sound and see the effect, but you can't tell where it comes from or where it goes. Oh, and Nicodemus, that's the way it is for everyone that is born of the Spirit too. Religion wants to domesticate the Church, the Spirit of God, and the spiritual person. Too often, it has succeeded. It is time to commit to reversing the trend.

Let's look at some definitions of *domestication* from the dictionary. I have used bits and pieces of a couple of different ones.

"To tame (an animal), esp. by generations of breeding, to live in close association with human beings as a pet or work animal and usually creating a dependency so that the

animal loses its ability to live in the wild."

(Dictionary.com based on Random House Dictionary)

Regardless of what most say, taming the Spirit is exactly what we want to do. Apart from some churches that have learned to let the Spirit move, many churches do not want things to get out of control. I know from experience. As a young pastor of a Full Gospel church in Western Kansas, I believed in and practiced the gifts of the Spirit. However, at that time, I was also conscious of trying to make our small fellowship grow. At times I was afraid the Spirit would move in the gift of tongues and scare visitors away. I wanted God to move, but I also wanted Him to do it in a way that would not "upset the applecart." In other words, I wanted Him to be TAME, not controversial since we lived in a small, conservative, Midwest town.

Generations of breeding correspond to generations of denominational tradition. You breed certain traits and instincts into or out of an animal. You can tell a breed by its size, features, coloring, and instincts it has. Just consider the well-known traits of a Collie, German Shepherd, Bloodhound, or Poodle. Given a few variations, they are predictable in looks and temperament.

Are not our denominations just as predictable? Haven't generations of tradition, doctrine, and practice been "bred" into the DNA of each denomination? Isn't that the appeal? You go from place to place and find a church with the same name, and you pretty much know what you will find. Somehow, we have come to believe that "franchising the church" is what God wanted. Nothing could be further from the truth. Even our "non-denominational" Churches slowly drift into the same patterns; they just do not have a central government, but even that is changing as men begin to build their apostolic kingdoms.

The reality is that some people are locked into a denominational tradition that does not meet their spiritual needs anymore, yet they have no idea that there is something more out there.

Another part of this definition is "to live in close association with human beings as a pet or work animal." Don't we want God close? We sing songs about His presence and seek to feel him in the services. However, sometimes I think we just want Him to serve our needs, wants, and purposes. We ask Him to anoint our plans without asking what His plans might be.

I've been in some churches that treated the Holy Spirit more like a mascot (pet) than Lord. He gets lip service but not control. Once again, I must refer to my own experience. One Sunday morning I was standing on the platform of the Church I mentioned above. The worship was okay, but I could not sense God's presence. I prayed that God would come into that service, and in a few minutes, I felt the Spirit of God come in gently. I said, "Thank you, God, for coming." God said, "What are you going to do with me now that I am here!"

I think we tend to want to feel His presence without letting Him have His way. I have been in non-spirit-filled churches that never mention the Spirit and wouldn't know Him if He kissed them on the lips. Everything is accomplished with man's methods, wisdom, and talent.

You'll note that, according to our definition, the thing domesticated loses its ability to "live in the wild." When we attempt to domesticate the Church, we effectively lose the spontaneous and unexpected moving of the Spirit.

*"To make more ordinary, familiar,
acceptable, or the like: to domesticate*

radical ideas" (Dictionary.com based on Random House Dictionary).

Be honest. Would you have to say that your regular week-to-week services are predictable? Outside of a few specifics in songs or sermons, do you know what will happen every week when you get to Church? Even with lively worship and dynamic preaching, some of our Spirit-filled churches start to get ordinary after a while. Soon we stop expecting too much out of the ordinary.

I always got a chuckle out of my Church when I would hear someone say, "Oh it was so good today: pastor didn't even get to preach because the Spirit was moving." It wasn't that there was no preaching or praying; it was just that multiple people did it instead of just one. I would live for those times when I could step back and watch the Spirit move on the congregation. That should be the rule, not the exception.

We want God to be acceptable. We want the message to be acceptable. We don't want people to think we are strange, especially in our seeker-sensitive culture. However, the very nature of the gospel message is a slap in the face to humanity—at least the real gospel message is.

Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians chapter two that the things of God are FOOLISHNESS to the natural man. He mentions the reproach of the cross and the mockery of those who cannot reason out the resurrection from the dead.

No, the gospel will never be acceptable to the lost, except the Spirit of God anoint it and bring conviction to the sinner's heart. Perhaps the problem is that we've controlled the Spirit so much that He can't anoint the message. As a result, we've had to water it down and prop it up with flash and dash to make it acceptable so people would respond.

