

THE COMFORTER --- SPEAKING FIGURATIVELY THAT IS!

In John chapter 10 Jesus uses a familiar, everyday parable to describe himself and his mission. He likens himself to a good shepherd who loves his sheep and protects them at all costs. The sheep know and hear the voice of their shepherd but will not follow the voice of a stranger. Jesus says, "I am the door of the sheep, if anyone enters through me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture" (v.10). All others who try to get into the sheepfold are strangers with malicious intent towards the sheep.

Reading this parable today is no problem for the modern post Bible-times reader. We understand Jesus is not a literal door, nor even a shepherd of literal sheep, but that he was using "a figure of speech" (v. 6). The Greek word here [*Paroimia*] means just that ... a figure of speech, an allegory or a proverb.

So let's not miss John's comment that at the time of speaking figuratively, "they did not understand what those things were which he had been saying to them" (v.6). Jesus was not speaking literally. We instinctively know this. Nevertheless the text spells it out with a clear statement that Jesus was using figurative language. That is, he was speaking metaphorically, in which a term or phrase is applied to something it represents. An allegory according the dictionary is "a figurative treatment of one subject under the guise of another; a presentation of an abstract or spiritual meaning under concrete or material forms. (1.) So obvious we think! We wonder at the naivety of Jesus' audience.

However, before we get too smug in our well-rehearsed and comfortable theological comfort zones, let's see if we ourselves in the Church today are not just as gullible and naïve in the very same manner. Is it possible we take Jesus' words on another occasion to be literal, rather than figurative?

Just a few chapters on (John chapters 14-16), Jesus gives a rather lengthy discourse on his impending physical departure from the company of his disciples. He is soon physically leaving them. But Jesus will not leave the disciples like orphans. He "will pray to the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever" (John 14: 16).

Recent "orthodox" Christianity has understood this "other Comforter" to be the Holy Spirit Who is the "co-equal and co-eternal third Person of the Triune Godhead." It's not hard to see how this conclusion is reached on a surface reading, and also given the centuries of entrenched dogma pushing it along in Church creeds since the Council of Chalcedon officially mandated belief in God the Spirit as the Third Person in the Trinity in 451 A.D.

An important support-argument for taking the Comforter (*Parakletos*) to be a real and literal God-the-Spirit-Person is found in the use of the masculine personal pronoun 'he'. Continuing his discourse Jesus says, "But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth which proceeds from the Father, he shall testify of me" (John 15:26).

This use of masculine personal pronouns for a neuter 'spirit' (*pneuma*), is even more striking in John 16:13. Here Jesus is still continuing the same discourse about leaving his disciples. He says, "But when he, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth". Here the neuter "spirit" stands in direct connection with the masculine pronoun, "he" (*ekeinos*). Surely then, the Comforter, is a Person, so the argument runs, otherwise why would Jesus call the Spirit "he"?

The reasoning then, is that when Jesus calls the Comforter "the Spirit of Truth" all rules of Greek grammar are suspended because the neuter word "spirit" is given a masculine pronoun. Thus, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, can be none other than God the Spirit, Third Person in the Godhead! Lay down misere!

Is this conclusion justified? It certainly is for many renowned Biblical exegetes. But --- "Not so fast!" We must always keep "the big picture" before us otherwise as the proverb runs, we shall miss the forest for the trees. Overall context is crucial.

Remember Jesus is telling the disciples he is physically leaving them soon. They will see him no more. They cannot come where he is going. Nevertheless they should not worry because "another Comforter" is being sent, "the Spirit of Truth" and when "he" comes, "I will come to you" (John 14:18) in the form of the helping Spirit. Note carefully there is an obvious interchange in Jesus' speech between the Spirit and the Comforter and Himself... "When the Helper comes ...that is

the Spirit of truth ...I will come to you ... for “he” proceeds from the Father.

Now here’s the question: Could it just be possible that when Jesus speaks of the Comforter who is the Spirit of truth that he is not speaking literally, not speaking about a separate Individual, a Real Person? Could Jesus be employing the well-documented use of Hebrew personification? Could Jesus be using metaphorical language that we, like his contemporaries, misunderstand as being literal? We already know Jesus is not a literal door, nor a shepherd of a literal flock of sheep (John 10: 6). We already know his common practice was to use *paroimias*, that is, figures of speech to teach profound spiritual truths.

