

The Spirit-Paraclete as Jesus' alter ego in the Fourth Gospel (John 14–16)

V. George Shillington

The word *Paraclete* is now used by many Christians, who seem to consider it just another name or title for the Holy Spirit. But the English term *Paraclete* is drawn directly from the Greek word *paraklētos*, and translators of the Gospel of John, where it is found, render it with a variety of English words, including “Comforter” (KJV/ASV), “Helper” (NASB/GNT), “Advocate” (NIV/NRSV), and “Friend” (The Message).

The basic sense of the word is “one called alongside.” The fuller meaning is determined by context. And what is that context? This special title for the Spirit occurs only in the Fourth Gospel (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7) and in 1 John (2:1)—nowhere else in the New Testament. In order to understand the word, then,

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we must examine the community in which it had currency, the community that produced the Johannine writings.

The focus in this article will be on the Farewell Discourses in John 14–16, in which the Spirit-Paraclete sayings come to light. As it is used in these three chapters, the word *Paraclete* is wrapped in mystery. Ernst Haenchen observes astutely that it “remains ambiguous

and perpetually disputed.”¹ Even so, rereading the relevant passages against the historical and theological backdrop of the Gospel of John can be fruitful for us, personally and communally.

In what follows we will explore the role of the Spirit-Paraclete as Jesus' alter ego, empowering a faltering community in a hostile environment some sixty years after Jesus' earthly life. After a brief overview of the situation in the life of the community, inferred from reading the Fourth Gospel and the three Epistles, I will focus on the five sayings about the Spirit-Paraclete, found in John 14:15–17; 14:26; 15:26–27; 16:7–11; 16:13–15.

A community of Jesus threatened with extinction

Jesus of Nazareth created a community of disciples around himself for the proclamation and performance of the kingdom of God in Palestine. After Easter the surviving community of first disciples attracted new members and branched out to various centres around the Mediterranean basin. Jesus was no longer with them in the flesh, but the memory of his word and work continued, merging judiciously with the social and cultural mores in locations where the Jesus-groups settled: Galilee, Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, Philippi, Rome, etc.

Over time, each group in its particular location developed its own faith identity in relation to Jesus the Christ, crucified and raised. Such identity formation included theological vocabulary, patterns of thought, forms of worship, and moral convictions. In

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the process, the community faced challenges from the outside and also from within. In particular, this brings us to what is sometimes called the Johannine community. A history of this community is described in Raymond Brown's classic work, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*.²

The geographical site of the Johannine community cannot be determined with certainty. Nor does the physical geography matter for the interpretation of the sayings

about the Paraclete. What does matter, however, is the sociopolitical location of the thought and life embedded in the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles. While the narrative material in the Gospel about Jesus and his disciples is important, of equal importance is the life of the community from which and for which the Fourth Gospel was written.

Scholars generally agree that the Gospel was written around 90 CE, and the Epistles five to ten years later.³ That dating puts the community some sixty years beyond the earthly ministry of Jesus, in a very different situation in life. The narratives and discourses in the Gospel of John about Jesus and his disciples effectively instruct the Johannine community about how to live in its environment more than half a century after Jesus had departed his earthly life.

Some of the tensions the community faced can be detected in the Fourth Gospel and the Epistles. “The world” in John consists of all those who do not believe in Jesus as Son of God and Saviour. The unbelievers include both Jewish and non-Jewish people. Some of the harshest statements in the New Testament against Jewish leaders appear in the Gospel of John not merely because the Jewish leaders opposed Jesus but also because the Jewish synagogue leaders of the time of the Johannine community cast aspersions on the Jesus group who speak of a Messiah no longer visible. So Jesus in John lashes out at his fellow Jewish leaders with such words as these: “You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him” (John 8:44; NRSV). The Johannine community is equally challenged by neighbouring Jewish critics, and equally offended by their taunts: Where is this Jesus-Messiah you talk about? How is your invisible Messiah helping you live the good

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life God promised his people? Imagine especially how the Jewish believers in the community would be offended by the criticism, tempted even to defect to their former life in the synagogue.

Accusations would have come from non-Jewish sources as well. The Johannine community, with its roots in Jewish faith, would not participate in the local cults or the imperial cult, both of which they regarded as idolatrous. A minority group with bold

exclusivist convictions, the Johannine community would have been called to account for their refusal to join their neighbours in their worship. As such, the little community could easily feel orphaned, leaderless, and helpless. Hence the stalwart encouragement in the Farewell Discourses about the Spirit-Paraclete who stands in for Jesus to help and defend the struggling community, as the earthly Jesus had done for his disciples decades earlier.

