

Sunday, May 19, 2013: Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:14-17; John 14:8-17 (25-27)

by [Barry Howard](#) in the [May 15, 2013](#) issue

My first notions of the spirit world came not from the Bible, but from *13 Alabama Ghosts and Jeffrey*, a collection of ghost stories written by Kathryn Tucker Windham and Margaret Gillis Figh. When I was in fourth grade I gave a report on this book.

I especially remember the tale of Jeffrey, a mischievous spirit who first made his presence known in the Windham home one night in 1966. "At irregular and infrequent intervals, [he would] clump down the hall, slam doors, rock in a chair, frighten the family cat, move heavy pieces of furniture, cause electronic equipment to malfunction, and hide objects." To this day when I drive around the square of one of those quaint Alabama towns, I look to see if there is a face in the courthouse window.

It stands to reason that as a child growing up in the Bible Belt I associated the ghosts of these stories with the Holy Ghost in the church house. Evangelists who visited preached passionate and lengthy revival sermons alternating almost schizophrenically between asking, "Have you received the Holy Ghost?" and warning, "Beware of quenching the Holy Ghost," as though this supernatural apparition could invade our bodies or condemn our souls, depending on our response at that moment.

Through the years I think I've matured a little in my understanding of pneumatology. I appreciate my Bapti-costal childhood, but I still have a lot of unpacking to do. Even the name Holy Spirit, which occurs in all English translations except the King James Version, is much more friendly than Holy Ghost, the former connoting holiness, the latter, a sense of spiritual haunting.

When I brush aside the folkloric notions of those early years, the biblical narrative helps bring a much-needed clarity to my understanding of the Holy Spirit. In the Gospel of John, Jesus begins to prepare his disciples for his departure but assures them, "I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you" (John 14:18, NIV). The incarnate Jesus had been with them in bodily form, and now his Spirit would be present with them in a fascinating and yet mysterious sort of way. "I will ask the

Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth” (John 14:16–17, NIV).

When I read this account of the comforter and encourager, I am consoled by the fact that at first Jesus’ closest followers didn’t “get it” either. I resonate with their anxiety when Jesus talked about a terminal point in his ministry and something yet to come which would alter and transform their relationship. They must have sensed in Jesus’ veiled hints that some crucial experience was looming, but they could not imagine its significance. They could not anticipate his eventual execution or the reality of his resurrection.

Up until this point Jesus had been their mentor. They even called him rabbi. He had shown them a new way to live, a life based not on status or perfection but on a self-worth founded on God’s love and a value system grounded in God’s grace. Jesus accepted them in their imperfect human condition and cultivated within them a lifestyle trending toward simplicity and service.

But with news of his pending departure, they must have wondered who would lead them now. Would they return to their old ways and habits? Who would teach them about God?

The answer was the Holy Spirit. This advocate is assigned to us Christ followers to navigate our steps, to keep us affirmed by God’s love, to steer us toward a lifestyle of service and simplicity, and to protect us from legalism by keeping us grounded in grace. Paul believed so strongly in this spiritual linkage that he wrote to the Romans, “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Rom. 16, NIV).

Although my early notions of the Spirit were more ghostlike, I now embrace the Spirit as the personality of God in the world. This Spirit is not floating around in the cosmos but takes up residence within a temple of human flesh. The Spirit of God that hovered over the waters in the creation story now occupies a human habitat in the redemption story.

Much to the chagrin of my hyper-Pentecostal friends, the Spirit is not an exhibitionist showcasing bizarre feats. Rather, the Spirit prefers to work clandestinely, deflecting attention while always prompting people toward God and a Christlike life.

The story of Pentecost, a pivotal part of the biblical narrative, marks the inauguration of the church and launches the globalization of the Christian faith. We cannot recreate the phenomena of Pentecost; our God is not the god of repeat performances but a God who is always seeking to do a new thing, and the Holy Spirit is pressing us to creativity and innovation and persistence.

In his book *Thinking about God*, Fisher Humphreys describes the Spirit as One who “brings life and vitality into the experience of the Christian and the church. . . . He makes Christian living dynamic as well as decent.” I understand the activity of the Spirit to be fostering unity, not division; inspiring creativity, not repressing it; and revisioning the future, not preserving the status quo.

Luke describes the arrival of the Spirit as “a mighty rushing wind.” I live on the coast where the breeze is constant but the speed is variable. The Spirit is that wind, a force that cannot be conjured or controlled. Although we cannot moderate its potency or dictate its direction, we can choose to raise our sails.