

JESUS CHRIST, ESQ.

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I begin in the New Testament, in the book of 1 John, a text written by someone presumed to be John the Beloved:

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.¹

I want to focus on one word in particular: *advocate*. The original Greek word in this verse in John is *paraklétos*, one translation of which is a defense attorney.² The Latin cognate of *paraklétos* is *advocatus*: “one called to aid (another),”³ from which we get the English *advocate* as well as the French and Spanish words for lawyer: *avocat* and *abogado*.

One could, therefore, say that John is describing Christ as a defense attorney.

I like this because I am by profession a public defender—that is, a criminal defense attorney appointed by the court to represent those who cannot afford to hire counsel for themselves. It is surprising to hear Christ referred to as a lawyer, though, because I am aware that lawyers are not universally loved—especially those who defend accused criminals. This seems to have been the case even in Jesus’ time, as lawyers,

1. 1 John 2:1–2, NIV.

2. See Blue Letter Bible, s.v. “Strong’s G3875 – paraklétos,” <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?t=kjv&strongs=g3875>.

3. Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. “advocate (*n.*),” <https://www.etymonline.com/word/advocate>.

together with Pharisees, are considered hypocrites.⁴ In the Book of Mormon, lawyers fare no better—for example, Alma says that the people of Ammonihah are in danger of destruction in part because of their wicked lawyers.⁵

So why would John use a term (*paraclétos*) that could be understood by the readers of his day to refer to a lawyer when describing the role of Jesus Christ?

Moreover, this is not an aberration, for there are quite a few scriptural references to Christ as *advocate* in contexts that sound decidedly legalistic. For example, Moroni says that Christ “hath answered the ends of the law . . . wherefore he advocateth the cause of the children of men.”⁶

Indeed, the more I think about this, the more I like the idea of Christ being a lawyer—and not just any lawyer, but *my* lawyer. To understand why, let me briefly explain one aspect of what I do as a defense attorney.

If you know anything about the legal system in our country, it will not surprise you to learn that most people who are charged with a crime end up pleading guilty, meaning they admit to having broken a law. When this happens, they are then sentenced by a judge—in other words, the judge explains what will happen to the person who has broken the law. This takes place at what is called a sentencing hearing.

In some cases, the sentencing hearing is a mere formality because the parties have agreed beforehand about the defendant’s sentence. For example, the defendant might have agreed to serve exactly sixty months in prison, and so all the judge does is formally impose those sixty months. There are no surprises, and my job is just to stand there and make sure that the agreement we reached is followed.

4. See, e.g., Luke 11:46.

5. Alma 10:27.

6. Moroni 7:28.

In other cases, however, the defendant goes into the sentencing hearing not knowing exactly what is going to happen. In those cases, my job is to try to convince the judge to give the defendant a sentence that is less severe than what the prosecutor has demanded. For example, the prosecutor might argue that the defendant should go straight to prison, but I argue that he should be put on probation instead.

When I am advocating in this way on behalf of my clients, I frequently focus on what kind of person they are, what their background is, what challenges they are facing in life. Remember, the person at this point has admitted to doing something wrong, so the facts of the case are not in dispute. The only question is what should happen to the person.

It is very common that I will say something along the following lines: Judge, my client did get caught with the drugs. But what you need to understand is that she was introduced to drugs by her parents when she was ten years old, and she's been addicted to them ever since. She also suffers from mental illness. But look at what she's done. She's held down a job for a year, she's gone through two different drug treatment programs, and she's been off drugs for over three months. Three months might not seem like a lot of time, Your Honor, but considering her history, that's a big step.

And then I ask the judge to give her less jail time, or put her on probation, or whatever it is that we hope the judge will do in that particular case.

The bottom line is that part of my job is advocating for mercy on behalf of my clients based on their circumstances, their history, the kind of person they are. As the renowned criminal defense attorney Bryan Stevenson puts it, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done,"⁷ and my job is to explain to the judge what that "more" is.

7. Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 18.

So now that I've told you a little bit about what I do for a living, let me explain why I think this can help us understand something of what the scriptures mean when they speak of Christ as an advocate—in effect, a defense attorney.

Consider that the scriptures speak of God as a judge: at “the great and last day,” Jesus tells the Nephites, “all people, and all kindreds, and all nations and tongues shall stand before God, to be judged of their works, whether they be good or whether they be evil.”⁸

But just as people who are brought before a judge in Minnesota have the right to a licensed Minnesota attorney to advocate for them, likewise, when we stand before the bar of God to be judged, we do not have to stand alone—for Christ stands with us, as our advocate.

To understand how this helps us, consider that a good defense attorney will both know and care about his or her client. If I don't know anything about my client, then I'm not going to be able to make a convincing argument to the judge that this person has redeeming qualities that should keep her out of prison. And if I don't care about her at all, then I'm probably not going to sound very convincing when I give the judge this information.

Christ certainly knows us better than anyone else could. He knows us even better than we know ourselves. Everything we have felt, he has felt; everything we have suffered, he has suffered: “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. . . . Surely he hath borne *our* griefs, and carried *our* sorrows.”⁹ On my best days, I as an earthly lawyer can feel empathy for a client whose life experiences I have some understanding of. But I could never approach the depth of understanding that Christ has for each of us. And while I try to care about my clients' welfare, I could never love them the way Christ loves each of us. He wants nothing more than to spare us punishment for

8. 3 Nephi 26:4.