But there were also internal struggles. As the group developed its self-identity in relation to Jesus of Nazareth, some members were drawn to a more spiritual understanding of the Christ. This pattern of belief is broadly called Gnosticism, namely, that

knowledge of God and salvation is spiritual in nature. James Robinson thus points to two trajectories traceable throughout early Christianity, one from Easter to Valentinus—a Gnostic believer in Christ—and another from Easter to the Apostles Creed.⁴ It is noteworthy that the Gnostic theologian Valentinus (100–160 CE), was the first to comment on the Gospel of John. By contrast, the larger branch of the church that led to the Apostles Creed was slow to acknowledge the authority of the Fourth Gospel, with its heavy emphasis on spiritual birth and spiritual knowledge. By the time the Johannine Epistles were written, some members of the community had already seceded, no longer willing to confess “that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (1 John 4:2–3; 2 John 7–8). The Gospel of John, especially in the

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Farewell Discourses, aims at keeping the community connected with Jesus of history through the power of the Spirit-Paraclete, Jesus’ other self.

It remains to be seen to what extent the sayings about the Paraclete confirm this view.

The multiple roles of the Spirit-Paraclete

A recurring theme in the Farewell Discourses especially is that of Jesus going away and coming back. The disciples do not under-

stand where he is going, and they tell Jesus so. His replies offer encouragement: his departure from them paves the way for his return to them with more expansive energy for their work in the larger world.

“You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I.” (14:28)

“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.” (14:18)

“It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate (paraklētos) will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.” (16:7)

In John there is little mention of a future apocalyptic return of Jesus to rescue his own from the judgment to fall on the world. Instead, Jesus comes back to his own in the form of the Spirit-Paraclete, enabling them to face the trials of life through which they must surely pass, as Jesus did during his lifetime.

One can imagine that the Johannine community would feel orphaned. Jesus as he was in the flesh was no longer with them. He was not forgotten in the mind of the community. Leaders, such as the Fourth Evangelist, saw to it that the memory would not vanish: Jesus was the revelation of the true God in the flesh. Yet he was not present in that form in the community living at the end of the first century, surrounded as it was by antagonistic powers. The five Paraclete sayings address the situation, assuring the members that Jesus is not a mere memory but a real presence for the performance of faith in the midst of adversity.

Another Paraclete (14:15–17)

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments, and I will ask the Father and he will give you another Paraclete, so that he may be with you for all time. That one is the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot receive, because it neither understands him nor knows him. You know him, because he remains with you and will be in you.”⁵

William Domeris has observed that “the most striking aspect of this passage is the mention of ‘another paraclete.’”⁶ The implication is that there was one before, and that one was Jesus. What Jesus was in thought, word, and deed is precisely what the “other Paraclete” will be in Jesus’ stead. Jesus “had been with them for a short time, but the ‘other paraclete,’ his *alter ego*, would be with them permanently, and not only with them but in them.”⁷

There are two words in Greek for “another.” One, *heteros*, signifies another of a different kind, while the other, *allos*, signifies another of the same kind (compare Gal. 1:6–7). The latter is the case in this saying. The Paraclete carries forward the commandments and the Spirit of truth found uniquely in Jesus. The community now owns Jesus’ commandments along with his Spirit-power to obey them.

The Paraclete as teacher (14:26)

“But the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, that one will teach you all things and will cause you to remember all things that I have spoken to you.”

Two points stand out in this saying: the Paraclete will teach the community and will bring to mind the word of Jesus. The role of the Paraclete, as the Holy Spirit of Jesus, is not merely to teach the members how to think and live in the moment; the Spirit will also remind them of the word of Jesus spoken many years before. There is no hint here or elsewhere in John that Jesus of history can be set aside under the influence of the Spirit. On the contrary, the two are bound together integrally. The word of Jesus from the past is spoken afresh in the new situation under the influence and guidance of the Paraclete.

The Paraclete as witness to Jesus (15:26–27)

“Whenever the Paraclete comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth that comes from the Father, that one will bear witness concerning me, and you also are bearing witness [at the same time], because you are with me from the beginning.”

