

## Who's Afraid of the Holy Ghost?

Dr. Cynthia E. Huggins

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“I still have many things to tell you, but you can't handle them now. But when the Friend comes, the Spirit of the Truth, he will take you by the hand and guide you into all the truth there is. He won't draw attention to himself, but will make sense out of what is about to happen and, indeed, out of all that I have done and said. He will honor me; he will take from me and deliver it to you. Everything the Father has is also mine. That is why I've said, 'He takes from me and delivers to you.'” — John 16:12–15 (CEB)

In my previous life as a Southern Baptist, the church year included just four special days: Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Palm Sunday, and Easter Sunday. So it was kind of exciting to discover the complexity of the church year that is followed by the United Church of Christ and most other mainline Protestant denominations:

1. Four Sundays of Advent, Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day
2. Epiphany Sunday
3. Transfiguration Sunday
4. Lent, starting with Ash Wednesday and lasting forty days
5. Holy Week — Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday
6. Pentecost Sunday
7. Trinity Sunday
8. World Communion Sunday
9. World Food Sunday
10. Peace Sunday
11. Reformation Sunday / All Saints Sunday
12. Remembrance Sunday

Today is Trinity Sunday, which falls on the Sunday following Pentecost. The Holy Trinity became official church doctrine at the Council of Nicaea in the year 325, despite the fact that the word *trinity* never actually appears in the Bible. Starting in the tenth century, the Feast of the Holy Trinity gradually spread throughout northern Europe, and in 1334 the Pope approved it for the entire church. So Trinity Sunday is roughly a thousand years old.

What do we mean by the Trinity? One of my favorite quotations about the Holy Trinity comes from Martin Luther, who said, “To try to deny the Trinity endangers your salvation, but to try and comprehend the Trinity endangers your sanity.” The Trinity is one of those things that lots of people claim to believe in, but few people really understand.

In Christian doctrine, the Holy Trinity is the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as one God in three persons. The doctrine of the Trinity gradually developed in the early New Testament church as

a way of articulating the three ways that God is revealed in the Bible: first (1) as God or Yahweh to the Jewish people in the Old Testament, then (2) as Jesus the Savior, and finally (3) as the Holy Spirit following the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Many of you are familiar with Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber, who will be the keynote speaker at the UCC Synod later this month. In her Trinity Sunday sermon last year, here's what she said: "God is three persons and one being. God is one and yet three. The father is not the son or the Spirit, the son is not the father or the Spirit, the Spirit is not the Father or the Son. But the Father, Son, and Spirit all are God and God is one. So to review. 1+1+1=1." Nadia has her own unique way of presenting complex theological concepts.

Personally, I like the analogy of Batman as God, Robin as Jesus, and the butler Alfred as the Holy Spirit. Each has his own identity and role, but if I ask you, "Hey, did you watch Batman yesterday afternoon after school?" you'd know that I was using the word *Batman* to refer to the show, which includes all three characters. Doesn't work with Superman.

Whatever names we choose—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost / Creator, Word, and Spirit / Creator, Redeemer, and Advocate—we're talking about the dance back and forth between the three expressions of our Creator. Three expressions of God, each with its own distinct characteristics and role. I like the way Keith Ward, in a *TWOTP* video, explains the Trinity as three aspects of the divine being, the source of everything that exists:

1. God, the primordial aspect, is the source of all things. We worship (admire, respect) God the creator, who is distant from us.
2. Jesus, the expressive aspect, is the image of the invisible God. We follow (imitate, learn from) Jesus, with whom we have a personal relationship.
3. The Holy Spirit is the aspect of the Creator who lives within us, a power that unites all people and creation with God.

We all do this. We all express ourselves differently, depending on who we're with and what we're doing. Sometimes I'm Dr. Cynthia Huggins, snooty member of the editorial board for a scholarly journal about the Brontë family. Sometimes I'm Cindy Huggins, embarrassed to show up for my annual physical exam with my doctor because I still haven't gotten my shingles vaccine. And sometimes I'm Cindy, talking on the phone every Sunday night with my sister Beth, who has known me longer than any other living person and reads me like a book. It's all me, but very different expressions of me—like God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit.

The UCC's Statement of Beliefs begins with this sentence: "We believe in the triune God: Creator; resurrected Christ, the sole Head of the church; and the Holy Spirit, who guides and brings about the creative and redemptive work of God in the world." The truth is that we're all pretty comfortable with God and Jesus. But we tend to ignore that mysterious, frightening Holy Spirit, although she appears in the New Testament over and over again.

- Both Matthew and Luke tell us that when Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit came down like a dove and rested on him.
- The Holy Spirit also appears in the Book of Acts, when Luke write these words: “Jesus was exalted to God’s right side and received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit. He poured out this Spirit, and you are seeing and hearing the results of his having done so.”
- Similarly, Paul writes in the Book of Romans, “God’s kingdom isn’t about food and drinking, but about righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.”
- One last example, from Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus: “Christ is building you—the church—into a place where God lives through the Spirit.” Or to paraphrase, Christ is building you, Centre Street Church, into a place where God lives through the Spirit.

