

The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church

John 14–17

by The Reverend Frances Taylor Gench

The New Testament bears witness to the fact that the early Christians experienced the Holy Spirit as a powerful presence in their lives. It was for them a sign that the new age had dawned—that in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God had set the future in motion, to be consummated at Christ’s Second Coming. It was, moreover, a gift of divine power, and a gift to the whole community. The Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church engaged in study of contributions that various New Testament witnesses make to our reflection on the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church, focusing on Paul’s discussion in 1 Cor. 12–14, the Pentecost scene in Acts 2, and the Gospel of John’s witness to the Spirit (or Paraclete) in Jesus’ farewell conversations in John 14–17. This Bible study focuses on the Gospel of John, but it may be of interest to note that the New Testament presents diverse views of the Spirit, and to touch briefly on Paul and Acts’ distinctive contributions.

1 Cor. 12–14

In this passage, the apostle Paul bears witness to the Holy Spirit as a “many-splendored thing,” rich in a variety of manifestations.¹ Indeed, the Spirit allocates a variety of different gifts in individual believers as the Spirit sees fit for the common good. No one has all the gifts, so it is only in community that the gifts needed for ministry are present. Moreover, it is clear from Paul’s discussion that the Spirit’s empowerment does not homogenize the community, but rather intensifies its diversity for the well being of all (1 Cor. 12:4–11).² In Paul’s view, then, unity and diversity are not contradictory terms—a view that finds expression in his image of the church as the one body of Christ with many members. Paradoxically, the church’s vigor and survival depend not on our sameness, but on our infinite variety.

Acts 2

The book of Acts emphasizes another understanding of the Holy Spirit, describing a great moving Spirit that sweeps in at decisive moments to tell the apostolic figures what to do.³ In Acts 2, the Spirit comes like a mighty wind at Pentecost, when the disciples do not know what to do, driving them to preach, indicating that their task is to proclaim Jesus Christ (see also Acts 10:44–48 and 15:28). To an important degree, it is related to divine empowerment to speak, to proclaim the fulfillment of the divine purpose in God’s intervention in the coming of Jesus.⁴ The Spirit was integral to the Gospel of Luke’s story of Jesus’ birth, identity, and mission as Son of God (vol. I of Luke–Acts), empowering him to serve God’s redemptive project in the world—God’s plan to bring salvation in all of its fullness to Israel through the life, death, and exaltation of Jesus, and through Israel, to all the nations (Luke 1:35; 3:21–22; 4:14–19). In Acts (vol. II), that same Spirit is the driving force behind the new movement of Jesus’ followers inaugurated at Pentecost.

“All” are now filled with the Holy Spirit that enables the church to discern, embrace, and serve the redemptive purpose of God.⁵

The Gospel of John

The Gospel of John provides yet another powerful understanding of the relation between the Spirit and the church that is not covered by gifts (1 Cor.) or by the great moving Spirit (Acts).⁶ It is found in John 14–17, Jesus’ farewell conversations with his disciples at their last supper together on the night before his death. By means of these conversations, Jesus prepares them for his departure and for life in his absence. They are filled with extraordinary words of assurance and promise (14:1–6), and chief among them are “I will not leave you orphaned” (14:18)—a promise that refers to the coming of the Paraclete, or Holy Spirit. Disciples will not be abandoned or left to fend for themselves. After Jesus’ return to God, the Paraclete will be sent in his name and will accompany them in their continued life and mission in this world.

The concept of the Paraclete is John’s own and represents the evangelist’s reworking and expansion of traditional understandings of the Spirit. By means of it, John speaks of the Spirit, more clearly than any other New Testament witness, as a *personal* presence—“the ongoing presence of Jesus while he is absent from earth and with the Father in heaven.”⁷

Believers experience the personal presence of the Paraclete in varied ways. In fact, the word itself defies translation, for it bears multiple meanings and is translated in a number of ways: Advocate, Intercessor, Comforter, and Proclaimer. The Greek word *paraklētos* (Paraclete) refers to one who is called (*klētos*) alongside (*para*)—and the Paraclete is “called alongside” believers in a *variety* of capacities.

John’s teaching about the Paraclete appears in five blocks (14:16–17; 14:25–26; 15:26–27; 16:7–11; and 16:12–15), each of which provides different insights into the Paraclete’s role in the lives of believers. **Read John 14:16–17**, where the first thing disciples are given to understand is this: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate [Paraclete] to be with you forever.” Notice that John speaks of God’s gift of “another Paraclete,” for Jesus himself was the first! The Spirit will be to the church the helper, comforter, counselor, companion that Jesus has been. In fact, nearly everything said about the Paraclete has been said about Jesus elsewhere in the Gospel. Only one difference emerges: unlike Jesus, the Paraclete-Spirit will not go away, but will remain with disciples “forever.” Jesus, the Word made flesh, lived on this earth in one time and place. The Paraclete, however, dwells within every believer for all times, and is thus a more intimate and enduring presence.

