

30 Years of Following the Holy Spirit

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30 Years of Following the Spirit

Acts 16:1-10

Vineyard Columbus is obviously way more than our pastors or even our staff. The thing that's made the church so wonderful over the years is the extraordinary people that God has brought to us.

Years ago, I had a picture in my mind's eye that I took to be from the Lord. The picture was of a treasure chest and I felt like the Lord was speaking to me, "I've given you this incredible treasure. You don't have to put treasure in the chest. I've given you the treasure. Your job, Rich, is to spread the treasure all around, to reach in to this treasure chest and spread it. The incredible treasure is the people that God has given us over the years.

Here's what I'd like to do. Marlene and I feel so honored in serving here for 30 years, but there are many of you who have journeyed with this church for the past 30 years. If you were here 30 years ago in 1987 when we joined the Vineyard movement and I became senior pastor, I'd like you to stand and say "thank you" to you for your faithfulness in serving this church and giving to this church and serving our community through Vineyard Columbus for these past 30 years. Thank you! Let's give these people a hand.

Now the leadership of this church came to a conviction from the church's earliest days that we really were not the head of the church. We had a conviction from the earliest days that the pastor wasn't the head of the church, that all the pastors and elders together were not the head of the church, no board or committee or group or groups of committees or the whole congregation together voting by majority were the head of the church. The very simple conviction that has guided us over the history of our church is **Jesus** is the head of the church. The church belongs to Jesus.

The founder of the Vineyard movement, John Wimber, once said that the Lord had spoken to him and very clearly said these words to John:

I want my church back.

At the core of our beings, the leadership of the church has believed throughout our history that we did not own the church. We did not have the right to impose on this church our own views about the way things ought to be and where we should go and what we should do. Rather, we set ourselves under Jesus as Lord and we have said a

thousand times over to God, “Lord, the church belongs to you. We want to follow your lead.”

God leads the church

Let me just make this more personal before we look at today’s text in Acts 16. Is that your attitude? Do you say this about yourself? “My life does not belong to me. My future does not belong to me. I exist to serve the Lord’s purposes here in this world. I want to know God’s plan for my life, God’s will. I want to follow his lead.”

Friends, if those are new thoughts to you, let me encourage you and say that you will never come up with a plan for your life better than God’s plan. You will never discover more joy or more happiness on your own than obeying God’s will for you. God has created you and God knows the particular things that he has planned for you to accomplish. There is no greater joy, no greater satisfaction, no greater impact you can make in this world, than discovering God’s plan for your life and choosing to follow that plan. This is what we see in the Apostle Paul’s life.

Acts 16:6-10

⁶They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; ⁷and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; ⁸and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. ⁹A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” ¹⁰When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Virtually every big decision that we have made here at Vineyard Columbus over the last 30 years was our attempt to respond to a sense of God’s leading. We have often felt like the children of Israel in the wilderness who followed the pillar of fire and the cloud as they made their way to the Promised Land.

Now, what we see here in Paul’s experience in the book of Acts and what our experience has been at Vineyard Columbus is that we are following a God who speaks.

God speaks to the church

One way that the God of the Bible is distinguished from idols is that our God speaks. Look with me at Psalm 115:2 for example. Here’s what we read:

Psalm 115:2

Why should the nations say,
“Where, now, is their God?”

This is what atheists today say. They ask the question, “Where is your proof of God? Why should we believe in him if he never speaks?” The psalmist answers:

Psalm 115:3-7

³ But our God is in the heavens;

He does whatever He pleases.

⁴ Their idols are silver and gold,

The work of man’s hands.

⁵ They have mouths, but they cannot speak;

They have eyes, but they cannot see;

⁶ They have ears, but they cannot hear;

They have noses, but they cannot smell;

⁷ They have hands, but they cannot feel;

They have feet, but they cannot walk;

They cannot make a sound with their throat.

The entity in the Bible that never speaks, that’s always mute, is not God. It’s idols, false gods, the gods of the nations. These are the gods in the Bible that cannot speak and do not speak. What marks God off from the idols of the world is that God speaks and idols don’t. False gods, no gods, non-existent gods don’t speak. The Lord speaks. The Bible says that he thunders from heaven.