Is the Comforter, the Helper, the Spirit of Truth actually a personification for Jesus Himself in a new ministry role? Could Jesus be telling his disciples that they are not to worry, because although he is physically leaving them, he himself will continue to be with them, albeit in a new and different expression of himself? Could it be the disciples are soon to experience the glory of their risen Lord? Till now they have known him in his humility and rejection. Soon they will know the power of his resurrection. Remember, Jesus knows he is about to ascend to the Right Hand of God on High. Jesus knows the Divine oracle that the LORD God is about to make him “sit at My Right Hand until I make your enemies your footstool” (Ps. 110: 1).

So, is Jesus announcing to his disciples that the Comforter is really another Divine Person, God the Spirit and the Third

Member of the Trinity according to the “Catholic creeds”, or is he simply assuring the disciples that he himself will be exercising a new role, a new ministry of truth in power on their behalf? There is sound evidence to contend for the second option. And my contention is based on the clear explanation of Jesus himself!

Concerning his discourse on the “Comforter”, Jesus plainly says, “These things I have spoken to you in figures of speech ... (*paroimiais*) (John 16:25)! Jesus comes right out and says the speech concerning the Comforter, the Spirit of truth, the “he” whom he will send from the Father, is a figure of speech, a metaphor, or an allegory. It’s as plainly stated as the nose in front of our Bible! The Comforter is a figure of speech, an allegory that teaches us a deep spiritual lesson under the guise of a concrete form! Jesus says so!

If this is true, we should expect to see confirmation in clear non-allegorical verses. And surprise, surprise, surprise (for those of you who remember Gomer Pyle)! This is precisely what we discover. Let’s see.

There is only one other place outside the Gospel of John where somebody is called Comforter (*parakletos*). Only trouble is you won’t find that word in your English translations. It is in John’s First Epistle chapter 2 verse 1 which is variously translated, “If any man sin(s), we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous” (KJV and NASB). “But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One” (NIV). Jesus Christ Himself is our Comforter, but it suits the

translators to use another descriptive term for the office of Jesus at God's Right Hand, now that he has physically left this scene. Fairness surely demands that the same author (the apostle John) should be allowed to be consistently translated, unless there is compelling local, contextual, internal evidence demanding a different nuance.

First John 2: 1 tells us that it is Jesus Himself via his ministry from heaven at the Right Hand of God his Father who is working wonderfully for us in the operative power of God as our "Comforter". James Denny (himself a believer in the Trinity) plainly acknowledges this to be so: "In I John 2: 1 it is Jesus who is the Paraclete [Comforter], even after Pentecost, and even here (John 14:18), he says, 'I come to you.' *The presence of the Spirit is Jesus' own presence in Spirit.*" (2). So, Jesus is the Comforter! This is his figure of speech to prepare the disciples for his new way of being with them and ministering to them from Heaven during his physical absence from earth. (For a fuller treatment of this theme see my book, "They Never Told Me This in Church" Second Edition, p.276f).

But where does this leave us with the personal pronoun "he" which apparently is such a telling argument in support that the other Comforter Jesus promises is an actual Person? Don't forget John deliberately breaks the rules of Greek grammar by calling the neuter "Spirit" a "he"! Well, there actually is a very simple, honest and reasonable solution.

If we proceed on the basis that Jesus is not speaking of the Comforter in terms of a literal Person Who is God in his own right, but is speaking as he says he is in "figurative language"

(*tauta en paroimiais lelaleeka*) this is how the passage will be translated...

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another helper to remain with you unto the [new] age, the spirit of the truth, which the world cannot receive, because it does not see it (*auto*) or know it [neuter *auto* to agree with 'spirit']. But you know it [*auto*] because it [*auto*] remains with you and will be in you... I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you ... But the helper, the holy Spirit, which the Father will send in my name, it [masculine *ekeinos* to agree with the masculine subject *parakletos* but only translated "he" if the translator assumes a person is meant] will teach you all things and remind you of all things I spoke to you (John 14:15-18,26).