I spent the first forty years of my life in the South, deeply immersed in the Southern Baptist Church. Now I’ve spent the past twenty-five years in Maine and increasingly involved in the United Church of Christ. As much as I disagree with the stance that the Southern Baptist Convention has taken on any number of issues, I will always be grateful for many things that I learned and experienced as a Southern Baptist—especially having to do with the Holy Spirit.

For example, I loved the Wednesday night prayer meetings at White Plains Baptist Church. We’d just gather in the sanctuary for an hour—no speaker, no program—and pray about whatever was on our minds and hearts. I learned not to be shy or self-conscious, scared about saying the wrong thing. Praying aloud with other Christians became as natural as breathing, as long as I remained open to the Spirit’s presence.

When I was in high school, the church youth groups in upstate South Carolina would gather once a month at one of the larger churches for a youth rally—which typically meant hearing a message delivered by another high school student and doing a lot of singing. Sitting there in the midst of several hundred young people and singing for an hour was one of the most moving experiences of my life, and nobody felt the least bit embarrassed about raising their hands in the air in reverence to God. In my humble opinion, it would do us all good—myself included—to raise our hands during a song or prayer occasionally. There should be no shame at experiencing the Holy Spirit tugging at our hearts—none whatsoever.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus uses the word *paraclete* to refer to the Holy Spirit when he is talking to his twelve disciples at the Last Supper. Paraclete is a Greek word usually translated as companion, friend, counsellor, or advocate. In these verses, Jesus is describing the Holy Spirit as someone who will step into his shoes, so to speak, when he is gone. The only difference is that while they have known Jesus as a separate person, the Holy Spirit will actually live inside them.

John 14:16–17 — “I will ask the Father, and he will send *another* Companion / Paraclete, who will be with you forever. This Companion is the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit, the breath of God . . . You already know him, because he lives with you and will be with you.”

John 14:26–27 — “The Companion, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I told you . . . Don’t be troubled or afraid.”

John 16:1–7 — “I’ve told you these things to prepare you for rough times ahead. They are going to throw you out of the meeting places. There will even come a time when anyone who kills you will think he’s doing God a favor . . . I didn’t tell you this earlier because I was with you every day. But now I am on my way to the One who sent me . . . It’s better for you that I leave. If I don’t leave, the Friend won’t come. But if I go, I’ll send him to you.”

In these passages of Scripture, it’s clear that Jesus is trying to encourage his disciples and give them hope. He promises that the Paraclete—the Holy Spirit or Companion—will be there to comfort them, to strengthen them, to guide them. You don’t need to be afraid, he tells them, because the Holy Spirit, your constant companion, will always be right there with you.

And yet in many churches today, little is mentioned about this particular expression of God. I think the idea of the Holy Spirit makes us nervous, even scares us, because we don’t want to give up control of our own lives. We don’t want the Holy Spirit telling us what to do, because we might not like what she tells us. We say that we want to follow Jesus, but only if he leads us to where we want to go.

Unfortunately, as Richard Rohr says, some people are so afraid of being judged or criticized that they never even access the gift of the Holy Spirit. We get so caught up in seeking an intellectual understanding of God that our faith almost comes to resemble a business transaction, and Jesus is like a good buddy who will never ask us to do anything that might make us uncomfortable.

We do what we can to serve our fellow human beings, seeking to love our neighbors as ourselves, but we do it on our own terms. Church feels comfortable for us, warm and cozy, because we can do it at our own pace and in our own way. After all, if we opened our hearts to the Holy Spirit’s guidance, who knows where she might lead us? We like things the way they are, they way they’ve always been, and we see no reason to change.

But friends, the Holy Spirit isn’t going away. She isn’t mysteriously floating in the air around us or above our heads. She isn’t standing right outside the door or even sitting in the back pew. The Holy Spirit is already within each of us, as close as our very breath. We can’t see her, but she lives within us. She longs to comfort us when we’re frightened, disheartened, or confused.

And if we’ll let her, the Holy Spirit—our Paraclete, our advocate, our companion—will provide this church with the holy imagination and prophetic vision that we need right now. As Rev. Dorhauer last Sunday morning in his video interview for *Convergence*, the Holy Spirit is busy leading Christianity and the Christian Church into a new way of being. You heard Dorhauer say that it’s the mission of the Church—not the survival of the Church itself—that God cares about, and the Spirit will get that job done with us or without us.

The Holy Spirit, as part of the Holy Trinity, is the expression of our Creator most accessible to us—freely given, always present, eager to be heard, longing to help. She will not impose her wisdom on us, but she is the best—indeed, the only—way for us to know God’s will for us individually and collectively.

As the UCC Statement of Beliefs says, the Holy Spirit is responsible for guiding and bringing about the creative and redemptive work of God in the world.

Come, Holy Spirit, come. The sooner, the better.

Amen.