

Who Is the Third Person of the Trinity?

Acts 2:1-21; John 14:15-18, 25-27

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I remember the day my mother-in-law hit me. Yes, I deserved it. This was before Kelly and I married. Kelly and her family were Presbyterian. The very formal kind of Presbyterians. I called them “God’s frozen people.” The Holy Spirit showed up by appointment only!

I grew up Baptist, where the worship was casual, the Spirit flowed freely, and people often said “Amen” during the pastor’s sermon. Not at Kelly’s church. It was deathly quiet. No one dared speak when the pastor was speaking.

We were in the car the day I was assaulted. I was in college at the time majoring in religion and philosophy. Occasionally we would discuss some of the new and exciting things I was learning. On this particular day, I was driving. Kelly’s mom was sitting in the back. Her name is Shirley, and I said, “Shirley, I learned in school that the Presbyterians are going to make it to heaven before the Baptists?”

She was shocked to hear me, a Baptist, admit this. She said with astonishment, “Why, I didn’t know that!”

I had her took hook, line and sinker!

I said, “Yes, it’s in the Bible. It says that the dead in Christ shall rise first.”

And from the back seat, she came around with a right that would have staggered George Foreman! We laughed about it for weeks.

Truthfully, the Baptists of my childhood were as uncomfortable with the Holy Spirit as the Presbyterians. I was wrong to associate casual worship with familiarity with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit seems to be the overlooked third of the Holy Trinity in much of Christendom. We are comfortable praying to God the Father, or Mother if that makes you feel

more comfortable. God as a Heavenly Parent—benevolent, caring, loving—feels right for us. And we are comfortable praying in the name of Jesus. God as the Son—who taught, performed miracles, died and was resurrected—feels right for us too. But our tradition shies away from talk about the dynamism of the Holy Spirit, which sweeps in and carries us to new and unexpected experiences.

Am I wrong? Dr. Molly Marshall, who was one of our lecturers a few years ago, says that we're afraid the Holy Spirit will make us do something "weird." I'm going to suggest we put away all the canned phrases and clichés about the Holy Spirit and get to know this third person of the Trinity. In what way is the Holy Spirit real to you? I'm not talking about what you were taught to say or what ought to be. What is your real experience with the Holy Spirit, the One Jesus calls the Advocate in our text from John?

It's an interesting Greek word, *Paraclete*, used only in John's gospel. The difficulty of translating this word into English is evidenced by the many ways it has been translated. My Bible uses the word Advocate. Yours may use Comforter or Counselor or Helper. The Phillips translation translates it with a phrase: "someone to stand by you." *The Message* uses the word Friend: "I will talk to the Father, and he'll provide you another Friend so that you will always have someone with you. This Friend is the Spirit of Truth." One translation doesn't even translate it at all. It simply uses the Greek word *Paraclete*, which means "someone who is called to one's side."

Remember the setting of this teaching. This occurred on the eve of Jesus' death. He was with his apostles. He washed their feet, gave the new commandment that they love one another, and forewarned Peter that within hours he would deny knowing Jesus. The next day Jesus would be crucified, creating a major theological crisis. Jesus was the incarnation of God, we claim, meaning that God was uniquely present in his life. Jesus was, as John A. T. Robinson said, "the human face of God." But he was about to die, and here's the theological crisis. If God was incarnate in this man from Nazareth named Jesus, what would happen when Jesus was gone? Was God gone too? Would God be available to the world after the death of Jesus?

Jesus' answer to that theological question was "yes." "I will pray the Father," Jesus assured them, "and he will give you *another* Advocate." The use of the word "another" is very important here. It suggests that God would give another *like Jesus*. As Jesus had been their Advocate, another would

come who would likewise “be at their side,” be their Counselor, their Helper, Comforter. The *Paraclete*, the Holy Spirit, Jesus said, would continue the work of Jesus after his death. The *Paraclete*, then, was the link between the life and ministry of Jesus and the future of the disciples and the church that would be born from their witness.

Do you see how the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, met this theological crisis? The death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus did not represent the end of God’s presence in the world. No, that marked the beginning of a new era for the believing community. Future generations would not be left alone, orphaned. The *Paraclete* would continue the work of God. While it’s true that we will not know Jesus in the way the first disciples did—hearing his teachings, feeling his touch, seeing him walk on water—it’s also true that we can know the indwelling presence of God through the Holy Spirit.

Now, here’s the most important part of this sermon. What does this mean? This is where we have to get really honest. What does this *really* mean? It’s more than just preacher talk, what ought to be. The *Paraclete* is God’s gift to us, a gift that we need not fear and must not ignore, a gift we should get to know. I want to give you some honest, personal observations. They’re not necessarily out of the Bible, but I don’t think they are in contradiction to the Bible. They are my own experiences with the Holy Spirit. They’re not perfect by any means. You certainly could add many more to this list. Here are some ways that I have honestly met the Holy Spirit.

First, my experiences with the Holy Spirit are frequent in worship with you. The playing of our organ or piano often touches a place deep within me. Sometimes a prayer, I’m convinced, is prayed only for me. Maybe it’s the choir. My Sunday worship begins on Thursday, when I begin research for the sermon. As I immerse myself in the texts, I sometimes feel transported to another place. I begin and then look at my watch and am shocked to see that hours have passed. It never fails that something in the text touches that same deep place. That, I believe, is the work of the *Paraclete*, our Counselor.

Second, my experiences with the Holy Spirit tend to be fleeting. A glimpse. A sudden illumination. A spark that I know intuitively comes from beyond. I know this is subjective. I’ve never spoken in tongues, which can be heard. I’ve never healed anyone, which can be verified. No, my

experiences with the Holy Spirit tend to be subjective and fleeting, what the Celtic Christians used to call “thin places,” those moments where the world beyond and this world intermingle. For me they have been moments when beauty and truth draw me out of myself and toward the Holy. Do any of you identify with that? That, I believe, is the *Paraclete*, the one who comes alongside.

Third, I have rich experiences with the Holy Spirit in nature. To be in the middle of the woods, beside a flowing stream, nature pulsing around me, is a spiritual and holy experience for me. I guess that is why I am a gardener. I participated in an Episcopalian ordination service at Church of the Nativity downtown once. It was a high occasion, full of “smells and bells,” as they say. I ran into one of the other participants some time later, and she said, “I’m so glad we used incense. That always means so much to me.” Before I could stop myself, I said, “The smell of the soil is my incense.” She said, “I don’t think I want the smell of dirt at church.” I responded, “I didn’t say dirt. I said soil, and for me there is a difference.” I meet the Holy Spirit there, in the smell of the earth, the sound of a trickling stream, and the sight of woodland flowers. There I meet my Helper.

And finally, I have meaningful experiences with the Holy Spirit when caring for my adult, disabled daughter, Hannah. She cannot feed herself, bathe herself, or dress herself. She can no longer walk unassisted. Her cognitive level is about eighteen months, yet she has feelings and knows when someone is being kind and loving and when someone is not. Some of you know that it takes great discipline to care for someone so dependent in such a way that it honors their God-given worth. To be patient. We’re always in such a hurry. Hannah doesn’t hurry. Ever! To be understanding. She didn’t choose this. She’s the victim, not me. To care for another human being in a tender, loving manner is a spiritual discipline where the *Paraclete* is present.

From my experience, that is who the *Paraclete* is, a gift from God we must get to know. They called Jesus Immanuel, “God with us,” and he was. But he’s gone. Jesus is gone and in his place God has sent us another Friend, the *Paraclete*, the one who come alongside us, a Counselor, an Advocate, a Helper, the third person of the Trinity. We get glimpses of the Spirit’s presence, and those moments connect us to the world unseen. And for that we are grateful. We are grateful for the indwelling presence of the

Holy Spirit, which may just sweep in and carry us to new and unexpected experiences. Oh, let us hope so! Let us hope so!

Closing Prayer

Holy Spirit, closer than our breath, as vital as our heartbeat, we are grateful that we are not left orphaned. Open our eyes to your presence. Amen.