


T H E L I F E U N D E R G O D S E R I E S

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ONE
CHURCH
UNDER
GOD

His Rule Over Your Ministry

A photograph of a church steeple with a cross on top, set against a bright sunset sky. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow. The steeple is silhouetted against the light, and the cross is a dark silhouette. The sky is filled with soft, wispy clouds.

THE POWER

The Holy Spirit is the power of the church in the same way the engine in a car supplies the power to make the car go. Without this power source the church may look good, like a new car sitting in the parking lot. But we won't get anywhere. Because living the kingdom life without the active participation of the Holy Spirit is impossible.

It is possible to know the Bible and not know the Lord. It is possible to memorize Bible verses and yet not be transformed, because only the Holy Spirit can make what is true in the Bible become real for you and me.

It is also impossible for the church to be the church God intended apart from the dynamic ministry of the Holy Spirit. That's because Jesus said, "Apart from Me you can do

nothing” (John 15:5), and Jesus is the One who sent the Spirit to indwell and empower the church.

THE HOLY SPIRIT WAS PROMISED TO THE CHURCH

It was Jesus Himself who alerted us to the absolutely critical role the Holy Spirit was to play in the church, and it was Jesus who promised to send the Spirit after He ascended back to the Father. On the night before His crucifixion, Jesus told the disciples, “I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you” (John 16:7).

THE PROMISED SPIRIT OF TRUTH

Jesus then referred to the Spirit as “the Spirit of truth . . . [who] will guide you into all the truth” (v. 13). This is key to the Spirit’s ministry since we have already seen His basic job is to make God’s truth come alive within us.

We could use many analogies for this process. The Spirit’s work is like taking the still photographs of the Bible and turning them into a motion picture in our lives. Of course, the Bible is living and true and powerful whether we believe it or not. But the Word will lie dormant until the Holy Spirit

comes and makes dead people alive and then plants the truth in their hearts.

If you could have taken a vote among the disciples at the Last Supper as to whether they thought it was a good idea for Jesus to leave them, the outcome would have been 11–0, not counting Judas. They didn't want Jesus to leave. They were upset and distressed when He told them He had to leave (see John 16:5–6). And if you asked many believers today which would be better for the church—to have Jesus among us in person, or have the Holy Spirit indwelling us—you would probably get a lot of votes for the first option.

But we are better off with the Spirit than we would be if Jesus were here in the flesh, and unfortunately today, it seems we are not aware of that—nor do we pay enough attention to the presence of the Spirit in our lives and churches.

Jesus limited Himself in the flesh, but the Spirit pervades and invades every place and permanently indwells every believer (see John 14:17b) because He is the omnipresent God, the third Person of the Trinity. His is a strong help. He is critical to all that we do.

THE PROMISED SPIRIT OF POWER

In fact, Jesus also indicated no Spirit equals no power. Just before His ascension, the Lord made another great promise to His apostles: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit

has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). This promise was fulfilled just days later at the birth of the church in Acts 2.

Think about what Jesus’ promise meant. The apostles had spent more than three years listening to Jesus teach and watching Him work. They had spent three-plus years absorbing truth from the eternal Son of God, who was preparing them to be foundation stones in His church (see Ephesians 2:19–20). Peter and the other apostles were not lacking for information to do what God wanted them to do.

But Jesus knew they were lacking in power. And even though He had been their Bible teacher, He told them they wouldn’t have power until the Holy Spirit came. According to Acts 1:4–5, Jesus prefaced His promise by telling the disciples not to leave Jerusalem until the promised Spirit had been given. Otherwise, all they had learned wouldn’t work. Their main job was to wait for the Holy Spirit to show up.

The disciples did that, and then we read in Acts 2,

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. And they

were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance. (vv. 1–4)

Pentecost was the church's birthday, and it was the power and activity of the Holy Spirit that brought the church into being. We are going to spend a good portion of this chapter talking about what it means to be filled with the Spirit, which is the secret of where the church's power lies. The Spirit's presence was manifested as wind and fire, a powerful invasion from heaven the disciples had never known before.

When the Holy Spirit came with power, the disciples were able to speak in a way they had never been able to speak before, declaring the message of God in a number of languages they hadn't learned (Acts 2:5–11). They were able to do things they had never done before because they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

What we are missing in the church today is not programs and seminars and information. We are missing the Spirit's power that comes from His filling. The more Spirit-filled Christians you have, the fewer programs you need. The church's job is not to replace the Spirit's ministry with other things, even good things. Having everything in place and being organized is fine, but we have to make sure we don't organize ourselves out of our need for the Spirit. Sound Bible teaching is critically important for imparting truth and

helping us discern the true from the false when it comes to the claims people make in the spiritual realm. But Bible teaching by itself cannot substitute for the Holy Spirit's presence.

