

Zaida Maldonado Pérez
We Love God, the Holy Spirit!

Abstract

This paper examines the historical development of the theology of the Holy Spirit within early church history, as well as how our current theological viewpoints have developed. This includes examining how the Holy Spirit is both God to us and also how the Third Person of the Trinity is also to be God for others through our work in missions. The centrality of the Holy Spirit for our lives, ministry, and the mission of the church is a key reason to continue to proclaim and teach this important truth of the Christian faith.

Keywords: Holy Spirit, theology, church history, Trinity, discipleship

Zaida Maldonado Pérez is professor of church history and theology at Asbury Theological Seminary's Florida-Dunnam campus. She is the author of *The Subversive Roles of Visions in Early Christian Martyrs*, and the co-author of *Latina Evangélicas: A Theological Survey from the Margins*, and *An Introduction to Christian Theology*.

I. The Holy Spirit is *God to Us*

We love God, the Holy Spirit! Centuries of confession about the person of the Holy Spirit have made us forget something of the boldness and radicalism of this statement. The ease with which this falls from our lips hides the centuries of struggle it took for the church councils to affirm and put into words what Christians who gathered to worship the Triune God were already proclaiming—belief in God the Holy Spirit.¹ This was not because council members did not believe; they believed in the Holy Spirit whom they also adored. Nevertheless, words and concepts fell short of “capturing” the Person, role, and work of the Holy Spirit. This “wild child” of the Trinity—the Spirit who will not be “had” or “possessed” by any—eluded all grasp and all attempts at taming her² enough to fit into a conceptual framework and definition.³ It is no wonder that Basil of Caesarea, himself trying to explain the person and work of the third Person of the Trinity, refers to her as “unapproachable” and “unmeasured by times or ages.”⁴ She eludes our understanding even today.

Despite this, he also refers to the Holy Spirit as “apprehendable.” However, it is not because we can “contain” or even adequately define she who is “unmeasured.” We can “apprehend” the Spirit because the Spirit “apprehends” us. That is, it is she who encounters us. Compelled by the Tri-une love for its creation, the Spirit invites us to experience God as one who comes to us and fills us to such a degree that we are led boldly—if even radically—to confess “we love God, the Holy Spirit”.

Members of the early church councils that met to discuss and define the place and work of the third Person of the Trinity felt they had “apprehended” the Holy Spirit.⁵ They, as we today, encountered this life-giving breath, wind, and creative power in the pages of our scriptures brooding over the waters of the darkness ready, with the Father and the Son, to unleash her creative energy and transform the dark void into that which was “good,” even “very good.” There, they encountered the Creator God breathing life, through the Spirit, into his new creation and, there too, they met the Spirit guiding a liberated people as a cloud by day and fire by night to the promised land. The Spirit, sent by God to accomplish the divine will, was present through prophets and prophetesses, the patriarchs, the judges, kings, and the many women and men of all ages and ethnicities called upon to fulfill God’s mission.⁶ And, many at the councils who met each other for the first time had “apprehended” this *ruach elohim*, the flaming divine *pneuma* in their own lives while facing their tormentors, ready to be martyred, if necessary, for their Lord. They, as we, were witnesses to the many who, professing Christ, experienced this “unmeasured” transforming, life-breathing power through the grace-filled work

and Person of the Holy Spirit. And so, confident of what they encountered in the scriptures, what they received from the apostles and the church and, assured of the witness of the Spirit in their own lives, they confessed what they themselves also beheld- the Lordship of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son. “The Father,” affirms Gregory of Nazianzus, “was the True Light which lighteneth every man [*sic.*] coming into the world. The Son was the True Light which lighteneth every man coming into the world. The Other Comforter was the True Light which lighteneth every man coming into the world. Was and Was and Was, but Was One Thing.”⁷

The Holy Spirit whom we love and worship is God, the “Other Comforter” who is with the “I Am that I Am” so that she too “Was” with God “in the beginning” when God created the heavens and the earth and “in the beginning” when the Word was with God.⁸ With the early church, we confess belief in the Spirit who was and is Lord; the Spirit is *God to us*.