In the book of Amos we read “the lion roars... who cannot but prophesy.” Many of the books of the Bible begin with the statement, “The word of the Lord came to...” the prophet. Or the Lord says.

Those of us who are followers of Jesus believe what Jesus believed regarding the Bible. We believe that God speaks through this book called the Bible. So, when we’re listening for God’s voice, the first thing that followers of Jesus do is they go to the scripture and they ask, “What does God’s written Word say about this?” But here’s the question: does God speak outside of his written Word? Does God speak to people today the way that he spoke to the Apostle Paul, through visions and dreams and impressions and all of that? Does God speak today? The answer is yes!

God speaks today

Indeed, the Bible itself suggests that we ought to expect to hear God’s voice outside of the written Word of God.

Turn with me to Luke 12:11-12. Jesus says,

Luke 12:11-12

¹¹ When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not worry about how or what you are to speak in your defense, or what you are to say; ¹² for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.”

Listen to what Jesus is saying; it is a most remarkable statement. He says at some point some of you will face persecution and part of the persecution will be that you will be hauled into court. You will be standing before judges, before governors, before rulers, and you will have to defend yourself and defend your faith and the temptation will be to become anxious about what you are going to say. Jesus says don't worry about what you will say at the time of crisis or when you face trials because at that very moment, the Holy Spirit will teach you what to say. Think about this, Jesus doesn't say here that when you are studying the Bible, you will be taught by the Spirit what to say. He says at the moment you are standing in court, the Holy Spirit will reveal to you what you should say.

Those who say that there are no continuing revelations end up doing exactly what the Bible, God's written Word tells them not to. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 5:19-20 Paul says,

1 Thessalonians 5:19-20

“Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt, but test everything and hold onto the good.”

Now when he says, “do not treat prophecies with contempt,” he clearly could not be referring to the written Word of God and the prophecies contained within because if that was the case, he would never go on and say, “but test everything and hold onto what is good.” We don't test the written Word of God and hold onto what is good. We obey the written Word of God in all of its entirety. We are called to simply believe the Word of God and do it. The prophecies that Paul is talking about must be prophetic revelation apart from the written Word of God. Paul has no problem with prophecy being part of the on-going work of the Holy Spirit in the church. The Bible simply doesn't have any problem with new revelations as being additions to the words of scripture.

For example, here in Acts 16, the Apostle Paul is guided by God's Spirit who was speaking to him in the moment. Paul could have spent his whole life studying the Bible and he never would have gotten the revelation to head over to Macedonia. Now, the wonderful thing about God's voice is that:

God speaks loud enough for us to hear

It is wonderful to know that Jesus is such a great leader that he speaks loud enough for his church to hear him. Listen to what Jesus says in John 10:

John 10:27

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me

Do you understand what Jesus is getting at here? Throughout John 10, Jesus says that he takes the same kind of responsibility for leading his people that a good shepherd takes in leading his sheep. A good shepherd in ancient Palestine wouldn't just race up ahead and say to the sheep, "Hey, you guys better keep up with me. I'm going to hide. I'm going to wear camouflage and crawl through the leaves so that you won't be able to follow me. If you wander off and nibble grass in another pasture, that's your bad. If you die because you fell off of a cliff, that's because you weren't smart enough to find me while I was hiding behind some trees." It was the responsibility of the shepherd to make sure the sheep got to where he was leading.

In past teachings, I've underlined the fact that Jesus called himself the good shepherd of the sheep. Not the foxmaster of foxes or the astrophysics professor of would-be rocket scientists. He's the shepherd of sheep! I love it! Sheep are the prototype of stupid animals! They are exceedingly stupid. They have no sense of direction. They can hardly find their feet without the help of the shepherd, much less find their way. So when Jesus wants to communicate the principle that God speaks loud enough for even sheep like us, no matter how stupid we are, however lost and directionless we are, Jesus uses the image of a shepherd and a sheep. He speaks loud enough for us to hear.

Years ago, when our church was growing rapidly, we were meeting in a small building south of Morse Road, right off of Cleveland Ave. It was in a little area in North Linden. The church itself held maybe 220 adults, packed in shoulder to shoulder. We were a young church with lots and lots of children. The church grew to almost 900 people in this tiny building. We had 40 parking spots. So, people would be walking to the church from blocks around, parking their cars several blocks away, hauling their kids in the winter to the church. We knew that we needed another building.