When Jesus' promise of the Spirit's coming was fulfilled, something supernatural from heaven occurred. The rest of the book of Acts is a proof of Jesus' statement to the disciples that they would receive power when, and only when, the Holy Spirit came and filled them. Acts is about what the local church looks like when the Holy Spirit takes over. The greatest thing that can be said about any church is that it is filled with people who are full of the Holy Spirit.

THE SPIRIT IS ACTIVE IN THE CHURCH

Since the Day of Pentecost the church as the people of God has been indwelt and energized by the Holy Spirit. I want to look briefly at several of the Spirit's distinct ministries to and through the church as they relate to our thesis, which the Bible clearly teaches, that the church's power resides in the Holy Spirit's person and work.

THE SPIRIT INDWELLS US

There is no saved member of the church of Jesus Christ who does not have the Holy Spirit living inside him or her. When the Spirit takes up residence in your life, He will never

leave you. Jesus said of the Spirit's coming, "He . . . will be in you" (John 14:17). The Holy Spirit baptizes every believer into the body of Christ at the moment of salvation (see 1 Corinthians 12:13).

We know every Christian is indwelt by the Spirit because Paul said, "You are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him" (Romans 8:9). The Spirit's abiding presence in those who make up the church gives us the continual access to His power we need to pull off what God has called us to do.

THE SPIRIT IS OUR TEACHER

This is one of the Holy Spirit's most crucial, and yet too often overlooked or undervalued, ministries to the church. The Spirit is the church's divine Teacher. We alluded to this above when we said the Spirit's job is to take the Word of God and bring it alive in our lives.

During His discourse in the Upper Room before the crucifixion, Jesus referred to the Spirit's future teaching ministry. "The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (John 14:26). And again, "When He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). If you want to know the Word of God in all its

power, you need God's Spirit for your Teacher.

Let me explain why I think the Spirit's teaching ministry is often overlooked. It's because too many of us think all we have to do is accumulate Bible knowledge and go out and put it into practice, the way a dad might follow the assembly manual to put his child's bicycle together on Christmas Eve. It's just a matter of following the steps, studying the illustrations, and picking up the right part at the right time.

But the Christian life isn't an assembly manual. Paul said something eye-opening in 2 Corinthians 3:6: "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." Paul was referring specifically to the law of Moses, which in itself could not give life because it carried no power to help anyone obey. That power only comes from the Spirit.

The principle Paul stated in this verse applies to what we are talking about. You can actually go to church and listen to Bible teaching, study the Word for yourself, and yet be worse off for it spiritually.

Let me illustrate what I mean. I attended one of the greatest seminaries in the world and studied under some of the finest professors and Bible teachers available anywhere. When I entered seminary I was full of excitement and enthusiasm at the thought of learning the Bible from these great teachers. And I did learn, studying the Bible and its related subjects from morning till night.

But anyone who has studied the Bible in an academic

environment can tell you how easy it is to go from learning God's Word so it can change and shape your life, to learning it as information to be digested and memorized so you can pass a test and earn a degree. When that happens, you begin to grow weaker and more mechanical in your faith and your walk with God, even as you're learning more about Him.

That happened to me to some extent during my seminary years. I began to grow cold spiritually. It wasn't because I was not learning the truth. It wasn't the professors' fault, because they were godly men whose teaching was marked by the Spirit's power. The problem was I got so wrapped up in what I was learning I stopped applying and living what I was learning. I was learning from my teachers, but I wasn't learning from the Teacher, the Holy Spirit. Knowledge for its own sake is not His goal. He wants us to be transformed by the truth.

Don't misunderstand. We need to know the Bible, because the Holy Spirit only teaches and applies the Word. He is not interested in applying our philosophy or human reasoning. But the "letter" of the Word without the Spirit kills instead of bringing life.

Jesus made an interesting statement in John 5:39–40 as He was dealing with those who sought to kill Him (see v. 18). The Lord said, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life."

If these people were searching the Scriptures, why wasn't their search leading them to believe in Jesus and find eternal life? One answer is those who rejected Jesus refused the Holy Spirit's ministry of enlightenment and conviction of the truth (Acts 7:51). Jesus' worst enemies, the Pharisees, were what we would call the Bible scholars of the day. They read the Old Testament constantly, but their study led them away from rather than to the Messiah. These learned men and their followers had all the right information, but they experienced no transformation because they refused to allow the Holy Spirit to apply His teaching and convicting ministry.