The Paraclete’s teaching role receives special emphasis: **Read John 14:25–26**: “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate [Paraclete], the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (14:25–26). The Paraclete teaches nothing other than what Jesus taught, and keeps believers grounded in the tradition of the Word. However, the Paraclete is a *living* teacher who unfolds, in new circumstances, the implications of what Jesus said. The Paraclete “guides” believers “into all the truth,” interpreting in relation to

each coming generation the contemporary significance of what Jesus has said and done. **Read John 16:12–13:** “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; . . . and he will declare to you the things that are to come” (16:12–13). The Paraclete’s teaching role in the community of believers is thus both “conserving” and “creative.”⁸ That teaching role is to pass on the tradition of what Jesus said and did without corruption; yet also to reveal the mind of Christ in new situations.

Finally, the Paraclete-Spirit accompanies believers as they come into conflict with the world—as surely they will—for they can expect the same reception accorded their master. When they find themselves called upon to defend their faith or to speak truth to those who hold power, the Paraclete-Spirit appears as a witness. **Read John 15:26–27:** “When the Advocate [Paraclete] comes, . . . he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning” (15:26–27). The Christian is no doormat, no passive victim, in the face of the world’s hatred and persecution. The Paraclete dwells within, giving voice to truth and empowering unwavering witness. Moreover, the Paraclete-Spirit places the world in proper perspective for believers. **Read John 16:7–11:** “when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment” (v. 8). The world judged Jesus guilty of sin and condemned him to death—but it was wrong! The very experience of the Paraclete in believers’ lives is a sign to them that Jesus was in fact vindicated, raised by God, with whom he now abides.

In these many ways, then, the Paraclete fulfills the promise of Jesus: “I will not leave you orphaned” (14:18). Indeed, the Spirit’s presence more than makes up for Jesus’ absence: “It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate [Paraclete] will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (16:7). After Easter, the Paraclete-Spirit, the living presence of Christ, abides forever with the church, accompanying, guiding, and empowering its continued life and witness in the world. Moreover, the Spirit is not confined to charismatics or apostles or prophets or teachers or administrators, but is the possession of every believing Christian. No one has second-class status or secondhand faith, for *all* have direct access to the Paraclete’s revelation of God in Christ. The concept of the Paraclete explains a great deal about John’s unique theological vision: its astonishingly egalitarian view of the church and its testimony to the fullness of life available *now*, in the believer’s present experience. It is one of John’s most profound contributions to Christian thought—one that summons disciples “to believe in a life shaped not by Jesus’ absence, but by the unending presence of God.”⁹

Questions for discussion and reflection

- What most captures your attention as you consider this brief survey of diverse views of the Holy Spirit found in the New Testament?
- Which of the Gospel of John’s insights into the Paraclete-Spirit’s role in the life of the church most intrigues you, and why? What is their import for our life together as Presbyterians?

- What connections do you discern between any of the texts or emphases noted and your experience of conflict in the Presbyterian church?
- Presbyterians teach that the church is “reformed and always reforming.” Can you think of instances in which you believe that the Holy Spirit has led the church to embrace new insights in understanding and implementing Christ’s will?
- New Testament scholar Raymond E. Brown notes both a strength and a weakness in John’s concept of the Paraclete. Consider his comment and share your reactions to it:

The thought that there is a living divine teacher in the heart of each believer—a teacher who is the ongoing presence of Jesus, preserving what he taught but interpreting it anew in each generation—is surely one of the greatest contributions made to Christianity by the Fourth Gospel. But the Jesus who sends the Paraclete never tells his followers what is to happen when believers who possess the Paraclete disagree with each other. The Johannine Epistles [1, 2, and 3 John] tell us what frequently happens: they break their *koinonia* or communion with each other. If the Spirit is the highest and only authority and if each side appeals to him as support for its position, it is nigh impossible (particularly in a dualistic framework where all is either light or darkness) to make concessions and to work out compromises.¹⁰

- What new insights have emerged from your engagement with these texts and your discussion with each other? What questions linger?

¹ Raymond E. Brown, “Diverse Views of the Spirit in the New Testament,” *Worship* 57 (May 1983): p. 230.

² Keck and Furnish, *The Pauline Letters* (?), p. 97.

³ Brown, pp. 232–33.

⁴ Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, *New Testament Theology* (Cambridge: University Press, 1995), p. 42.

⁵ Green, pp. 46–47.

⁶ Brown, p. 233.

⁷ Raymond E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), p. 106.

⁸ Gail R. O’Day, “The Gospel of John,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), p. 777.

⁹ O’Day, p. 754.

¹⁰ Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*, pp. 121–22.

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