Another issue we have here is that people like the familiar. Things seldom change in most churches. It is too messy. It causes too many problems with too many people who like things a certain way. The mere suggestion of changing worship styles or trying something new sends shivers down the spine of many a pastor. In some churches, the Spirit may be allowed to move, but only in certain ways. We want the Spirit to move, but let's make sure it is in familiar and pre-approved ways.

At times you may go to a church that seems radical with some unusual (to us at least) practice or

manifestation (falling when prayed for, tongues and interpretation, prophecy, running around the pews, etc.). But on further examination, you will find that it is a regular event with that group. Part of it is faith. God moves according to where people are at and what they have faith for, but as often as not, it is simply something with which we've become familiar. The response to the "moving of the Spirit" is a learned and accepted thing in that group. The sad thing is, after a while, the Spirit really isn't even needed because we've learned how to do it.

"To adapt (a plant) so as to be cultivated by and beneficial to human beings."

(Dictionary.com based on Random House Dictionary)

One of the most serious errors I believe the Church must recover from is that we are the center of this whole God thing. Much of the message preached in the past 30 years has been about how I can be better, richer, healthier—BLESSED! In short, the American Church wants to be comfortable. Many have reduced the Bible to a self-help book. God is presented as the cosmic benefactor that is just waiting to do good things for us. I'm sorry, Jesus didn't die on the cross to make us rich; He died on the cross to make us

HOLY! When we emphasize any blessing over the real objective, we lose in the long run.

As a pastor, I can't tell you how many people I've seen believe God for prosperity without any regard for personal integrity. When God didn't bless them according to their doctrine, they had no place left to go and just got discouraged and fell away. Many left the Church with the words, "*you just didn't have enough faith,*" ringing in their ears

I am wondering, whatever happened to the concept of sacrifice for the sake of Kingdom? For a lot of Christians, our "sacrifices" include getting up a bit early on Sunday morning or volunteering for a Saturday youth event, or maybe an extra offering for missions or the building fund. So many of the things we call "sacrifice" come directly from our surplus time and money.

I am reminded just now of the widow's mite. The religious bunch gave their offerings, measured out according to the law to the last grain of wheat, but they gave out of their abundance. The widow gave out of her need. Of course, this isn't just money we're talking about, but our entire lives. Jesus said, "No greater love has any man than he lay down his life for

a friend." My life entails my time, my attention, my money, my possessions, my family, my friends, my job, etc. I can only die physically for God once, but I can "lay down my life" every day for Him.

I have heard people say that they would die for Jesus. I think that Jesus would like for them to live for Him here and now. As good as God is to us, from the forgiveness of sins and salvation to healing and blessing, HE is still the center of this whole thing. We are to be His servants, not the other way around. We are to serve God regardless of the circumstances. It makes no difference if I am blessed or healed at the moment or not.

I have seen far too many people make getting their way a condition of their faithfulness.

"To bring down to the level of the ordinary person." (The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language)

There is a tendency in some churches to eliminate the supernatural. They talk about the Spirit, but they don't want anything supernatural. Paul said there were those that "had a form of godliness but denied the power thereof." Such people are religious, not spiritual. Religion does not require the supernatural—

and many people like it that way. They want a practical religion that they are comfortable with. They like it rational and "doable." They want something they can take pride in accomplishing—which is why religion loves legalism.

Many denominational churches have their doctrines about the Spirit, but they do not HAVE the Spirit, or at least they never let Him out the ecclesiastical box they keep Him in. You'll hear it in many churches, "God doesn't do miracles today." It never fails to amaze me that sincere, born-again Christians believe that Satan has miraculous power today, but God does not. Many of these same Christians will tell you that God does not talk to us anymore because we have the Bible.

I have another message entitled "Christian Idolatry." I based it on Psalms 115:4-7:

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not; Eyes have they, but they see not; They have ears, but they hear not; Noses have they, but they smell not; They have hands, but they handle not; Feet have they,

*but they walk not; Neither speak they
through their throat.*

It is a very sad fact that many people believe, in essence, that our God is a Christian idol. They don't believe He can speak to us, or touch us, or heal us or work through us supernaturally. Their concept of God is not consistent with the Bible but is instead the "work of men's hands," as they reduce the infinite God to something manageable and understandable to finite man. On the other hand, spirituality requires the supernatural because we need God to get the job done. That hurts our religious pride and takes away our legalistic tendencies. To rely on the Spirit of God day-by-day is much harder than living by a set of religious rites, ceremonies, and rules.