THE SPIRIT EQUIPS US FOR MINISTRY

There is one more activity of the Holy Spirit related to the church I want to point out before we turn to the Spirit's filling. The Bible teaches the Holy Spirit is the source of the spiritual gifts that make it possible for the church to execute its ministry.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians concerning spiritual gifts, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:4). Going on to verse 7 we read, "But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." And after mentioning a number of gifts, Paul clinched his point that the Holy Spirit is sovereignly in charge of the gifts: "But one and the same Spirit works

all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills” (v. 11).

People get all worked up today arguing about the gifts—which ones are still in effect and how we should think about those who claim to have the more spectacular gifts like healing and tongues. This is not the place for that discussion, but whatever your view is, the point I want us to see is the power is not in the gift or the person exercising it, but in the Holy Spirit who gives the gift. The Bible’s emphasis is in the place where ours needs to be: on the Giver rather than on the gift or the recipient.

THE SPIRIT FILLS THE CHURCH

Now we come to that portion of the Holy Spirit’s ministry where I want to do some extended study. The Bible says, “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18). This command is written in the plural, which means it is addressed to the whole church. More than that, it is a conditional command that requires us to continually be filled with the Spirit on an ongoing basis because the filling can be lost.

When we say the Holy Spirit fills the church, we mean the believers who make up the church—both individually and in our corporate life when we come together as the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit’s filling is commanded for every

Christian, because the Word of God is designed to lead us to experience His supernatural power for holy living and ministry.

THE NECESSITY OF THE SPIRIT'S FILLING

If this is true, we need to ask why more of us are not experiencing the supernatural—such an obvious power of God in our lives and in our churches that no natural explanation for what's happening will suffice. The short answer is individual Christians and churches are not Spirit-filled. Why are more churches not seeing the supernatural power of God at work in their midst? Because they are not Spirit-filled churches made up of Spirit-filled people.

They may be Bible-teaching churches with great programs, and thank God for that. But unless the Holy Spirit is filling the people on the platform and in the pews, the result will ultimately be church as usual. I don't know about you, but I don't want to settle for the usual. I want to see God's wind and fire sweep through His church as He fills us with Himself through the work of the Spirit.

You may be saying, "Tony, you just said all true Christians have the Holy Spirit living inside of them all the time. Now you're saying we need to be filled with the Spirit. Don't we already have all of the Spirit within us?"

Yes we do, if we are talking about the Spirit's indwelling.

The Bible says God “gives the Spirit without measure” (John 3:34). But the Spirit’s filling is different than His indwelling. We are never commanded to be indwelt by the Spirit, but we are commanded to be filled. The indwelling is permanent and unconditional, while the filling is not permanent in the sense of happening once for all, but conditional.

The word “filled” means “to come under the control of.” That should give us a clue to the difference between indwelling and filling. The issue in filling is not how much of the Spirit we have, but how much of us the Spirit has. We need to be filled with the Spirit for the same reason we need to stop at a gas station if we plan to drive somewhere. We need fuel to energize the motor in our car.

You don’t need to get a new engine when you pull into a gas station. You just need to be filled with fuel or you’re not going to get very far. That’s why the Spirit’s filling is so important to the church.

THE RENEWAL OF THE SPIRIT’S FILLING

To carry this analogy a step further, the moment you leave the gas station and start driving, what happens? You begin using up the fuel in your tank, and at some point you will have to stop again for refueling. We certainly don’t “use up” the Holy Spirit, but in the daily grind of living we often let people and circumstances crowd out the Spirit’s direction. This is

why we need to “keep on being filled” with the Holy Spirit.

We are filled with the Spirit as we consciously yield to Him and turn over every area of our lives to His control. As much as we might like to think we can do this once and be done with it, experience and the Word of God teach us this isn't the case. Yielding control to the Spirit is a day-by-day, and often a moment-by-moment, necessity as we move through life.

I'm sure you've had the experience of coming to church and gathering with the saints of God to worship and praise Him and learn from His Word. The combination of the Word, the music, the praise, and the worship has filled you, and you leave church feeling like you can handle anything. But as the week goes on your filling is tapped by the trials of life, and you soon find yourself in need of a refill. The goal of the Spirit's filling is to give you a fresh wind, a fresh fire, a new spiritual dynamic that enables you to live in accord with God's will.

We don't have to wonder what the Spirit's filling is like, because the Bible tells us in Ephesians 5:18. This verse begins, “Do not get drunk with wine” and tells us to be filled with the Spirit instead. We call it being under the influence of alcohol when the alcohol so possesses a person it alters his personality and his actions. A drunk doesn't walk, talk, or act normal because the alcohol is now running the show and dictating the person's responses.

When you are filled with the Spirit, you come under His influence so God through the Spirit is now running the show

and calling the shots in your life. Why can't some believers control their temper? Because they aren't drunk enough on the Holy Spirit. Why can't others overcome a wicked tongue, evil thoughts, or various addictions? Why are there so many powerless churches, constantly in conflict? Because they aren't Spirit-filled.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not saying we can always just shed all of this stuff with one prayer, although I've seen the Spirit set people free instantly. What I'm saying is we'll never get the victory in any area until the Holy Spirit is firmly in control.

WHO IS FILLING YOU?

If you are going to be filled with the Holy Spirit, you can't also be full of yourself, because the Spirit isn't going to take second place to your ego. What are the characteristics of people who are full of themselves? All they can think about and talk about is themselves, because they are all wrapped up in themselves.

Turn that self-centeredness around and you have the characteristics of Spirit-filled people. All they can talk and think about is God and what He is doing, because He is continuously flowing through them in the power of the Spirit. I love the way Jesus pictured the Spirit's ministry as a constantly flowing stream of water (see John 7:37–39). The Holy Spirit

does not want to minister to us in little spurts, but as a continuously flowing stream that is constantly refreshing and renewing us. In other words, the Spirit's filling is meant to be a way of life.

HOW TO GET THE FILLING

If it is this important for us as the church to be filled with the Holy Spirit, the next logical question to ask is how we can get the filling God commands us to have. God would not give us such a command without telling us how to fulfill it. The question of how to be filled with the Holy Spirit is answered in the three verses that follow Ephesians 5:18.

After giving the command to be filled, Paul went on to write, "Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ" (vv. 19–21).

Let me summarize these verses. It is in the act and the attitude of worship believers are filled with the Spirit. A church that wants to be Spirit-filled must be a worshiping church. A family that wants to be Spirit-filled must be a worshiping family. And if you want to be Spirit-filled as an individual believer, you must know what worship means and know how to worship.

Going back to our gas station analogy, worship is the fuel

you get at the station when you come to be filled. Worship involves your relationship both with God and with other believers, which is why local church participation is essential for every believer. This is important because when the Holy Spirit came to indwell and fill the church in Acts 2, the church was gathered in collective worship.

The believers were collectively filled with the Spirit again in Acts 4:23–31 as the church gathered to pray for boldness in their witness. The church gathered to worship and went out filled with the Spirit to serve Christ.

I'm not saying you have to go to church in order to be filled with the Holy Spirit. You can go to church and not be a worshiper. You can go to church, sit back, and let the "professionals" on the stage do your worshiping for you, as we talked about earlier in the chapter on God's presence.

But we shouldn't be surprised the Spirit would grant His filling in the context of the church at worship. The kingdom Christian was never intended to be an only child. The Bible tells us to sing, not to and for ourselves alone, but "to one another" and to the Lord.

A powerful example of this occurred not too long ago during our Sunday morning worship service. Our typical service will last almost two hours, and we have a program for how much time is allotted for each portion. This serves as a guide and, for the most part, we follow it. But this particular Sunday, the Spirit took over.

It began with my son Anthony leading worship and not being “able” to conclude it. Moved by the Spirit, he continued long after the program said he was supposed to stop. On the program, my daughter Priscilla was scheduled to read the Scripture verses for the day but we never made it that far. Also moved by the Spirit, Priscilla joined Anthony in song and the two led the congregation in what turned out to be at least an hour of worship—no one was counting. We were just there in the moment, experiencing God’s powerful Spirit.

Toward the end of the worship, Priscilla dropped to her knees with the microphone in her hand and said to me, in front of everyone, “Daddy, can you pray for us? There are people here who need to be set free. Pray, Daddy.” At that time I went forward and asked for all who needed prayer to come forward. The pews emptied as nearly all of the congregants came to receive prayer. It was an overwhelming collective moment with the Holy Spirit. I could barely preach afterwards. We stayed there in His presence for a long time that morning. I believe lives were set free and followers were filled to a deeper level because we submitted to the Spirit, not to a bulletin with a schedule.

A lot of people in the body of Christ are being weighed down by problems and habits and addictions they can’t seem to shake. But if we were yielded to God and filled with the Holy Spirit, we would see burdens being lifted some people thought were too heavy to be lifted. Like a balloon filled with

helium, the Spirit's filling enables us to rise above the downward pull of circumstances.

Through yielding to the Spirit, we place ourselves before God and confess our complete dependence on Him. When we do that, the Holy Spirit is free to pour in His filling.

Now you understand why Jesus told the woman at the well God the Father is seeking people who will worship Him "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23). These are the people God is eager to pour out His power and blessings on through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. This is the kind of church God wants us to be, so we can know the Spirit's power for ourselves and turn this world upside down for Him, just like the early church did (see Acts 17:6).

Let's do it.

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