II. God the Holy Spirit is God *for us* and *for others*:

But, the Holy Spirit is God *to us* because, first and foremost, the Spirit is *God for us*.⁹ The Holy Spirit is God for us when, despite our sins, the unending love of the Triune God makes provision for us through the Son. God’s heavenly Manna, God’s Bread of Life who is Jesus the Christ, comes to us as the incarnate Lord, our brother and friend, who, through the power of the Spirit, gives himself fully so that we may have the abundant life intended for God’s creation since “the beginning.” It is through the missionary Christ and in the missionary Spirit that we are reconciled to the missionary God who pours his love within our hearts.¹⁰ In this divine missional movement, the Spirit reveals God to us as “holy love sending and seeking” those who will receive the “unifying Spirit” and embody the “God of missions” in their life and service.¹¹

United to God through the unifying and Holy Spirit, we are thus sanctified, that is, set-apart-to-become-a-part of the mission to which God calls us and for which God enables us through the gifts (charisms) of the Spirit.¹² This mission is at least two-fold 1) to “go and make disciples of all nations” and, 2) to “love one another; even as I have loved you” (Matthew 28:19-20; John 13:34). Both of these find their center in the One that desires and empowers us to love God with all of our being and love our neighbor as ourselves (Luke 10:27; Matthew 22:37-38).

A. “Go and make disciples”

The call to “go and make disciples” has been interpreted variously throughout history. A survey of the history of missions shows that a robust

understanding (theology) of the meaning and implications of Jesus' ministry for our own work and witness, and the socio-political and/or cultural location of the church, impact, for good or ill, the manner in which this commission is carried out. Where and when the church(es) has been in power, discipleship has, intentionally or not, often taken some form of imperial or cultural coercion (not the least of which has been supported by an equally imperialistic theology).¹³ The difference, for instance, between the discipleship of a persecuted church and the forced coercions carried out by an imperially or government-favored one is stark. Where discipleship is faithful it has sought to imitate the life and ministry of Jesus even unto death.¹⁴

All *imitatio Christi* is also an *imitatio Trinitatis*. Ministry that takes hold of an *imitatio trinitatis* includes what we might glean from a study of the tri-personal community (the trinity *en se* or *ad intra*)¹⁵ to what we can learn from the concrete expressions (and thus qualities) of each of the Persons of the Trinity in history (that is, the economic Trinity, the Trinity *ad extra*).¹⁶ The story of God's response to the murder of Abel by his brother Cain is a case in point. Looked at from the vantage point of the great commission, it teaches us that "making" disciples is at its very core a return to an acute understanding of what it means to serve the God that deems us our brother and sister's keeper.¹⁷ And, from the vantage point of the cross, we especially grasp the gravity and depth of what God means when he says the "voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground."¹⁸ An *imitatio Trinitatis* sees the work of each of the Persons in the Trinity as teaching tools that challenge, shape, and inform our discipleship.

Faithful discipleship then, also calls for an *imitatio Spiritus Sancti*. A theology of discipleship cannot do without a strong pneumatology. By "strong" I do not only mean that it should be extensive or even scholarly, as important as these are for understanding our faith. Emphasis is rather on commitment, self-rendering; it is on a lived pneumatology. Without this, discipleship runs the risk of misrepresenting, or worse, victimizing the other. A discipleship anchored in a strong pneumatology seeks to be open to hearing, learning, and even imitating, by embodying, the teaching and giving qualities of the Person of the Spirit sent to be our *paracletos*, our teacher and mentor.¹⁹ Such qualities include breathing life; witnessing to the truth (because she is the Spirit of truth); giving access to the Father; renewing minds and hearts; inspiring hope, life, and ministry; challenging systemic evil; convicting sin; creating a new thing; gifting us for ministry and, despite our failures, being our strength and succor in time of need.²⁰ A Spirit-filled and Spirit-led discipleship then, will seek to live out such qualities in all realms of our existence. And, we do this through a student-teacher submission to an infinitely grace-filled, loving and wise God.

The Holy Spirit then, is more than God's Self-Gift for our renewal and restoration. The mentoring Spirit reminds and enables us to follow in the footsteps of the One Tri-personal God that always teaches by example.²¹ Faithful discipleship must be anchored, empowered, moved by the Person of the Holy Spirit without which our ministry is hollow and lifeless. It must be an *imitatio Trinitatis*.

B. "...of all nations"

Through Christ, God calls us and the Spirit prepares us, to make disciples of "all nations." There is nothing private or "measured" about the Gospel and its reach. Our relationship with God is meant to be personal- not private. The personal God relates to me so that I can, in turn, relate to others, personally. Through the Spirit of the risen Christ in us the Gospel becomes incarnate, palpable, real. The nature of the call to make disciples is thus as inclusive as it is imperative. All of us are called to be about the great commission in whatever shape that may take for us. And, we are to do so as representatives of the missionary God whose missionary Spirit shows no partiality.²² Hence, a gospel tainted by the evil of racism, classism, or exclusivism on any grounds, to name a few examples, is a foreign gospel promoted by foreign, unholy gods, and we are to have no part in it except to denounce it as the work of an antichrist. The gift of God in Christ, himself the Good News, will not be hoarded, tamed or circumscribed by our will, to our people, our church, or our nation.²³ Always it will irrupt from the most unexpected places speaking truth to power and calling the low and the mighty that grieve the Spirit because they grieve their neighbor- the widow, the poor and the oppressed- to repent and be renewed through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, we are sent by God to "go and make disciples of all nations." Sent by God to inspire (2 Peter 1: 20, 21; Mark 12:35; 1 Cor. 12:12, 13), vivify (Titus 3:5; John 3:5; 7:38), instruct (Nehemiah 9:20; Acts 1:2), amaze (Psalm 139:1-6; Acts 2:12), transform (Genesis 1:2, 3 *et al*; Acts 2:41; 4:32-35), work miracles (Psalm 86:10; John 14:12), bring justice to the nations (Deuteronomy 32:4; Isaiah 52:7-10; Matthew 12:18), the missionary Spirit is always a Spirit on the go.²⁴ But, she is also the ever present, abiding Spirit of God. God expresses this dynamic constancy through the love that is poured in us through the Spirit that gives witness to our Spirit that our God indeed can be trusted. The Spirit abides in us as we dare to move out of our comfort zones to "go" and be the church, the presence of hope amidst the storms that often threaten to kill and maim our resolve.²⁵ It is this ever moving-yet-ever-present Spirit that allows us to "be still," even as we would despair, "and know that I am God."²⁶

III. “Love one another as I have loved you”

Our call is also to unity. Jesus prayed that all who believe in him might be one just as the Father is in Jesus and Jesus is in the Father so that “the world may believe that you have sent me.”²⁷ Already the work of God in Christ makes us one body through the unifying Spirit from which we were all given to drink. Nevertheless, the Spirit of God in us is also the present fulfillment of what is to come to pass fully in the eschatological future. Even so, we are called to live out this eschatological present-future reality in the here and now as a concrete witness to a skeptical world that continually challenges us to *show* them our claim to being “one in the Spirit.” We must take up the challenge with the *gusto* that only the Holy Spirit can inspire.

IV. “Come Holy Spirit”

“Jews or Greeks, slaves or free,” we cannot accomplish any of this without the unifying, empowering, and commissioning agency of the Holy Spirit.²⁸ Only the missionary Spirit of God imbues us with divine pathos for the lost, the hurting, the downtrodden, and the dispossessed. It is this passion as *ruach* that moves us toward the other, the stranger; the one God loves. And, it is in moving toward the other when we experience most fully the love of God. To be filled with the Spirit then, is to be moved.²⁹ The Holy Spirit moves us from seeking meaning to “meaning-making” when, enraptured by God’s compassion for us, we ask not just “What does this all mean?” but, especially “What shall we do?”³⁰ God’s mission is always concrete. The Spirit always goes native.³¹ The Reign of God that is “among” (Luke 17:20, 21) us and yet also at hand (e.g. Mark 1:15) is both a witness to God’s love and a challenge to believers. Through the Spirit, we seek to live out of that new-because-different order³² that manifests itself everyday all over the world through every labor of love that is laid at the feet of the cross to the glory of God. Nothing and no one is insignificant where the Spirit is concerned. Everyday we are called to experience and be those crevices of power that call for the liberation of souls from the bondage of sin that perpetuates suffering against God, humanity and God’s good creation. Indeed, to have the dynamic and energizing Spirit in us is to be challenged and even convicted of the sloth that often permeates our lives, our churches, and our mission. Ought we claim to love God the Holy Spirit if we do not live out that love in the here and now through our call to service, discipleship, and unity? Should we claim to love the Spirit if we do not care to see how we grieve her? While we are not perfect—only God is perfect—we are called to reflect a perfected love for God, for ourselves, others, and for creation through the perfecting Spirit of God in us.

We must leave this essay after the manner of God's "to be continued." The Holy Spirit, God's "to be continued," carries on the divine, dynamic, redemption story in history. As active and grateful participants in the story's unfolding, we rejoice with all the saints, past and present that, with one voice, exclaim(ed) "*we love God, the Holy Spirit!*" even as we also exclaim, "*Come Holy Spirit!*"

End Notes

¹ The Nicene Creed (325) focused on asserting the eternal divinity (consubstantiality) of the Son (especially against the Arians) includes only a brief affirmation of belief in the Holy Spirit. It begins with "We believe" and ends with "And the Holy Spirit." The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381), seeking to combat the teaching of the Macedonians or Pneumatomachians (that denied the divinity of the Spirit), goes further in its affirmation. It includes the following: "We believe. . . . And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son Together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets." See Christian Classics Ethereal Library, "The Nicene Creed," at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds1.iv.iii.html>; accessed June 25, 2012.

² *Pneuma* is neuter in the Greek and *spiritus* in Latin is masculine. I am aware that the feminine form of the noun does not imply gender. According to our scriptures God has no gender. God is Spirit (John 4:24; 2 Cor. 3:17; Phil 3:3) and not a man (Num. 23:19). My use of the feminine article to refer to the Spirit is not apologetical. It is simply my preference here, one based on Biblical precedence. Scripture uses gendered articles, metaphors and analogies to refer to the Persons of the Trinity (Isa. 42:14; 46:3-4; 49:14-15; 66:12-13; Num. 11:2; Luke 13:18-21; Matt. 6:9; 23:37, et al.). The Hebrew tradition, more so than the Christian tradition, seems significantly more at ease using both male and female language for God. For an extensive definition of *ruach*, see Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 3.

³ I refer to the Holy Spirit as the "wild child" of the Trinity as a way of affirming the Spirit's "incapturability"- that is, our own fundamental difficulty at describing and defining the Spirit whose work never ceases to surprise and amaze us. I first refer to and develop the term "wild child" for the Holy Spirit in my section of a chapter on the Holy Spirit that I co-wrote with Loida Martell-Otero and Elizabeth Conde-Frazier in, *Latina Evangelicas: A Theological Survey from the Margins*, published by Cascade Books, 2013.

⁴ The Athanasian Creed also attributes the quality of being "unmeasurable" to each of the Persons of the Trinity. However, I believe Basil's reference here, focused as it is on defining the nature and Person of the Holy Spirit and the difficulties that this poses, was referring to our own inability to measure the unmeasurable.

⁵ I am referring especially to the council of Constantinople (381) where they delineate the Spirit's consubstantiality, co-equality and co-eternality with the Father and the Son against the Pneumatomachi.

⁶ Numbers 23:7, 8 provides a powerful example of God fulfilling God's mission even through those who had other intentions.

⁷ Gregory of Nazianzen, "The Fifth Theological Oration: On the Holy Spirit," 1: 582, in NPNF 2-07, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1994), accessed from <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf207.html> on August 11, 2011. In the words of the Athanasian Creed, "the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, the Holy Ghost is Lord. And, yet [there are] not three lords; but one Lord" accessed from <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds2.iv.i.iv.html> on June 24, 2012. See also Augustine's "Wherefore, if Holy Scripture proclaims that God is love, and that love is of God, and works this in us that we abide in God and He in us, and that hereby we know this, because He has given us of His Spirit, then the Spirit Himself is God, who is love. In *On the Trinity* XV, 19.37 accessed from <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf103.txt>: June 24, 2012.

⁸ Genesis 1:1, 2 and John 1:1.

⁹ I am constrained by space to limit how the Holy Spirit is God for us so that I can focus on how the Spirit is God for others. Christians believe that all of salvation history, from Genesis to Revelation, is God for us, indeed, for all of creation.

¹⁰ The Cape Town Commitment refers to the "missionary Spirit sent by the missionary Father and the missionary Son" see <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/ctcommitment.html#p1-5>. Romans 5:5 refers to the giving of the Spirit to believers and to the pouring of God's love in us through the same Spirit who is love. See also; Luke 11:13; Acts 2:4, 38, 39; 10:44-46; 1 Thessalonians 4:8, 1 Corinthians, 6:19, *et al.*

¹¹ See Orlando Costas, *Liberating News*, 73.

¹² Romans 12:4-10; 1 Corinthians 12:8-11; 1 Peter 4:10; Ephesians 4:11-13; John 14:12 *et al.* Note: we are also called to be Holy (Leviticus 19:2; 20:26; 1 Peter 1:13-16). Thus it is both a work of God and a call.

¹³ Much has been written in this area for which I do not have the space to develop.

¹⁴ Luke 6:40; Matthew 10:24. It is in this *imitatio Christi* that we too, with Christ, reveal the Father (John 14:8,9,12, 13).

¹⁵ This is also referred to as the "social Trinity."

¹⁶ Any tritheistic tendency is measured with the knowledge that the Trinity is three Persons who are One. Focus on an imitation of the Persons is merely to affirm and assert the significance of the revelation of the Godhead that is manifest to us as three.

¹⁷ God exemplifies this for us through the Son. But, already vestiges of a call to learn and imitate God's love for God's children is seen since the creation story. See also I John 4:20-21.

¹⁸ Genesis 4:10. Truly, the blood of the tortured, murdered and dehumanized by those who claimed to come to them in the name of the Christ still cries out to God from the ground. It cries out also from those who are ignored in the name of a private and thus all too comfortable faith.

¹⁹ The Spirit reminds us of the witness of the Son and of our call to glorify the Father.

²⁰ Neither space nor time would suffice to account for the myriad manifestations of the Spirit now and in ages past.

²¹ We are called, with and through the Holy Spirit in us, and in the body of Christ, to find ways to bring life to the lifeless and dispossessed; to create hope where none seems to abound; to see the “other” through the eyes of the One who created her and gave himself for her; to find ways to renew, challenge, speak the truth in love.

²² Deuteronomy 10: 17, 18; Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11; John 3:16; Galatians 3:14; 2 Peter 3:9 *et al.*

²³ The church fathers fought against gnostic tendencies in the church that discriminated between the privileged few who perceived they had the true “gnosis” or knowledge (the truly “spiritual”) and those who did not possess this spiritual “spark.”

²⁴ In the scriptures, the Holy Spirit is constantly sent by God to accomplish the divine will.

²⁵ For instance, scripture reminds us that the Spirit was with Jesus in the desert as he was being tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:11).

²⁶ Psalm 46:10

²⁷ John 17:20, 21

²⁸ 1 Corinthians 12:1-27

²⁹ Abraham Joshua Heschel puts it beautifully when he says “emotion is inseparable from being filled with the spirit, which is above all a state of being moved” (*The Prophets*, Vol II, p. 96).

³⁰ Acts 1:12; 2:37, 38, *et al.*

³¹ The Spirit always goes native. For more on this and our call to model a Spirit gone native see my section of the chapter on the Holy Spirit co-written with Loida Martell-Otero and Elizabeth Conde-Frazier in *Latina Evangélicas: A Theological Survey from the Margins*, scheduled for publication by Cascade Books Nov. 2012.

³² For more on the nature of the Reign of God see González, Justo L. and Zaida Maldonado Pérez, *An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002) 144-152.