Called Alongside: The Paraclete’s Roles in Discipleship

By Deborah M. Gill

What is the role of the Holy Spirit in discipleship? What is His heritage among us? How should the Holy Spirit shape our future?

The biblical term Paraclete is rich in imagery. Each modern version has its preferred English translation. When Paraclete is used of the Holy Spirit, the KJV renders it “Helper”; the NASB, “Comforter”; the RSV and NIV, “Counselor”; and the Message, “Friend.”

References to Jesus as Paraclete are rendered “Mediator,” “Advocate,” and “Intercessor.” Yet, “no single word can provide an adequate rendering.”

Understanding Paraclete as “legal advocate” or “encourager” is too restrictive, and “helper” is too generic. To complement our understanding of the noun, insights from its related verb are illuminating. Real treasure is found in what our Paraclete is called alongside to do — the kind of assistance the Holy Spirit offers the Lord’s disciples.

Presence

The most common use of the verb parakaleo is “to ask to come and be present where the speaker is, to call to one’s side,” that is, “to summon to one’s aid, to call upon for help.” Thus, Paraclete identifies “one who appears in another’s behalf, who is called to one’s aid; an assistant, supporter, or helper.” Jesus unpacked the significance of this important role of the Holy Spirit in discipleship during His farewell discourse prior to the Last Supper.

Discipleship is first and foremost about being with Jesus (Mark 3:14, 15). Personal
relationship was primary in Jesus' method of spiritual formation. He kept constant company with those He called. But in the Upper Room, Jesus broke the news to His closest friends that He would be leaving them (John 13:1,33). How could this be? How could they carry on without Him? The disciples were troubled, confused, and fearful (John 14:1-18).

Anticipating their loneliness, Jesus shared this promise: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another [Paraclete] to be with you forever — the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you

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know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:16-18, Paraclete transliterated from the Greek).

Jesus was not leaving them alone; He was leaving someone with them. Someone they already knew — who lived within them. “Another” (just like Jesus) — would be called alongside them. Their Master was passing the baton from one Paraclete (compare 1 John 2:1) to another — from the Word Incarnate to the Spirit of Truth.

Though no one had ever seen God, Jesus made Him known (John 1:18). Jesus was the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15); the Word made flesh, who dwelled among us (John 1:14). What Jesus had begun, the Holy Spirit would continue. “The Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me” (John 15:26).

The first Paraclete made God human; the second made Him spirit. Both came from the Father for this essential aspect of discipleship — to be with the disciples. And since the Holy Spirit could be with the disciples, inside of the disciples, every one of them at the same time — forever, it was best that Jesus went away. For in this way Jesus comes to us again: through the person of the Paraclete (John 14:16-18; 16:7).

The first and foremost role of the Holy Spirit in discipleship is as our Divine Companion, keeping us close to Jesus in our walk with Him and our journey to Christlikeness.

People of the Presence have a precious heritage. The companionship of the Paraclete makes possible the experiential dimension of the Christian life. God's nearness infuses every aspect of New Testament discipleship: inspiring evangelism, anointing ministry, authenticating community, deepening formation, heightening worship, and empowering the supernatural. Ever since the birth of the Church, the Paraclete has been making Jesus intimate to His followers.

If we hunger to experience God's glory — the manifest presence of God — we will court the companionship of the Paraclete.

The remaining work of the Paraclete in its role in discipleship can be described as two alternate aspects of His relationship as Companion. As only an intimate ally can, the Paraclete brings to bear all the authority we have granted Him to help us conform to the image of Christ and cooperate in the Great Commission. At times, He asserts control forcefully — with the same urgency as a cautionary sign by the highway: ATTENTION — BRIDGE OUT; WRONG WAY — DO NOT ENTER; CONSTRUCTION ZONE — FINES DOUBLE; or LANE ENDS — MERGE. At other times, His influence is gentle. His whispers are more like road signs giving important information (Last Exit Before Tollway); directional clues (I-35 Exits Left); input for our comfort (Next Rest Area 34 Miles); tips to decrease our stress (Diamond Lane Ahead); or ideas to enrich our experience (Scenic Overlook).
their personal lives, the spiritual disciplines, and the gifts of the Spirit.

Those who had an identifiable charismatic experience scored highest in positive changes in their personal life, testifying of an infusing of their spiritual life with a meaningful experience with God, an increase in their church involvement, and a significant increase in their giving of time and money. Those who spoke in tongues with their initial charismatic experience led in 6 of the 9 spiritual disciplines identified. And “those who received glossolalia at the time of their charismatic experience were highest in the ‘supernatural’ charisms such as prophecy, interpretation of tongues, knowledge, wisdom and miracles.” Reed summarizes his findings as follows: The decisive factor in the personal changes and the motivation for service is the charismatic experience. The more definite the experience (a crisis experience accompanied by glossolalia or another charism) the greater the personal change, motivation and commitment.9

People full of the Spirit, who live and walk in the Spirit, display the fruit of the Spirit, and live lives controlled by the Spirit (Acts 6:5; 7:55; 11:24; Galatians 5:16–25; Romans 8:8–14).