*They have forsaken Me the fountain of living
waters, and hewed them out cisterns,
broken cisterns, that can hold no water.*

Jeremiah 2:13.

Many churches have done this very thing. They want the water, but they want the water that is stored in their doctrinal wells, not the fresh, free-flowing water of the Spirit. (By this, I do not mean any wind of

doctrine, but rather the fresh application of the Word to people's lives and situations.)

Having a cistern lends some security to the thing. We can control the depth of the water and know there's always some in reserve.

I know from experience; I do not need a cistern. God has proven to me, time and again, when I have gotten up to preach or teach without having anything on my heart and no message "prepared" that He has something special planned. If I approach the ministry from the aspect of having to have a prepared message, I struggle. I worry that I'll have to get out exactly what I have prepared, rather than allowing God to use me to get His message across. I can't count the times I had gotten up with one message ready to go and, when I started preaching, God had me speak on something completely different. That is not to say I do not study, pray, and make a few notes, but I cannot let those things dictate to me how or if the Lord will use me. If God does not give me something in advance, I've learned that I need to wait and see what spontaneous thing He has planned.

I have to chuckle at the E-Mail advertisements I get for sermon sales. They usually start with, "For the

busy pastor who doesn't always have time to study." Just buy your sermon complete with notes, PowerPoint presentation, coordinated worship service, and complimentary bulletin graphics. "Jesus in a box" for just \$19.95.

God never intended one man to do all the work. That is why the Bible teaches a plurality of leadership and instructs us in Ephesians chapter four that the job of the five-fold ministry is to train the people of God to do the work of the ministry. Some ministries focus on keeping people dependent on them rather than working to produce more ministries.

Cisterns work great because you do not have to depend on the spontaneity of the Spirit. However, as the scripture says, they cannot hold water. It keeps leaking out, and we must keep filling it up with more man-made stuff to meet the *needs* of the people. Fleshly ministry does not produce long-term change and spiritual satisfaction in people. It promotes a spiritual immaturity that requires another bottle of milk. That makes for excellent job security for the shepherd but a dismal failure in producing solid disciples of Christ who are growing toward ministry.

The Church of Jesus Christ is a living organism. Paul calls it the Body of Christ. That is not a literary device or a simple analogy; it is a living spiritual reality. Jesus is head of the Church, not a man, ministry, or board. It needs the free-flowing life of the Spirit to energize and propel it along. I believe that Jesus is quite capable of leading and directing His Body without requiring our approval. Instead, He wants our cooperation.

"Where Do We Go from Here? How do we get from where we are to where we see we need to be?" It requires doing things differently. It has been my repeated observation that, in any given service, we have the option of having a good service or a Holy Ghost service. The pivotal point in any service comes when someone in the service must step out and obey the Spirit of God. That person becomes the *"cork in the bottle"* for the moving of the Spirit. Sometimes that is the worship leader who feels to break the predetermined plan and flow spontaneously. It might be the pastor or speaker who is willing to change a message in midstream or step out of the way altogether and let someone else speak. Just as often, it might not be someone *upfront*. It may be someone in the congregation who needs to obey God and allow God to use them in a gift of the Spirit or even stand

and give a teaching or exhortation. When that single person fails to obey, for whatever reason, the Holy Spirit cannot and will not move in a way that He wants to. It does not matter if they hold back in fear or timidity or are never given a chance; they remain a "cork in the bottle."

You can see why domesticating the Church throttles the Holy Spirit. If our prescribed order of service does not allow for spontaneous change, we lose the ability to uncork the bottle. Suppose the congregation is never empowered to step out or is not given the encouragement and opportunity to do so. In that case, they will never realize that they might well be hindering the moving of the Spirit. If the celebrity status of ministry will not make room for anyone in the congregation to share, then we have effectively squelched the Spirit. When we reduce the congregation's participation to testimony or a prayer request, we limit both the Spirit and Body.

We cannot domesticate the Spirit, for no one can control God. Still, we can domesticate the Church and, in doing so, grieve the Spirit to the point where we are left to have "good services" without the life-imparting, life-changing power of the Spirit that we so desperately need today. Do we dare let the goose

loose? Can we trust God enough to take our hands off? Do we love our traditions more than our God? Do we continue having *church as usual*, or will we risk letting God take over in His Church? God will have a Church that displays the fullness of Jesus Christ in the last days. That is not the question. The question will be, will you and I be a part of it?