

58. The Last Farewell

John 16-17

At the end of John 14, as the disciples were leaving the Last Supper, Jesus had said, Come, let us be going, and the narrative continued with him and his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus was arrested by Temple soldiers led by Judas. Later, the author of John found other things he wanted Jesus to say by way of leavetaking, and another chapter, John 15, was inserted to accommodate them. Still later, as a final leavetaking, John 16, was added (plus a long prayer by Jesus, in John 17). Here is the John 16 leavetaking. It repeats the Paraclete promise from John 15, but with an important difference.

These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be caused to stumble. They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the hour cometh, that whosoever killeth you shall think that he offereth service unto God. And these things will they do, because they have not known the Father, nor me. But these things have I spoken unto you, that when their hour is come, ye may remember them, how that I told you.

And these things I said not unto you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I go unto him that sent me; and none of you asketh me, Whither goest thou? But because I have spoken these things unto you, sorrow hath filled your heart. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: It is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the Paraclete will not come unto you; but if I go, I will send him unto you. And he, when he is come, will convict the world in respect of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they believe not on me; of righteousness, because I go to the Father, and ye behold me no more; of judgment, because the prince of this world hath been judged.¹ I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth,² is come, he shall guide you into all the truth; for he shall not speak from himself; but what things soever he shall hear, [these] shall he speak; and he shall declare unto you the things that are to come. He shall glorify me; for he shall take of mine, and shall declare [it] unto you . . .

¹Etymologically “Advocate,” in many Bibles translated “Comforter.” Its meaning changes between one layer of John and the next. In early layers, the Paraclete reminds the disciples of Jesus and interprets his words. In this late layer, the Paraclete sometimes becomes an accuser of the sins of the world. This is a response to the exclusion from the synagogues, which made enemies, not neighbors, of Christians and other Jews.

²Here, John 16 continues the earlier meaning of Paraclete: the felt continuity of Christ among his followers, after his death.

Reflections

The Gospel of John was written in Ephesus, and it was in Ephesus that the wave of expulsion persecutions was next felt. The author of John, having already opened up his Gospel to add John 15, reopened it to record a prophecy of Jesus about expulsions from synagogues, adding that those who had brought that about felt they were serving God, as in their own way they doubtless were. The beginning of John 16 puts that new prophecy of Jesus into the record.

John 16 goes on to give a different function given to the Paraclete, the Spirit who will be with the disciples, replacing the bodily Jesus, after his death. The Paraclete had had a consoling function (whence the translation “Comforter”) and a memory function: to recall what Jesus had said and explain its meaning. Here is how John 15 had put it:

But when the Paraclete is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of Truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall bear witness of me, and ye also bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning. (John 15:26-27)

To have “been with Jesus from the beginning” was to be able to report what he had done and said. This the Apostles had done; now, the Paraclete has that role: expounding to believers the content and meaning of the faith they already have.

The tone in John 16 is quite different. Just after dealing with the expulsions from the synagogue, “Jesus” goes on to say:

Nevertheless, I tell you the truth; it is expedient for you that I go away, for if I go not away the Paraclete will not come unto you, but if I go, I will send him unto you. And he, when he is come, will convict the world in respect of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgement; of sin, because they believe not on me; of righteousness, because I go to the Father, and ye behold me no more; of judgement, because the prince of this world hath been judged. (John 16:7-11)

That is, the Paraclete is now a judge of the world, an accuser of wrongdoing, doubtless including the expulsion “prayer” and its perpetrators.

Having thus made Jesus or his proxy a defender in the present, the author then added John 17, a prayer of Jesus which puts the Paraclete *into the future*. After praying for his immediate disciples, Jesus continues:

Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word, that they may all be one, even as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that thou didst send me. (John 17:20-21)

Luke, speaking through “Paul” (Chapter 56), had turned the church in a new direction, accepting the final break with Judaism. The author of John, speaking through “Jesus,” looks ahead – to the final triumph of the unified churches.

Meanwhile, the persecutions themselves would continue to spread.