

THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH
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Central United Methodist Church
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(John 16:12-15) "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. {13} When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. {14} He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. {15} All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

IT'S A CONFUSING WORLD

Did you know that Dihydrogen Monoxide can kill you? Dihydrogen Monoxide or DHMO as it is commonly called is:

- A major component of acid rain
- A major Contributor to the greenhouse effect
- A leading cause of severe burns
- Fatal if inhaled
- Major contributor to the erosion of our natural landscape
- Corrosive and will rust many metals
- The cause of many electrical failures and can decrease the effectiveness of automobile brakes
- Often found in the excised tumors of terminal cancer patients

Despite this danger, Dihydrogen monoxide is often used:

- As an industrial solvent and coolant
 - In nuclear power plants
 - In the production of Styrofoam
- As a fire retardant
- In the distribution of pesticides. Even after washing, produce remains contaminated by this chemical
- As an additive in certain junk-foods and other food products

So what is this extremely dangerous chemical? Does anyone know? Dihydrogen Monoxide is just another name for WATER! Yes, that's right. It's nothing but plain old H₂O. Fear of this substance has been used as a hoax to scare people since 1989 when several students at UC Santa Cruz distributed a Dihydrogen Monoxide contamination warning on the campus via photocopied fliers. In 1994, Craig Jackson created a web page for the coalition to ban DHMO. Many other hoaxes have cropped up over the years.

We live in a strange and complicated world where it's hard to know what's true and what's not. More disconcerting is the fact that we are easily duped and fooled by scaremongers and tricksters. The disciples had similar concerns. They were getting ready to go into the world without the physical presence of Jesus. For three years, whenever they needed an answer or wanted the true story, they only had to turn to Jesus and ask. As Jesus prepares to leave them for the last time, they are concerned. How will they tell the difference between fact and fiction? How will they decipher their surroundings in order to know the truth?

In order to calm the disciples, Jesus tells them that he is leaving a part of himself with them. He's leaving the Spirit of truth that will guide and inform them into the future. This episode with Jesus and the disciples was important to the first century church. At the time of the writing of the fourth Gospel, the church is beleaguered and struggling. Jesus hasn't been en fleshed among His people for almost seventy years. The church is still in its infancy. Christianity is more of a Sunday school class within the Jewish Synagogue at this point. There's a lot of tension between the Jews and this young Christian group. What are they supposed to do? The lonely church must learn to lean on the Spirit as a guide.

TRUTH

What was true in the first century is still true today. We must continue to rely on the Spirit of truth to inform the church's ministry and mission.

As we know, though, this is easier said than done. Some things are clear. It's easy to know what Jesus is thinking on certain subjects:

- ***“Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so.”***
- ***“Go make Disciples.”***
- ***“Feed the hungry or heal the sick.”***
- ***“Love your neighbor as you love yourself.”***

These commands are pretty clear and straightforward. There are other subjects that Jesus (or the Spirit of truth) has no clear answer.

- What color should we paint the sanctuary?
- Should I have decaffeinated or caffeinated coffee this morning?
- Should I buy a Chevrolet, Ford, Honda or Toyota?
- Does God want me to take this new job or should I stay where I am?
- Should the United States continue to drill for oil in the Gulf Coast?

If God does weigh in on these kind of decisions (which I believe is up for debate), it doesn't always come across loud and clear.

Even our sacred sources seem to disagree with themselves. John says, ***“Those who believe in him (Jesus) are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already” (John 3:18)***. Then Paul comes along in Ephesians and says God has a plan ***“for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him (Jesus)” (Ephesians 1:9)***. So, which is it? If you do not become a Christian are you condemned or does God ultimately plan to save all people, as Paul seems to suggest. Maybe these Scriptures are up for interpretation. Whose interpretation is correct?

There are things in the past that the church assumed were correct that are under scrutiny. In some congregations to this very day, women are not allowed leadership roles. The United Methodist Church, the first American Protestant denomination to do so, approved full ordination

and clergy rights for women in 1956. This certainly went against the common thought of the day. Today, somewhere between 20-30% of United Methodist clergy are women. For years the church supported slavery and for much longer segregation. The Spirit of truth whispered into the ears of our church leaders and we slowly began to realize that we were wrong.

The church will continue to deal with many other difficult issues in the 21st century as the Spirit of truth continues to open our eyes and hearts to the love of Christ. New circumstances and issues become the Q-tips that clean our ears and prepare us to receive fresh truth.