In this saying Jesus does the sending, although the source of the Paraclete, as also Jesus, is the Father. The role of the Paraclete in

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this instance is that of a defense attorney in a courtroom, one who takes up the case in behalf of a defendant. He gives testimony concerning Jesus. The Greek word for “witness” is *martyr*. The witness to Jesus may not persuade the earthly judge, and thus the defendant may suffer martyrdom. Even so, the Paraclete bears witness to the truth in the face of death. But the Paraclete does not bear witness so that the members of the commu-

nity may not do so. Both the Paraclete and the members give testimony in one voice, not ever denying knowledge of Jesus, who gave his life for the members.

The Paraclete as judge (16:7–8)

“It is better for you that I go away. For if I do not go away, the Paraclete will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And coming thus he will pass sentence on the world concerning sin and justice and judgment.”

Again, Jesus is the one sending the Paraclete in his place. With this saying the community can take heart that the case is not stacked against them. One or another of the members may have been called to account, either in the court of the synagogue or in a tribunal of Rome. In either setting, the issue had to do with their confession of Jesus as the Messiah of God. The Paraclete-Judge will reprove the world concerning sin (that is, injustice), concerning the just cause of Jesus, and concerning judgment for wrongdoing. Presumably the Paraclete does not function as judge independently of the members of the community. He is with them and in them. The action of the Spirit-Paraclete in the world corresponds integrally with the action of the community. Speaking for the currency of this saying, and the others, for the present time, René Girard avers, Jesus “himself becomes our Paraclete . . . who will work ceaselessly within the world to bring the truth to light there too.”⁸

The Paraclete as spokesperson (16:13–15)

“Whenever that one comes, the Spirit of truth, he will lead you in the whole truth. For he will not speak from himself, but whatever he hears he will speak, and will communicate to you the things to come. That one will glorify me, because he will receive from me and communicate the same to you. Whatever things the Father has are mine. On this account I said that he will receive from me and communicate the same to you.”

While the title *Paraclete* is not present in this saying, it is evident that the same concept is at play. The Spirit of truth is personified as “one called alongside” the community of believers in Jesus to communicate the will and word and work of Jesus to the faithful members. They will be granted insight concerning things to come,

presumably so that they will not be caught unawares. What is especially poignant in this saying is the dynamic integrity and interaction between the Father, Jesus, the Paraclete, and the community in bringing the truth and glory of God to bear in community life and in the world. Members of the community do not speak out of their own human spirit-mind but only as the Spirit of truth instructs. However hard it is to grasp this dynamism, it is worth pondering deeply for ongoing Christian community life in the world.

Conclusion

In his commentary on the Fourth Gospel, Calvin states: "If it is asked whether we today are not still under the patronage of Christ (*sub Christi clientela*), the answer is easy. Christ is a continual Patron, but not in a visible manner. While He dwelt in the world, He openly manifested Himself as the Patron. Now He guards us by His Spirit."⁹ The leap from the narrative world of the Fourth Gospel, set in the first third of the first century, to the present moment is a common occurrence among Christians: John Calvin in his time, and we in ours. As the above discussion illustrates, I

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find it instructive to keep clearly in mind the origin of the Fourth Gospel in a community living at the end of first century. The Gospel was written to assure the community, many years removed from Jesus and in a hostile environment, that it was not orphaned. The gift of the Spirit-Paraclete brought Jesus to life in the thought and activity of the threatened community. No doubt the Johannine community had its rituals and pattern of speech, as all religious communities do, but the real presence of Jesus in life and thought springs not from human constructs, linguistic or otherwise, but from the initiative of the risen Christ in the presence of Father-God.

The Spirit-Paraclete is sent, not summoned. The reality of the Spirit of Jesus is a gift to the Christian community to shape identity and empower faithful witness in the world.

Notes

¹ Ernst Haenchen, *John: A Commentary on the Gospel of John*, vol. 2, trans. Robert W. Funk, Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 126.

² Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

³ *Ibid.*, 59–138.

⁴ James M. Robinson. “Jesus from Easter to Valentinus (or to the Apostles’ Creed),” in *Jesus: According to the Earliest Witness* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 27–63.

⁵ The translation of the sayings is mine.

⁶ William Domeris, “The Paraclete as an Ideological Construct: A Study in the Farewell Discourses,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 67 (1989): 21.

⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 302; see also Raymond E. Brown, “The Paraclete in the Fourth Gospel,” *New Testament Studies* 13, no. 2 (1967): 113–32.

⁸ René Girard, “History and the Paraclete,” *Ecumenical Review* 35, no. 1 (1983): 11.

⁹ John Calvin, *The Gospel according to St John: 11–21 and The First Epistle of John*, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 82.

About the author

V. George Shillington is professor emeritus of biblical and theological studies at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba.