The Paraclete in the Church Fathers

by Anthony Casurella

In this paper we survey the use made by the early Church fathers of the paraclete passages, that group of five logia from the Farewell Discourses of John relating the Lord's promise of the Spirit of Truth, the δ'λλος παράκλητος.

Such a survey needs no excuse, in one sense, as the history of exegesis is intrinsically interesting. But knowledge of how our ancestors used and interpreted Scripture does have value for the whole hermeneutical question. For one thing, it helps us to recognize and correct some of our own blind spots, as well as to help us avoid the mistakes of others. In a related way, we must remember that in the fathers we see the New Testament through the eyes of men 16 to 18 hundred years closer to its writing than we are, some of whom were native speakers of Greek and all of whom lived in a culture much closer to that of the first Christians than we do.

The paraclete passages themselves are of wide importance and are a notorious crux. They are much discussed in the fathers, being referred to literally hundreds of times in the extant literature; at present they are the focus of a large and difficult body of writings. They possessed evidential value for certain issues important to the ancient Church and not insignificant today.

We limit our consideration to fathers who wrote in the period between Tertullian (d. ca. 225) on the one hand and the year 451 on the other, concentrating on the years between the landmark councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon. Nevertheless, these limits include a great number of passages from authors of differing points of view and over a span of two-and-one-half centuries. If we are not to be misled, we must establish at the outset that we can here do no more than delineate and illustrate broad outlines of patristic interpretation; our

Asbury Theological Seminary alumnus Anthony Casurella is a doctoral candidate at the University of Durham (England), and is Principal of Emmanuel Bible College in Birkenhead, England.
scope does not permit the luxury of a full description. References given are intended to be suggestive, not exhaustive.

In the ancient world, exegesis and theology were more intimately related than they are today. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the paraclete passages had a place in the dogmatic debates of the time, both in the writings of the fathers and those of the heresiarchs. In the East, they are cited along with other texts in almost wasteful abandon; Western usage, with its different approach and greater economy of language, is more chaste. But on both sides writing on the paraclete passages is governed by three major dogmatic concerns: the Trinity, Christology, and Pneumatology.

With regard to the doctrine of the Trinity, they are invoked as evidence for distinction (or lack of distinction) of Persons within the one Godhead. At 14:16, for example (ἐρωτήσω τὸν πατέρα καὶ ἄλλον παράκλητον δώσει υἱὸν κ.τ.λ.), we see Christ teaching specifically that the Paraclete-spirit is quite distinct (ἐτέρος, alias) from himself. Stress here is laid, of course, on the adjective ἄλλον, but it is also clear that three separate individuals take part in the bestowal of the Spirit: the One who asks, the One who sends, the One who comes. The same is true of 14:26 (ὁ δὲ παράκλητος . . . δὲ πέμψει ὁ πατήρ ἐν τῷ ὄνοματι μου κ.τ.λ.), 15:26 (ὁ παράκλητος δυν ἐγὼ πέμψω υἱὸν παρα τοῦ πατρὸς), and in 16:4b-7 passim.

On the other hand, paraclete passages are called in as evidence for the unity and consubstantiality of the Trinity. The Three are seen to be One in that They are possessed of a common name: The Spirit comes in the name of the Son, 14:26. But it has already been shown that the Son comes in the name of the Father (5:43, et al.); therefore, the name of all Three Persons is one. They are seen to be One in that They are inseparable in will and operation. For example, it is inferred from 16:13-15 that when One speaks the Others also speak; from 16:7-8 we learn that the Spirit rebukes (ἐλέγχειν, arguere) just as we see from other Scriptures Father and Son doing. A juxtaposition of 16:7, 14:26, and 15:26 shows that the Spirit is sent inseparably by both Father and Son; and in 14:16 we see Son and Spirit both perform the work of advocacy. Finally, They are seen to be one in that They possess all things (e.g., eternity) in common, 16:15. Specifically, all that the Son has He has received through unity of substance with the Father (16:15a), and all that the Spirit has He has through unity of substance with the Son without the medium of any organ of hearing and without receiving anything He did not already
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have (16:15b and context).16

These materials also play a part in the Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries, particularly 16:14-15: ἐκεῖνος (i.e., ὁ παράκλητος) ἔμε δοξάσει, δτι ἐκ τοῦ ἐμοῦ ὁμοίως καὶ ἀναγγέλει ψιν. πάντα δει ἄχει ὁ πατὴρ ἐμά ἔστιν. διὰ τούτο εἰλπον δτι ἐκ τού ἐμοῦ λαμβάνει καὶ ἀναγγέλει ψιν. John 16:14 distinctly sets the Son apart from the creatures. They partake of the Spirit, but this verse clearly states that the Spirit (Who, it is presumed, is from God) partakes of Him. The Son, therefore, partakes of the Father's very essence and is no creature.17 John 16:15 also shows the Son to be God and of one essence with the Father; for no creature possesses all the qualities and attributes of the Father.18 Cyril of Alexandria draws this out: On the one hand, the Son can be neither something made (ποίμα) nor one of the creatures (κτίσμα). If He were and spoke 16:15 truthfully, there could be nothing in God and creation not held in common. If this is absurd (there is no doubt Cyril thinks it is), then the Son is no creature.19 On the other hand, he contends that the Son is not inferior to the Father but equal to Him. Jesus, if speaking the truth in this passage, cannot be less than equal with the Father; for, if He were, then divine attributes could be attributed to Him and less than divine attributes to the Father (cf. 17, 10). Furthermore, nothing could then hinder our saying truthfully that the Son is greater than the Father and the Father less than the Son. As this is absurd, Son and Father must be equal.20

The most important exegetical question asked of these verses in regard to the Christological discussion concerns the content of πάντα, omnia. The short answer is that it includes all things proper to Godhead, all the properties and attributes of the divine nature, in fact, the divine nature itself;21 this means that the Son shares the Father's divine honors, titles, operations, Godhead, eternity, sovereignty, omnipotence, will, power, life, substance, even His Holy Spirit. πάντα also includes the Father's knowledge, and particularly knowledge of the precise moment of the end.22 Arian teaching apparently took Jesus' self-confessed ignorance of the day and the hour in Mark 13:32 and Matthew 24:36 as proof that the Son is unlike the Father in substance and subordinate in dignity. This was naturally felt to be quite damaging to Nicene orthodoxy, and steps were quickly taken to interpret the damaging passages in a more favorable light. The favorite approach seems to have been to reinterpret them in the light of John 16:15 on the (largely Origenic)
principle that Scripture cannot be self-contradictory and that, since all Scripture is Spirit-inspired, any passage may be interpreted in the light of any suitable other. Athanasius characteristically refers the ignorance of the day and hour to the human nature of the Son, but mentions 16:15 (17:10?) as evidence that as the Word of God, Christ cannot be nescient. Other writers, particularly those of Alexandria, simply deny that the Synoptic passages mean what they seem to, again on the basis of John 16:15.

It is only to be expected that the fathers should use passages promising the Holy Spirit and outlining His work in their development of Pneumatology. They do, and that in a manner similar to their treatment of the Trinity and the Christ. They argue, first of all, His increate deity. In John 15:26 we are told of the παράκλητος . . . δι' αυτοῦ πατρός ἐκπορεύεται. That Spirit can be no creature who proceeds from the increate Father. Similarly, that the Spirit is no creature can be inferred from 16:13-14, οὐ γὰρ λαλῆσαι ἀνεύτων ἀλλ' ὁ θεὸς αὐξάνει λαλήσει, καὶ τὰ ἑρχόμενα ἀναγγέλει ὕμιν. Arian exegesis had understood these verses to show that the Spirit is not God because He is not perfect in and of Himself; if He had been, He would speak ἀνεύτων and would need to be reminded of nothing. Didymus counters this in two ways. In the first place, what is said here is no different from what is said of Christ at 12:49; neither Spirit nor Son speaks anything but the words of God. Secondly, while even the best of creatures speaks often from its own will (which it must suppress to do the will of God), this passage shows that the Spirit always speaks the things of God. Therefore, He is increate, and the divine will and nature are His by right. Neither is there any subordinationism here; the Spirit is to receive from the Son only in the sense that πάντα διὰ Εὐαγγελίου ο πατὴρ ἐμά εστιν. It is because of His (consubstantial) procession from the Father that He is said not to speak from Himself.

The deity of the Spirit is further evidenced by showing that He shares the divine titles, attributes, and operations of, and is equal to, the Father and the Son. (Cf. on the doctrine of the Trinity above.) Examples of each of these are taken from the paraclete passages. Among other attributes is that of omnipresence; that the Spirit is everywhere present Didymus infers from a juxtaposition of δωσει υμῖν with παρέστη υμῖν μένει and ἐν υμῖν ἐσται (14:16-17). Among the divine operations proper to the Spirit are these: with Father and Son the Spirit judges (16:8), He foreknows and foretells (16:13), He
teaches and inspires men (14:26), and He puts them into remembrance and guides them into all truth (14:26; 16:13). The Spirit is shown to be of one deity and substance with the Father in that He is said to bear witness to the Son (15:26), an operation referred to the Father elsewhere. That He is one with the Son is clear from the title given Him by Christ, ἀλλος παράκλητος. ἀλλος implies that Christ is also to be termed παράκλητος; according to at least one writer, ἀλλος would not be used of things not consubstantial. That the Lord is a Paraclete is confirmed by I John 2:1. That the Spirit is one with Christ and is, indeed, His own Spirit is further demonstrated by the fact that He is called πνεῦμα τῆς ἀληθείας (14:17; 15:26; 16:13) by the One who is Himself Truth (14:6).

We have already said that exegesis is not easily to be distinguished from theology in patristic thought. The outlines which we have already traced are gleaned only by searching several scores of individual citations in widely differing writings of a dogmatic nature. Our account could not be complete without such searching. We do possess, however, in addition, a body of commentary and commentary-like materials which pays more attention to expounding the text and less to doctrinal debate. In the East we have extant the commentaries on the FG by Origen (unfortunately not complete and lacking the commentary on our passages), Cyril of Alexandria, and Theodore of Mopsuestia; the fragments of commentaries by Apollinaris and the Arian Theodore of Heraclea; and the homilies by John Chrysostom. From the West the only consistent exposition of the whole Gospel are the 124 tractates by Augustine, composed in Hippo ca. 413-418.

We cannot give an adequate overall impression of the achievement of this literature without making a passage by passage analysis. It is true, in general, that the East shows greater loquacity and freedom to speculate and create (though this is not quite so evident in this type of writing). The Latin writing differs in ways more or less directly related to the practicality of the Roman mind. Concerned as it is with the problems of organizing and governing churchly society and life, it is less free to speculate. The temper of Latin exegesis tends to be pastoral rather than merely intellectual. Perhaps this is why the sole Latin commentary on John is in homiletical form. We can, nevertheless, give one or two specific illustrations.

The mention of Antioch and Alexandria reminds us of the tendency of the latter school to allegorical or "spiritual" exegesis.
This does touch the paraclete passages once or twice in Origen. What are the πολλά of 16:12 which the disciples are not able to bear? For him they represent the spiritual exegesis of the Law which the disciples, as Jews, were not ready to accept.35 An example of just this sort of spiritual exegesis, and one which involves the paraclete passages, occurs in his commentary on Canticum Canticorum. 1, 14(15) reads in part oculi tui columbae (LXX δόφιναμο ουν περιστεραί). Origen decides that the two doves of the eyes represent the Son of God and the Holy Spirit. The allegory for the Spirit is clear enough; the dove is the classic Christian symbol for the Holy Spirit. That the other eye and dove represent the Son becomes apparent for Origen when he reflects that both Son and Spirit are called Paraclete in the New Testament. Therefore, both must be doves!36