CONTINUING EDUCATION

It's as if Jesus knew we couldn't handle all the truth at once so it becomes a process. You might call it continuing education for the Christian. Taylor (our Daughter) will be a sophomore at UNCG this fall. For those of you who don't know, sophomore means "*wise fool*." The designation, whether it's fair or not, names the one who knows just enough to be dangerous, the one who, having learned a great deal as a freshman, now thinks he or she knows everything.

I would suggest that most Christians are sophomore Christians. We know just enough to be dangerous. This is the reason I give a sideways glance to anyone who thinks they have most or all of the answers. Being a disciple—a follower of Jesus Christ—is an ongoing process. It lasts for a lifetime. It never ends and as desperate as some seem to be to get the answers, we never will.

Christianity is a revealed or revealing religion. There's a reason Jesus followers were called "*The Way*." We are on our way with Jesus. Following Jesus is not a onetime competency test that qualifies you for all things. There are some notions that we carry around for a long time but the Spirit of truth sometimes challenges those notions and brings about change. Some people call this being wishy washy. I call it

following Jesus. The Spirit is like a teacher that pushes us to new places that we would not have gone if it had been left solely up to us.

I love the story told about George Buttrick, a well-known preacher of the 20th century. Buttrick was in his seat on an airplane working intently on a yellow note pad. The man sitting next to him interrupted him and said, ***“Excuse me, I hate to bother you, but you seem to be working very diligently on something. May I ask what it is?”***

Certainly, I am a Presbyterian minister and I am working on my Sunday Sermon.”

“Oh, religion,” the man observed. ***“I don’t like to get all caught up in the ins and outs of religion. ‘DO UNTO OTHERS AS YOU WOULD HAVE THEM DO UNTO YOU.’ The Golden Rule: that’s my religion.”***

“And what,” said Buttrick, ***“do you do sir?”***

“I work at the university,” he said. ***“I am an astronomer.”***

“Oh,” said Buttrick, ***“astronomy. I don’t like to get caught up in the ins and outs of astronomy. ‘TWINKLE, TWINKLE LITTLE STAR:’ that’s my astronomy.”***¹

His point was well made. God gave us a head for something other than a hat rack. The mind is one of God’s great gifts. The ability to think, discern, analyze, reason, and conclude is something no other animal has. God gave us a mind. I think he meant for us to use it.

Honestly, this is what I love about United Methodists. I often tell people we are the thinking person’s church. While Scripture is our benchmark, we also think that it is informed by tradition, reason and experience.

¹Clayton J. Schmit, *“A Guide for the Truth,”* Pulpit Resource, June 3, 2007, 48.

Sometimes after years of Christian conferencing and debate, the four seem to come together in agreement. At this point, we assume the Spirit has spoken. This prevents the erroneous error of listening to only one voice which might not be the voice of the spirit.

DR. SPIRIT

The Spirit is one of most demanding, difficult, blessed, revealing, wonderful gifts God has ever given us. The spirit was a gift to all of us from Jesus. But that doesn't mean we don't test the Spirit. In one of his letters to the churches, he helped to establish, Paul speaks about the need to "*test the Spirit.*" Even Paul knew that there could be good and bad spirits. We are easily misled so we must be careful.

We live in a time when church attendance is down but interest in spiritual things is on an upswing. People are reading all kinds of Spiritual self-help books, sitting with spiritual directors and exploring the depths of spirituality as never before. I think it is a good thing but we must be careful because the spirit doesn't necessarily lead us toward theology, doctrine denomination or congregation. The Spirit's one purpose is to lead us to a living, loving relationship with Jesus Christ. There is only one Truth with a capital "T" and that is Jesus. Jesus is the Absolute Truth. Jesus is the Unshakeable Truth. Jesus is the Eternal Truth. We need to be careful that we are being led to Jesus and not some personal thought or agenda.

JESUS TODAY

I think these are incredible times to be a follower of Jesus Christ. If the church and its people can get their heads and hearts in the right place, we can impact our communities and the world in incredible ways. If we will listen, the Spirit is guiding, maybe even pleading with us, to be Jesus incarnate in the world.

And maybe the truth is simpler than we realize. In his novel, *The clowns of God*, Morris West portrays the return of Christ who holds a Down's

syndrome child. As he holds the child, he serves her the bread and wine of communion saying, ***“I gave this mite a gift I denied to all of you— eternal innocence. She will never offend me as all of you have done. She will never pervert or destroy the works of my Father hands. She is necessary to you. She will evoke the kindness that will keep you human. She will remind you every day that ‘I AM WHO I AM.’”***²

The Spirit of truth is a gift from our Savior. Let us not deny its power for it will lead us to God Truth in Jesus Christ.

²As quoted in Homiletics (June 1998), 47. Morris West, *The Clowns of God* (Israel: Toby Press, 2003).