The church leadership settled on a health club. We were in negotiations to buy a health club just off 270. We were going to renovate and make it into a church building. We were really far down the road when we had a prophetic conference much like the conference we're going to host this next week. A guy came in who was prophetically gifted. We were hoping he would speak to us about the place the Lord wanted us to go.

Well, I dropped the guy off from the airport at his hotel. He took a nap. Then I picked him up for the evening session. He said, "Rich, I feel like I have a word for you. Remind me to talk with you after the meeting." So after the meeting, I went up to him and said, "What was the word?" And he said, "Rich, I fell asleep and felt like the Lord took me by the hand and in a dream I was walked around the city. The Lord took me to a health

club.” And I thought to myself, “This is it! God is saying that we’ve made a great decision in pursuing the health club.”

But instead, he said, “The Lord said if you go ahead and purchase that health club you’re going to encounter incredible legal hassles. But don’t worry, I’ve got a gift for you.” I thought, “Oh, no. We’re so far down the road in the negotiations, but this word is so clear. What should we do?”

The leadership team decided that we would very slowly continue to explore the health club, but sign nothing because this may have been God warning us. Shortly after that, our attorney, who is still part of this church and who was handling the purchase for us, called and said, “Rich, I’ve got some bad news for you. As I’ve looked into this health club, it’s got a number of problems. For one thing, the health club is built over the property line. So we’re really only buying three walls. Then it was purchased in a foreclosure action and there are a number of clouds on the title and there are all these other legal problems. Rich, if we go ahead and purchase this health club, I’m going to spend the next five years of my life sorting this out.”

We said “Thank you, God. Thank you for speaking loud enough that even people like us could hear you.” A few weeks later, the property here at Cooper Road came on the market. We’d been searching for a year and a half for property on the northeast side of the city within the Outerbelt because we wanted to reach back in to the city and not just out to the suburbs. And God gave us this property.

To whom does God speak?

God speaks to the open and available

I meet many, many people who are frustrated about knowing God’s plan for their lives. I meet folks who say, “I want to hear God’s voice, but I have such great difficulty knowing what God has for my future.” May I ask you a personal question today? Friend, do you take even five or ten minutes on a regular basis to ask God’s mind on your future? Then do you wait for an answer? Do you take even five or ten minutes on a regular basis to hear God’s mind? God’s direction for your life, for your work, for your relationships, for your ministry, for your marriage, for your children? We hear from God when we take time to listen to God, when we make room for God. At some point, we have to turn off all the noise and put our phones on silent or leave them at home and just ask the Lord to speak. Your servant is listening.

Sometimes we can prime the pump by journaling, getting out a notebook and just writing at the top of the page, “Lord, is there any person who you want me to encourage? Is there any area that you want me to render service to you? Lord, is there anyone you want me to pray for? Is there an area of my life that you want to heal? Is

there something you want to do through me? God speaks to the open and available, those who incline their ear to hear.

Now how does God speak? In this text, Paul wants to go southwest down to what was called Asia which was a province back then, an area where the city of Ephesus was located. But he is blocked by the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the Holy Spirit spoke to Paul through a deep inner impression. Most likely he spoke through a prophecy. Paul had Silas along, who was a prophet. Paul himself was prophetically gifted. But however the Spirit of God spoke, they felt restrained from going southwest so they tried to go north.

Here's what we read:

Acts 16:7

and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them

Bithynia is north. Maybe there was a vision of Jesus giving clear direction to not go north. They were blocked southwest. They were blocked northeast. And then Paul gets a vision in verse 9 from a man in Macedonia calling him to come to Macedonia and help.

Acts 16:9

⁹ A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

How does God speak? He frequently

God speaks through open and closed doors

A.T. Pierson, in his old Acts commentary, drew attention to what he called "the double guidance of the apostles and his companions." Namely that on the one hand we see prohibition and restraint and on the other, permission and constraint. Forbidden to go in one direction and invited to go in another. One time the Spirit of God says, "don't go there," and another time he says, "come." And Pierson in his book lays out numerous examples from the history of missions about double guidance. David Livingstone tried to go to China but God sent him to Africa instead. Before him, William Carey, planned to go to Polynesia in the South Seas but God guided him to India. Adoniram Judson went to India first but he was driven out by the Lord to Burma. God slamming a door in your face is one way that God guides. We've had missionary couples that we've sent out. They had all their plans set up to go to one country and they were aimed there and had studied to go there and felt led by God to go there. But God closed the door and they were sent on to another place. The double guidance of the Lord. He says no to one thing – maybe something we really want – and pushes us on in another. This is the history of Christian missions and this is the history of the way that God will lead you.

I told you that we purchased this property here on Cooper Road. We really needed to put up a building and we wanted to borrow money to build. The year was 1990 and it was during the Savings and Loan crisis. Credit had pretty much dried up for building new buildings. Even though our church was growing and we had a good track record financially, no one would loan us any money. Finally, I got to the very last bank in town. I spoke to the loan officer and gave him all of our financials. The loan officer said, “You know, things don’t look good. The bank vice president who makes these decisions said that he’s never heard of the Vineyard.” We were unknown in those days. The vice president said, “Vineyard sounds like some fly-by-night operation. If they were Presbyterian or Methodist, maybe I would make the loan. But I don’t think it’s going to happen.” This was a Thursday.

Winter was setting in. If we didn’t get the loan soon it would be another year before we would be able to build. We were so crowded in the space we felt like this was going to put a lid on what God wanted to do in our church. So we held a prayer meeting on Friday. We gathered our leaders to pray that God would somehow change this vice president’s heart. “Would you open the door for us?”

As it turned out, on Sunday morning, this vice president was home with his child. He normally went to his Presbyterian church, but his child was sick so he stayed home. He turned on the TV and there was a religious program called “Hour of Power with Robert Schuller”. Dr. Robert Schuller was talking about being sick in Europe, but a man from Vineyard who turned out to be John Wimber, came into his room and healed him. Schuller went on to sing John’s and the Vineyard’s praise for his healing. Well, the bank vice president was watching.

The loan officer called me on Monday and said, “There’s been this incredible change, Rich. The vice president came in this morning and said Vineyard is a well-known national organization and we need to push through this loan!” God led us by opening a door for us to build here on Cooper Road.

How does God speak today? He certainly speaks through open and closed doors. But as I said before, it’s likely that this little team of church planting missionaries received prophetic directions along the way. Luke mentions that Silas himself was a prophet and Paul ministered among the prophets and teachers. We know that Paul occasionally received divine guidance via visions and dreams and prophetic utterances in his letters.

God speaks through prophetic guidance and dreams

I’ve mentioned to you that more than 25 years ago, I had a series of dreams regarding the diversity of our church. At the time, our congregation was almost entirely white, non-Hispanic people. One evening I had a dream that while I was preaching, I looked

out and the church was incredibly racially diverse. I woke up from the dream really encouraged. I thought, “Wow, the faces that I looked at were so different than the faces that I see every week in front of me.” I fell back asleep. I had a dream the second time. Then I fell asleep and had the dream a third time and after the third time I felt the presence of God in the room. I thought this is the Lord speaking to me. Through the 90’s I prayed about the diversity of our church.

Here's an important lesson regarding God’s leadership, even if God speaks it doesn’t mean that the thing that you heard is going to happen tomorrow. The thing that you heard, if indeed you heard accurately (and we don’t always hear accurately, after all, the Apostle Paul tells us that we know in part and we prophesy in part.) But even when we hear accurately, it doesn’t mean that that vision is going to unfold in the next day or week or month or year as we assume. It may be a decade or two before the dream comes to pass.

Usually with the Lord it’s step by step: the Christian life is a walk. First, I’m going to lead you to go to college. And then when we’re in college, I’m going to lead you regarding your major. And we take certain classes and you think “Yes, this is the direction I want to go.” Then we go to work. Then we change jobs. Step by step God leads us from one thing to another. And God works in partnership with us. He leads but we must follow! This long term dream of diversity took tremendous effort on the part of literally hundreds of people in this church. We needed to choose to adjust our leadership structures. We needed to choose to engage in friendships with people who didn’t look like us. We needed to choose to start new groups and reach out to the immigrant community in our city. We needed to choose to change our worship and to listen and to learn and to read and to grow.