9. Isaiah 53:3–4; Mosiah 14:3–4.

our sins. There are many times when I wish I could spare my clients the punishment required by the law. But, frankly, I don't feel this in every case. And here is another difference between a worldly lawyer and Christ our Advocate: his boundless love for us, his charity, truly will never fail.

Moreover, Christ will never abandon us. As a lawyer, once I close a client's case, I sometimes don't think much about them anymore. This is partly because I have so many cases that I can't realistically remember every one that crosses my desk. But sometimes it is a conscious act of abandonment; on my worst days, I tell myself, "I'm glad it's not me—and anyway, that guy got what he deserved." By contrast, Jesus Christ will never forget us, never give up on us. He knows that none of us really deserve his grace, in the sense that we could never merit it by our works. And instead of thinking "I'm glad it's not me," he makes our problems his problem. He makes our punishment his punishment. He steps between us and the executioner, taking upon himself the "demands of justice."¹⁰ And he does this because he loves us.

To make this more personal, I ask you to imagine with me that you have passed away and are brought "before the pleasing bar" of God to be judged.¹¹ My caveat is that while I am going to imagine this as a literal courtroom, this is of course a human conceit. There is a lot we don't know about the final judgment. There is certainly a lot we don't understand. The scriptures are not even always consistent about exactly who is doing the judging—for example, Christ is mentioned as both an advocate and a judge. Nevertheless, while I want to be clear that this is just a way of imagining what must be an experience beyond mortal comprehension, I think this is a useful exercise to think about our relationship with Christ and his role as an advocate.

10. 2 Nephi 9:26; Alma 42:15.

11. Moroni 10:34.

So let's use our imagination. I picture myself in a heavenly courtroom. The judge's clerk and court reporter are, of course, angels; there is a bailiff who might be the archangel Michael, holding a flaming sword. God himself is seated in the judge's seat—instead of a black robe as in a human courtroom, he wears a holy robe of purest white. I picture myself sitting at the defense table. I imagine God saying something like, "Mr. Steffen, please rise. You have been accused of sinning against me." Now note that while in earthly courts there is a prosecutor to offer the condemnation of the accused, God has no need for this because, as Alma puts it, "our words will condemn us, yea, all our works will condemn us . . . and our thoughts will also condemn us; and in this awful state we shall not dare to look up to our God."¹² That is, we condemn ourselves—even the most vain among us will be forced to recognize their "nothingness" when they come face-to-face with God.¹³

So there I stand, unable even to look at my Father in Heaven as he reminds me of the evidence against me—as he reads a complaint listing all the things I have done wrong in my life—all my sins and shortcomings, all the ways I have chosen to cut myself off from his presence. And then I imagine him saying, as earthly judges do, "How do you plead?" which is just to say, "What do you have to say for yourself?" And I, of course, have no recourse to say anything other than the truth: "I am guilty!" There is nothing I can say that will change what I have done: the people I have hurt, the opportunities I have wasted. Overwhelmed by the consciousness of my own failings, I feel the force of Alma's words: "we must come forth and stand before him in his glory, and in his power, and in his might, majesty, and dominion, and acknowledge to our everlasting shame that all his judgments are just."¹⁴

12. Alma 12:14.

13. Mosiah 4:11; Moses 1:10.

14. Alma 12:15.

At that very moment, as I realize I have nothing to say to justify myself, no reasonable claim to innocence, just as I am about to drown in the despair of the damned, I feel Christ putting his hand on my shoulder. I realize he has been seated next to me in this heavenly courtroom at the defense table, and he now stands and whispers, “Let me handle this,” and then addresses the Father on my behalf.

“This man is my brother,” Christ says, “and I know him well.” He proceeds to tell God all there is to know about me—not just about my sins, but also my good works; not just my failures, but my triumphs. He will say something like, “I know he doesn’t look like much, and he hasn’t done very much, and his progress wasn’t as great as others’—but his heart was in the right place, and he had to repent so many times, he became quite good at it!” He will remind my Father of all the times I tried so hard to keep that one particular commandment, even though I never quite succeeded. He will ask God to consider all those hours I spent praying and studying the scriptures and serving in the Church, even though my prayers were never very powerful, my knowledge of the scriptures never very deep, and my service modest at best.

And then, because those few good works fall far short, finally Christ will get to the most important part, which is recorded in Doctrine and Covenants section 45: “Father, behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin, in whom thou was well pleased; behold the blood of thy Son who was shed, the blood of him whom thou gavest that thyself might be glorified. Wherefore, Father, spare [this] my br[other] that believe[s] on my name, that [he] may come unto [us] and have everlasting life.”¹⁵

And I realize in that moment that Christ’s role as an advocate goes so far beyond just knowing me, caring about me, and standing with me—though of course it includes all of those things. Christ cares so much about me as his “client” in that heavenly courtroom that he is

15. Doctrine and Covenants 45:4–5.

willing to condescend to come to earth, live as a mortal man, suffer in the Garden of Gethsemane and then on the cross, all so that I could be spared the “demands of justice.” And he did this, not just for me, but also for you.

And so, with Jesus’ hand still on my shoulder, and with tears in my eyes, I imagine God looking down at us and smiling, and saying to us both, “I find the defendant, Mr. Steffen, innocent through the blood of his Advocate and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

So as followers of Christ, let us repent, let us have faith, and let us be grateful for our Savior, who takes upon himself our sins, our weaknesses, our crimes—and through whose sacrifice alone we can hope to be acquitted and recommended to God.

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