Even Trinitarian scholars admit that here and "in the Greek text of John 16:13, the Holy Spirit (neuter) is assigned a masculine pronoun, possibly to emphasise the personal reality of the Spirit or the identification of the Spirit with the Paraclete" (3.) Thus we see that the Spirit may be thought of equally as an influence, the Spirit of truth (cp. "the spirit of error" in 1 John 4:6 and "the spirit of the world" in 1 Cor. 2:12), or as the personal reality of Jesus himself behind the influence --- hence the interchange between the Spirit and the Helper.

Furthermore, if the Comforter of John chapters 14 through 16 is an actual and independent Person Who in His own right is God, what is His Personal Name? Every person has a name. The Father God has a Personal Name. He tells us

His Name is Yahweh (Hebrew YHVH, Ex. 3: 13-14). The Christ (Hebrew, Messiah) has a name. "You shall call his name Jesus" (Matt. 1: 21). But what is the Holy Spirit's Personal name? Comforter or Advocate or Helper are descriptive titles, not names. In all of my reading of the Scriptures I have never yet come across any place where the Spirit is called by a personal name.

And if Jesus was referring to a Third Person of the Godhead when he promised us "another Comforter" why is this One not prayed to, sung to, worshipped, or addressed anywhere in the entire corpus of Scripture? It's an argument from silence I know. But the silence is deafening. Surely One Who is God must be so prayed to, worshipped, personally addressed? On what authority is the modern church praying to, singing to, worshipping or addressing the "Blessed Holy Spirit"? Just one example, please!

And if the Comforter is a Person Who has been sent for the Church during Jesus' physical absence, why doesn't 'He' send any personal greetings to the Christians 'He' has been sent to help? Take a look, for example, at any of the Pauline epistles. Every single one of them opens with an exhortation and greeting "from God our Father and our Lord Jesus the Christ". What? Doesn't the Third Member of the Trinity even want to say, "Hello!"?

Oh, but doesn't the Spirit speak? Yes, of course. But let us not forget this is a "figure of speech", a common Hebrew way of thinking in terms of personification. If we insist that because the Spirit speaks it must *ipso facto* refer to an

actual person, then what will our modern Western minds do with a verse like Galatians 3: 8 ... “The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘All the nations will be blessed in you.’” The Scripture must be a person because it preaches? The Scripture must be a person because it sees? The Scripture must be a person because it speaks? The idea by its very suggestion is preposterous. So, what blind spot do we insist on nurturing by saying that which Jesus plainly declares is a “figure of speech” must be an actual third Person Who Himself is co-equal God?

But didn't Ananias and Sapphira “lie to the Holy Spirit” (Acts 5:3), and didn't Peter tell them they had “not lied to men but to God (Acts 5:4)? Surely only a person can be lied to, so this is proof the Holy Spirit is a Person? Well, listen to a parallel passage where Paul warns the Thessalonian believers that if they reject his apostolic warning, they are “not rejecting man but the God who gives His holy Spirit to you” (1 Thess. 4:8). Thus, to lie to an apostle of Christ, to reject the word and teaching of an apostle, is equivalent to lying to and rejecting God Himself. The apostle stands there as a fully accredited agent of the living God. Here the Holy Spirit means the power and the authority invested by God in the apostles. Even in the Old Testament the rebellion of the Israelites is said not to be against man (i.e. Moses and Aaron), but “against God whose messengers we are” (Ex. 16: 8).

So, let's connect the dots in an effort to fairly represent Jesus' farewell address. He says in plain figurative language (!) that when he leaves this earthly scene, "another Comforter" is coming ... even "the Spirit of truth" ... yes, plainly, "I will come to you" (John 14:18) but exercising a new ministry, a different type of ministry, but only better.

Oh, blessed be God our Father, who has answered the prayer of Jesus (John 14:16). Jesus has been raised from the dead. Jesus has been exalted to the Right Hand of His Father on High. We now experience Jesus himself for ourselves in a very personal and real way. He is our Comforter ... figuratively speaking, that is! This is the "spirit of the truth" that fortifies, helps, empowers us until the Day when we see him face to face. Let us walk day by day more and more in this anointing from on High!

1. Macquarie Encyclopedic Dictionary: Signature Edition.

2. James Denny, "Holy Spirit," *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1917, p742.

3. Alvin Kimel Jr., ed., *This is My Name Forever: The Trinity and Gender Language for God*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001, p. 66).