But these two passages from Origen represent the total extent of allegorizing in connection with the paraclete passages. Partly this is because the FG does not contain material which presented itself to the Greek mind as needing that sort of interpretation but mostly because those using allegory soon came to recognize that their tool was of little use in the controversies of the time. However satisfying it might be in private devotion, it was a sword that would not penetrate, a shield that would turn no blade in the thrust and parry of debate. Even the Alexandrians resort in great part to a type of exegesis almost entirely concerned to expound the text in its visible and historical sense. At the end of the day there is, in exegesis of paraclete passages, little palpable difference between Antioch and Alexandria.

To say that commentators are generally concerned to expound the plain sense of the text is not to say there are no differences in the results. For one thing, the questions asked of the text are so different that for some passages each commentator appears to be unique. However, we may consider 16:12 as an example of a passage of which most writers are asking similar questions. Why did Jesus keep silence concerning the πολλά? It is because they, already dispirited, had not yet been prepared to apprehend them by the Paraclete.37 And why can they not bear them now? It is because they are still bound by the letter of the Law and their Jewish training?38 What the content of the deferred teaching may be is, if diversely expressed, plain enough; the πολλά are the deeper mysteries of the Christian faith.39 If Augustine, unlike other (particularly Greek) writers refuses to be drawn into speculation concerning what specific doctrines now known the Lord may have had in mind (because we are never in Scripture told), it is
clear from his writing that even he agrees that Jesus is here referring to the deep truths of the Christian faith.40

We must try to form some impression of the fathers’ success in arriving at a true assessment of the paraclete passages. But this requires a word of caution, since the very framing of the question implies that we possess a true interpretation. Yet we, no less than they, are children of our time; and if we seek to judge it must be with the memory that we ourselves stand in need of judgment, perhaps most where we least suspect it. In assessing the fathers, we must remember that we are ourselves under review.41

There are certainly differences of concern and approach. The fathers were men of faith, seeking to understand the implications of the revelation in Christ for life and doctrine; we in this century so often are not, as Professor Stuhlmacher has recently reminded us.42 Their questions are often colored by their philosophical orientation; so are ours, but the nature of the questions and presuppositions has changed. They assumed that the Scriptures were literally inspired; for Origen, even the very letters of the (Greek) text of the Old Testament carried meaning hidden for the faithful exegete to discover.43 Such an understanding is unthinkable to the “scientific” exegete of today. The fathers assumed that the words of the Farewell Discourses are the ipsissima verba of Jesus; we sometimes doubt whether they can even be traced as far back as the original author and draft of the Gospel.

The fathers were, of course, unfamiliar with the developments of the last century-and-a-half. They took their text as they received it and frequently worked on it from memory. They knew nothing of the “assured results” of form critical methodology and would not have understood the need for the various theories of displacement that color contemporary interpretation. They could not have anticipated the search of the philologists and history of religionists which has plundered the literature of the ancient world to discover why τό πνεύμα τῆς ἀληθείας should be named ὁ παράκλητος.44 Indeed, had they done so, it is difficult to imagine it making a great deal of difference to them.

It is true that assessments of the dogmatic value of the passages have changed somewhat, even (in recent years) among Catholics. For example, most commentators would now refer 15:26 τό πνεύμα τῆς ἀληθείας διὶ παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς ἐκπορεύεται to the Spirit’s mission rather than to the eternal relations of the Trinity. Yet Professor
Barrett is right when he says that, while the Farewell Discourses contain no formulated doctrine of the Trinity, they contain the materials from which that doctrine eventually grew. If the Gospel is the story, then the doctrine is what must be true if the story is told. Whatever faults they may have had, the fathers did not lack skill in making necessary inferences.

We must make a similar acknowledgment of their more purely exegetical efforts. It is true that their commentaries are sometimes tendentious; it is true they sometimes press the conclusions of a text beyond the intention of the author; it is true that there are idiosyncratic and poorly grounded interpretations. But these things are no less true mutatis mutandis of a multitude of pulpits, books, and journals today. On the whole, the general lines of their work are to be sustained. With regard to the text as it is, they anticipate nearly everything that has come since.

Let us close with a word of caution that goes beyond our concern with exegesis. There are many voices calling today for an abandonment of the hard-won results of the patristic age. What the fathers did wants weighing, it is true. But ought not the same to be said of us? I grant that we must not accept patristic conclusions uncritically, but if we simply ignore or forsake what they have done, we place ourselves in danger.

Footnotes

1A paper given in Winona Lake, Indiana, on Friday, 15 September, 1978; I hope to publish a fuller treatment elsewhere.


3That we are likely to have exegetical blind spots should be patent to anyone with the capacity to make realistic inferences from Church history or from the current state of the age-old debate over "contextualization."

4Before Tertullian there are no certain references to our materials; after 451 their exegesis becomes refined and conventional with little new to offer.

5According to S.G. Papadopoulos, exegetical and systematic theology have become distinct poles, each claiming an absolute, even exclusive authority. In patristic writing there is no disjunction; we speak not of patristic exegetical or dogmatic theology, only of patristic thought: Σ.Γ. Παπαδοπουλος, ΠΑΤΕΡΕΣ. ΑΤΣΗΕΥΣ ΤΗΣ ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑΣ. ΑΓΙΟΝ ΠΙΝΕΤΜΑ, (Athens, 1970), p. 5.

6General condemnation has led to the loss of all but a glimpse of writings classed as heretical. We deal here only with (more of less) orthodox writers.

7Marcellus of Ancyra adduces them in support of his peculiar Sabellian understanding of the Trinity as a monad with a double extension, ultimately to be reabsorbed. See Marcell. fr. 66-67. 73-74 (GCS 14, 197-200). Arguments for distinc-
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tion by the more orthodox are generally raised to combat types of modalism akin to that proposed by Sabellius in the third century.

8See Eus. e.th. 3, 5, 1 (GCS 14, 160). Cf. other references in n. 9 below.
9See Eus. e.th. 3, 4, 5, 9 and 3, 5, 1-9. 17-18 (GCS 14, 159-163) in the East and in the West Ambr. Spir. 1, 13, 136-137 (CSEL 79, 73-74) and Eus. Ver. Trin. 4, 8 (CCL 9, 58), 4, 28-29 (CCL 9, 63).

The assessment here depends on more than could be presented within the scope of this paper.

10See Ambr. Spir. 1, 13, 134-139 (CSEL 79, 73-75).
11See Ambr. fid. 5, 11, 134 (CSEL 78, 265).
12See Ambr. Spir. 3, 6, 35 (CSEL 79, 164).
13See Aug. serm. Ar. 4 (PL 42, 686).
15See Leo tract. 75, 3 (CCL 138A, 467-468).
16See Ambr. Spir. 2, 12, 131-134 (CSEL 79, 137-139).
17See Ath. Ar. 1, 15 (PG 26, 44) and Cyr. thes. 4 (PG 75, 45).
18See Ambr. fid. 5, 18, 224 (CSEL 78, 302); Ambrstr. quaest. 125, 1 (CSEL 50, 385); Aug. Max. 2, 20, 3 (PL 42, 789); and Didym. Trin. 2, 23 (PG 39, 796).
19Cyr. thes. 21 (PG 75, 357).
20Cyr. Jo. 1, 3 (Pusey 1, 42).
21See Ath. Ar. 3, 4 (PG 26, 329); Ambr. fid. 2, 4, 38 (CSEL 78, 69-70); and Cyr. Juhn. 9 (PG 76, 952).
22See Ambrstr. Mt. (PLS 1, 666) and Aug. serm. V. T. 16A, 11 (CCL 41, 228).
24See Didym. Eun. 4 (PG 29, 696). This line of argument is most fully developed by Basil of Caesarea, Bas. ep. 236, 2 (Johnston 170). He supports his thinking by reinterpretating the ov μη of Mk. 13, 32 to mean, not except but unless; thus, no one, not even the Son, would have known had not the Father known; for the cause of the Son's knowing is the Father.

3See, e.g., Ambr. Spir. 2, 5, 42 (CSEL 79, 102); Cyr. thes. 34 (PG 75, 589); Didym. Spir. 25 (PG 39, 1055-1056).
26See Cyr. thes. 34 (PG 75, 581-584).
30Both of these last operations are considered by at least one author to be divine operations: Bas. Spir. 19, 49 (Johnston 100; SCH 17, 202).
31See Pel. Trin. fragment 4 (PLS 1, 1549-1550).
32Gr. Naz. or. 41, 12 (PG 36, 444-445).
33See Epiph. haer. 74, 13, 4 (GCS 37, 331) and Ambrstr. quaest. 97, 15 (CSEL 50, 181-182); 125, 23 (CSEL 50, 392).
34This is not to say that they are never dogmatic or tendentious.
35Or. Cels. 2, 2 (GCS 2, 129).
36Or. Cant. 3 on 1, 14 (1, 15 vg.) (GCS 33, 174).
37See Cyr. Jo. 10, 2 (Pusey 2, 625 ff).
38See Didym. Spir. 33 (PG 39, 1063).
39See Cyr. Jo. 10, 2 (Pusey 2, 626).
41The assessment here depends on more than could be presented within the scope of this paper.
43 Although the fathers never use words like inerrant or dictation, they would not on the whole be uncomfortable with the ideas behind them. (Yet they could raise objections to theories of direct verbal inspiration on occasion.)

Abbreviations
Ancient Christian Writings

The Greek Fathers
Athanasius Alexandrinus (Ath.)
Orationes tres adversus Arianos (Ar.)
Basil of Caesarea (Bas.)
Epistulae (ep.)
Liber de Spiritu sancto (Spir.)
Cyril of Alexandria (Cyr.)
Commentarius in Iohannis Evangelium (Jo.)
Contra Julianum (Juln.)
Thesaurus de Trinitate (thes.)
Didymus the Blind (Didym.)
Contra Eunomium (Eun.)
De Spiritu sancto (Spir.)
De Trinitate (Trin.)
Epiphanius (Epiph.)
Panarion seu adversus lxxx haereses (haer.)
Eusebius of Caesarea (Eus.)
De ecclesiastica theologia (e.th.)
Gregory of Nazianzus (Gr.Naz.)
Orationes (or.)
Marcellus of Ancyra (Marcell.)
Fragmenta (fr.)
Origen (Or.)
Commentarius in Canticum Canticorum (Cant.)
Contra Celsum (Cels.)
The Latin Fathers
Ambrose of Milan (Ambr.)
De fide (fid.)
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*De Spiritu sancto (Spir.)*
Ambrosiaster (Ambrstr.)

*In Matthaeum 24 fragmenta (Mt.)*
*Quaestiones Veteris et Noui Testamenti (quaest.)*

Augustine of Hippo (Aug.)

*In Iohannis Euangielium tractatus (Jo.)*
*Contra Maximinum haereticum Arianorum Episcopum (Max.)*
*Contra sermonem Arianorum (serm.Ar.)*
*Sermones de Vetere Testamento (serm.V.T.)*
*De Trinitate (Trin.)*

Eusebius of Vercelli (Eus.Ver.)

*De Trinitate. (1-7, authorship disputed; 8-12, authorship unknown.) (Trin.)*

Leo Magnus (Leo)

*Tractatus (tract.)*

Pelagius (Pel.)

*De Trinitate (Trin.)*

Editions of Ancient Christian Writings

*Corpus Christianorum, series Latina* (CCL), Turnhout 1953—.
*Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* (CSEL), Vienna 1866—.

*Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte* (GCS), Berlin 1897—.


*Sources Chretiennes* (SCH), Paris 1955—.