ENCOURAGEMENT

The final uses of the verb parakaleo include the Paraclete’s more gentle roles. They are: “to be friendly to or speak to in a friendly manner”; “to treat someone in an inviting or congenial manner”; and “to instill someone with courage or cheer.”10 The corresponding meanings of the noun parakletos that describe the outcome or effect of these kinds of action are “comfort, encouragement, and address.”11

Disciples who value the divine companionship of the Paraclete, and align themselves with His directives as managing partner, become the intimate understudies of their own spiritual director. As One who fathoms the deep things of God, the Spirit invites the Lord’s disciples to join Him as guide on the adventure of discovering His directives (1 Corinthians 2:9–16; John 16:13–15). His anointing welcomes Christ’s followers into a realm of revelation (1 John 2:20,27), encourages union in utterance (Acts 2:4), and offers empowerment in the supernatural to do the greater things Jesus promised (John 14:12).

By making room for the Holy Spirit and giving careful attention to His desires, we can learn the spiritual disciplines of spaciousness and attentiveness. Our spiritual director coaches us to create space: on our calendars as well as in the Sunday service schedule, in our budgets, and in our emotional and physical reserves. By narrowing our focus we can increase our margin, but He wants the middle. He desires that the prime real estate of our lives belongs to Jesus. The Paraclete teaches us attentiveness by helping us practice heightened focus on and sensitivity to Jesus, His desires, and His purposes. Lavishing undivided attention and resisting distraction or multitasking to be fully present is a gift of singular value — a high form of worship. The sacrifice required to learn the spiritual disciplines of spaciousness and attentiveness results in the radical transformation of a disciple from the inside out.

The intensity with which the Paraclete exercises authority varies, as He deems appropriate. The Holy Spirit is aware of many things that we are not: the gravity of a situation, the urgency of a need, the potential of an opportunity, and the duration of a divine moment. But the alternation from His forceful exercise of authority to more gentle influence is not arbitrary, but progressive.

The more we cooperate with the Holy Spirit, the more intimate our relationship and the more satisfying His role becomes. The more we mature in our discipleship, the more we grow to recognize the Paraclete’s love and regard for us.

CONCLUSION

The Holy Spirit’s role in discipleship is rich and varied — just as the many translations of His title, Paraclete, would suggest. Instead of settling for a single word to capture the various kinds of assistance the Holy Spirit provides us, it is illuminating to compare the verb from which His title comes. The common Greek word, parakaleo, helps us to appreciate more fully the
Holy Spirit’s role as divine companion, managing partner, and spiritual director.

The Paraclete is God’s agent of the experiential dimension of the Christian life. His role as divine companion can make us people of the Presence. May we always reverence His person, be careful not to quench or grieve the Holy Spirit, but to welcome and work with Him, both in our personal lives and in the church.

In His role as managing partner, the Paraclete persists in strongly urging us to please the Lord. Building on His trusted relationship as our closest companion, the Paraclete turns His focus to spiritual formation, determined to direct us as disciples to become ever more like Jesus and to reproduce the Christ-life in others. As initial physical evidence accompanies baptism in the Holy Spirit, Spirit-controlled living evidences life in the Spirit.

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God has designed things for His disciples that are beyond human comprehension. Known only to the Holy Spirit, who searches them out, the Paraclete guides us on the adventure to discover them. Having received the Spirit of Truth, we can understand what God has freely given us; we can express spiritual truths with spiritual words; and we can have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:9–16). But our spiritual director is not content that our message and ministry be characterized merely by wise and persuasive words. New Testament discipleship demands demonstration of the Spirit’s power.

The character of our precious Paraclete is to hide behind the Lord Jesus Christ. As Jesus explained, the Holy Spirit would never speak of or represent himself (John 16:13). “He always comes in the name of and representing another.”12 Though He never calls attention to himself; I want to call attention to Him today, and to express great appreciation to the Father and to the Son for sending us this precious Partner.


Maybe in your ministry you have had several important times: your first decade in ministry; the second decade; or maybe the first community you lived in; the first church you served; the second? Maybe you did well. But in the end, when the record is written, none of that matters as much as how you finish the race.

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ENDNOTES
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 183.
9. Ibid., 192.
10. BDAG; Liddell and Scott, s.v.
11. Ibid.