

We Are Not Alone

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

4th in a seven-part series

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John 14:24–27 (Common English Bible, CEB)

²⁴Whoever doesn't love me doesn't keep my words. The word that you hear isn't mine. It is the word of the Father who sent me.

²⁵"I have spoken these things to you while I am with you. ²⁶The 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.

²⁷"Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I give to you not as the world gives. Don't be troubled or afraid.

Acts 1:4–8; 2:1–4, 42–47 (CEB)

[After his resurrection, Jesus tells his disciples to go to Jerusalem and wait for the one he had promised would come . . . and the Spirit does arrive.]

⁴While they were eating together, he [Jesus] ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for what the Father had promised. He said, "This is what you heard from me:"

⁵John baptized with water, but in only a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

⁶As a result, those who had gathered together asked Jesus, "Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?"

⁷Jesus replied, "It isn't for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority." ⁸Rather, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

¹When Pentecost Day arrived, they were all together in one place. ²Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them. ⁴They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak.

⁴²The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. ⁴³A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were united and shared everything. ⁴⁵They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. ⁴⁶Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. ⁴⁷They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.

Too often, the world can seem like an awfully lonely place.

But in Christ, we are never alone. His Spirit is our ever-present companion and helper.

As we strive to walk on the Jesus Way, to embrace our Lord as the Way, too often, we feel like we are walking alone or, at best, in the company of a few equally struggling friends. But the truth is that God walks with us every step of the way, in the person of the Holy Spirit.

The evening before his crucifixion, Jesus promised his closest disciples that he was not leaving them alone. God would send another person, a Comforter, Helper, and Advocate, typically known as the Holy Spirit. After Jesus was crucified and risen, after his ascension, the Holy Spirit came to the believers who had gathered in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost. And it is the Spirit who has been with God's people ever since, guiding us, empowering us, encouraging us, comforting us.

Yet, the Holy Spirit is deeply misunderstood and woefully ignored in much of the American church. The way to get to know the Holy Spirit is to grasp some of the basics, much as we would get to know anyone.

The Holy Spirit: Just the FAQ's

Exactly what is the Holy Spirit?

Yikes! First, the Holy Spirit is not a “what,” but a “who.” You too are not a “what” but a “who,” a person. The Holy Spirit is a person. Look, for example, at the following passage from John 16. I’ve underlined all the personal pronouns that refer to the Holy Spirit, aka the Advocate. Don’t get too caught up in the fact that these are all masculine pronouns. In English, we only have “he” and “she” to choose from when it comes to singular personal pronouns. Using “it” is a far worse choice, for though it avoids the gender issues, “it” relegates the Spirit to being an impersonal thing; the Spirit is no less a person than you and I are persons.

⁷ I assure you that it is better for you that I go away. If I don’t go away, the Companion won’t come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. ⁸ When he comes, he will show the world it was wrong about sin, righteousness, and judgment. ⁹ He will show the world it was wrong about sin because they don’t believe in me. ¹⁰ He will show the world it was wrong about righteousness because I’m going to the Father and you won’t see me anymore. ¹¹ He will show the world it was wrong about judgment because this world’s ruler stands condemned.

¹² “I have much more to say to you, but you can’t handle it now. ¹³ However, when the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you in all truth. He won’t speak on his own, but will say whatever he hears and will proclaim to you what is to come.

¹⁴ He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and proclaim it to you.

John 16:7–14

In the Bible, the Spirit *searches, knows, teaches, dwells, accomplishes, gives life, cries out, bears witness, has desires, is grieved, helps, intercedes, works all things together, strengthens*, and is *lied to*. These are not verbs we apply to chairs or to electricity. The Holy Spirit is not akin to the Force of Star Wars; the Spirit is a person, a Holy Who! Don’t be misled by the fact that the Bible uses images like doves, wind, or fire in reference to the Spirit. Such images illustrate something about the Spirit to us, but that is all. After all, Scripture refers to God as a “rock” and Jesus as a “door.”

But is the Spirit more like an angel or more like God?

The Holy Spirit is not an angel. Angels are created beings that are neither human nor divine. In Scripture, God uses angels as his messengers. Like you and me, angels are persons, though not divine.

And the Spirit is not merely “like God,” the Holy Spirit *is* God, fully and completely, though not all of God. The Spirit is God in exactly the same manner as Jesus is God and the Father is God. These persons, the three “who’s” of the Trinity, comprise the one God, who is not divisible, for God is one.¹

Does the Holy Spirit have a name?

The name most commonly used by the New Testament writers is “the Holy Spirit.” However, the Holy Spirit is also called “the Spirit,” “the Spirit of God,” “the Spirit of the Lord,” “the Spirit of Christ,” “the *Paraclete*,” “the Spirit of Jesus,” the “Spirit of Truth,” and “the Spirit of his Son.”²

I suppose it would be easier to think of the Spirit as a person if the Spirit were named Tom or Sally. But those are names given by humans to other humans. The Spirit is a person, but not a human person. Don’t let the seemingly impersonal

¹If you think you’ve figured out how three can be one, without sacrificing something of their diversity or something of their unity, I can assure you that you are wrong – at least it is still a mystery of God after these past 2,000 years.

²This Greek word is variously translated as Comforter, Advocate, Helper, and Counselor. It is a name used often by Jesus in his last talk with his disciples. Jesus was leaving but God was sending another to be with them – the Spirit, aka the Paraclete.

nature of the word “spirit” mislead you. The Holy Spirit of God is very personal indeed, very much a person.

What does the Spirit do?

Gordon Fee, the most prominent Pentecostal NT scholar, came up with just the right phrase to describe the Spirit’s work. The Spirit is the “empowering presence of God.”

The Spirit is God-with-us every day. It is the Spirit who empowers and strengthens us. It is the Spirit who comforts us. It is the Spirit who lifts up to the Father the prayers that we can’t even articulate ourselves. If you believe that God is helping you through a crisis, it is the Spirit who is the helper. It is the Spirit who opens people’s hearts so they can hear the Good News. It is the Spirit who is God-doing with us and for us every day.

It is the Holy Spirit who gathers us together for worship. Indeed, it is the Holy Spirit who has formed us into the fellowship that we call the Church,³ the holy catholic (universal) church. And it is the Spirit who sustains us in this community of believers.



The Dove

One of the symbols in St. Andrew’s Rose Window is that of a dove. All four Gospel writers tell us that at Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River, God’s Spirit descended like a dove upon him. Luke put it this way, “. . . and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove” (Luke 3:22).

Though doves appear in the Old Testament, never before in Jewish traditions had a dove been used to represent God’s Spirit. The descent of God’s Holy Spirit upon Jesus, accompanied by the voice from heaven, marks out Jesus as God’s “beloved Son” and prepares us for the uniqueness of Jesus and his mission. Later, returning to his hometown, Jesus would rise in the synagogue to read from Isaiah 61: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me.”

So there’s the basics. The Holy Spirit is with us every step along the Jesus Way. Importantly, the Spirit has also made each of us a part of a group of people who are also striving to hold to the Jesus Way, i.e. the body of believers, Christ’s Church Universal, which is sustained and empowered by God’s Spirit.

The universal⁴ Church

Simply put, the Church, aka the Body of Christ, is the worldwide community of believers, encompassing not only the living, but the believers who have died. We gather in churches to worship, to pray, to care for one another, and to go about the work given us by Christ. But the Church is not the buildings, it is the people. The Church includes believers of all the various denominations, large and small, including: United Methodist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Southern Baptist, Lutheran, the Church of Christ, and so on. You can think of the Church universal as a family, comprised of billions of brothers and sisters across the globe.

What really is a church? Why bother going?

Those are pretty basic questions and you’d surely get a wide variety of answers if you went out on the street and asked a bunch of people those two simple questions. Many people have had wonderful experiences with churches, but many have had just the opposite. Philip Yancey, the well-known Christian writer, talks straightforwardly about his own church upbringing and that he became a Christian despite it. On the jacket of his

³Writers often capitalize “Church” to help the reader differentiate between the universal body of Christ and the local churches, such as St. Andrew.

⁴In the UMC hymnal, the word “universal” is rightly footnoted as an acceptable substitute for “catholic.”

book, *Soul Survivor*, he writes, “I have spent most of my life in recovery from the Church.” That’s quite a statement from one of the most influential Christian writers of his generation. Given that Yancey speaks for far too many, including some who lost their faith entirely, let’s take a look at those two basic questions.

What is a church?

First, a church is not a building. We may use the words that way, but the truth is that a church is a community, a fellowship of believers who may meet in a building or in homes or even on a mountaintop to worship, to pray, to care for one another, and to go about the work given them by Christ. Each church, like the community we call St. Andrew, can be thought of as an outpost or colony of the larger worldwide fellowship of believers called “the Church.”

There are many images of “the Church” in the Bible. It is we who are God’s sheep, protected and cared for by the Good Shepherd. We are also, as Paul puts it, the Body of Christ. We are his eyes and his hands and his feet in this world. We are a fellowship that was formed by God, in the person of his Holy Spirit, and is sustained by that same Spirit. Indeed, Paul refers to us as God’s temple, in whom God’s Spirit dwells. We are, as Peter puts, a “chosen race, a holy nation, . . . God’s own people.” And there is only one thing that we have in common, our faith, i.e., our trust, in Jesus Christ. That faith in Jesus Christ is our one and only badge of membership, not race or gender or geography, nor our obedience to a set of rules nor our conformity to a particular set of doctrines.

Why Go?

I sometimes get a question something like this: “I believe in Jesus, but why should I have to go to church? Can’t I love Jesus just as well in my living room?” I understand where the question comes from, particularly in our individualistic society. Frankly, I’m not much of a joiner myself. And I’m pretty pragmatic, wondering what something will do for me. But there is a reason that Bishop N. T. Wright writes, “it is as impossible, unnecessary, and undesirable to be a Christian all by yourself as it is to be a newborn baby all by yourself,” for all those who have faith in Christ are born anew, new creations born into God’s creation, the Church. As another wise and informed Christian, whose name escapes me, wrote, “There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship to the Church.” To put it another way, we can’t expect to have a healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship with his Body. And to put a finer edge on the theology, all believers are part of the Body of Christ, whether they are present or absent.

You see, we humans are built for relationship, for community. We are made in the image of God, who is, in his very being, inherently relational, an eternal loving fellowship of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, it is in community with one another, believer to believer, that we discover the best within us and learn what it really means to have a Good Shepherd.

So, why go to church? Because it is there, in the midst of others, that we can find the meaning, the purpose, the joy, and the peace that we all seek.

Is it too much to ask that our churches be such places, that these colonies of God’s new human race, reflect the God whom we worship? In a word, no!

Now, no church will meet all our expectations, nor will any church meet all of God’s expectations. But being absent from church entirely is not an option for a Christian. It is here, in these places and within these communities that we discover the deepest joys of the Christian life.

My wife, Patti, and I came to St. Andrew more than fifteen years ago, not long after getting married, and found here the most warm, welcoming, joyful people that either of us had experienced. And we’ve been here ever since, in good times and bad. One son

was baptized here, another married, and now we've gotten to share the baptism of our grandchildren with this wonderful congregation of Christians.

But even more important, it has been here that we have found our way to a deep, enduring, and fully dimensioned relationship with Jesus Christ. God has used all these wonderful people, both clergy and lay, to reshape us both and we will be eternally grateful. Yes, church matters. Come and see!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Today's Scripture passage from Acts is a good opportunity to use our imaginations. Try making two lists. Label them "Jerusalem church" and "St. Andrew." List out what you see as some similarities and differences between the two communities. What might we learn from them? What might they learn from us? I'm guessing that the latter will be more difficult for you. You might even take the passage from Acts and go through it phrase by phrase looking for similarities and differences.
2. What do you make of the statement "There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship with the church?" Do you agree? Has this been your own experience? What does this statement imply about our life in the church? We don't call one another "brother" and "sister" at St. Andrew although some Christians do. Why brothers and sisters? What does it mean to you to think of yourself as part of a family that encompasses all Christians? Jesus certainly thinks that the family of disciples is the family that has first call on our lives (see Matthew 12:46-50, for example).

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

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| Monday Acts 4:23-31 The believers in Jerusalem pray for boldness in the face of threats. | Tuesday Acts 5:1-11 The disturbing story of Ananias and Sapphira. Be sure you notice that their offense was lying about their contribution, not failing to sell all they had. |
| Wednesday Acts 6:1-7 The apostles are overwhelmed with the work of the community and decide to reorganize! | Thursday Ephesians 4:1-16 The body of Christ, the Church, is to be unified. |
| Friday 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 The body of Christ is one, but has many members. | Weekly Prayer Concerns |

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class – now studying 2 Kings

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying 1 Timothy

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series:

Did Paul Really Hate Women?

Paul and Women in the world of the first Christians

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org

Sermon Notes

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