When we’re following the Lord, he may show you what his plan is many years ahead. But we can choose against that plan. We can. We can say no. I see what you’re opening up to me, God, but I don’t want that. It’s too costly. I’m afraid. I have another idea about how I want my life to go and I don’t want your idea. We have to choose for the plan of the Lord. And we have to pray for the plan to come to fruition. Regarding diversity, I feel like our church chose, repeatedly chose, and continues to choose to have a church that breaks down dividing walls between people.

God spoke to the Apostle Paul and he speaks to us.

God speaks through visions

God spoke to the apostle Paul through a vision. Here’s what we read:

Acts 16:9

⁹ A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”

Bible scholars have wondered for 2,000 years what the identity of the man of Macedonia is. How did Paul know that the man was Macedonian? In all likelihood, the man in the vision told him. Many Bible scholars believe that the man in the vision was Luke, the gospel writer and the book of Acts. Because in verse 10, Acts moves from the third person (Paul and Silas did so and so) to the first of the “we” passages. We did this. We did that. Here’s what we read:

Acts 16:10

¹⁰ When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Luke was a physician and many physicians in that day traveled in a circuit as they took care of people. It may be that he met the Apostle Paul in this city called Troas. And then at night, Paul had a vision of Luke inviting him to come to Macedonia to preach the gospel there. This is one of the great turning points in world history. The gospel goes to Europe where it was centered for the next nearly 1900 years.

Here at Vineyard Columbus, God has led us through visions that are not nearly as monumental in effect, but they have been important to us and to our city. Starting in the 1990’s, our church began offering different programs. We offered ESL and we opened a medical and dental clinic down on 5th Avenue. Then in this century, we started an outdoor basketball league and an after-school program. And we began praying 13-14 years ago about whether God wanted us to reach the city in a greater way by putting some of programs together and building a community center which cost a great deal of money to build and to fund. We began praying over it. And even though it was a great idea, I needed to know personally that it was God’s idea. We have always believed that the church belonged to Jesus and that at every step when we made big decisions, we asked the Lord, “Is this you, God? And not just a good idea from us. You’re the head of the body.”

As a leadership team, we talked about the community center and began putting plans together. We didn’t pull the trigger until the Lord spoke. One day when I was out on a prayer walk, I had a vision and it was like watching a movie or something projected up toward the sky. I saw in my mind’s eye, but it wasn’t just a thought, it seemed like it was outside of me. I saw a picture of an arrow and I felt like that the Holy Spirit was speaking to me, “Rich, do you know what the arrow is?” And I said, “No, Lord.” And he said, “For years, you have been building the shaft of the arrow, that’s the church. But the point of the arrow is the Community Center and that’s what is going to pierce the community.”

As I began looking at this shaft of an arrow and the point of the arrow, I began thinking that we need to tie these things together. The church needs to be connected physically, architecturally to the Community Center. We were thinking about buying another building somewhere else for the community center, but I realized that if the church wasn't tied by bricks and mortar to the Community Center, then on the one hand, the vast majority of people in the church would never get involved in the Community Center. They would say, "Oh, isn't it nice that our church does this thing. But it is only for a couple of percent of the people who are involved. It's not really for all of us in our church." And over time, if we separated the church from the Community Center, it would probably drift away from its Christ-centered orientation as many Community Centers have historically done.

So, as we began thinking about that picture of an arrow, we realized that we need to tie the church to the Community Center so that for generations to come, the Community Center would maintain a Christ-centered focus tied intimately to the work of the church and the church would connect with our calling to reach our community.

Brothers and sisters, on the occasion of this 30th anniversary of our church being part of the Vineyard movement, I want to underline two things for you. First, the Lord loves Vineyard Columbus. He really does. He has poured out his blessing on us. He has allowed us to experience his favor. One of the ways that God has shown us that he loves us is that he has led us by his grace.

As I close today, I'm reminded of the words from that great old hymn, "Amazing Grace" that goes this way:

Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come
Tis grace that brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home.

We can say that about Vineyard Columbus. Through many dangers, toils and snares we have already come. It's grace that brought us safe thus far and grace will lead us home.