

New Testament images for spiritual direction

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FROM THE EARLIEST CENTURIES OF CHRISTIANITY, spiritual direction, or spiritual guidance, has arisen in a variety of forms, each offering a particular way of cultivating spiritual growth in the lives of the faithful. Models of spiritual direction have varied according to theological tradition, historical setting and social context. Over the past ten to fifteen years, the ministry of spiritual direction has experienced a revival as lay persons and clergy have begun to seek out spiritual guides in astonishing numbers.

Unfortunately, many Christians in contemporary western culture have found traditional models of spiritual direction inadequate or even harmful. The spiritualities these models of spiritual direction encourage do not always meet the spiritual needs of Christians struggling with the pressures and issues of a post-industrial world. Consistently with these cultural shifts, Christians are re-evaluating the ministry of spiritual direction, seeking models that seem to offer more freedom in Christ than do many traditional forms. Such a re-evaluation, while seeking new perspectives, will need to include an assessment of New Testament fonts of spiritual direction.

But what does a 2,000-year-old collection of writings have to offer contemporary spiritual direction? In responding to this question, I will first examine the New Testament roots of what has been the dominant image of the spiritual direction relationship. Then I will propose an alternative image – again drawn from the New Testament – that I believe offers more fruitful possibilities for spiritual direction in the contemporary world.

CLASSICAL MODEL: SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR AS PARENT

Classical models of spiritual direction have tended to cluster around the image of ‘spiritual parent’. A look at three significant developments in the spiritual guidance tradition will show how this image has retained its power, even as it was modified to fit new contexts.

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'Spiritual parent' in the desert tradition

Scholars agree that the earliest type of Christian spiritual direction developed among the desert *abbas* and *ammās* of fourth- and fifth-century Egypt, Palestine and Syria.¹ As numbers of Christians sought God's presence by retreating to the harshness of wilderness areas, a form of spiritual guidance arose which depended on the wisdom and character of certain spiritually mature individuals. These spiritually mature *abbas* and *ammās* were seen as spiritual fathers and mothers of the disciples who sought their guidance. The 'children', the seekers, came to the *abba* or *amma* sincerely desiring to detach themselves from worldly concerns and to become more like the *abba* or *amma*, to become more fully immersed in God. Often these disciples lived alongside their spiritual parents, trusting that their lives would be moulded under the influence of the *abba* or *amma*.

A significant part of this relationship was the seeker's desire to receive from the *abba* or *amma* a 'word' that would bring true life. This word – a brief story, an observation, a reflection on life with God – was tailored to the unique situation of each disciple. 'Its purpose was to reveal and heal the particular weaknesses or deficiencies in the seeker.'² The word was not to be analysed, and might be incomprehensible.³ For example, upon asking for a word, a disciple could have received a story such as this: When a certain brother asked Abba Joseph what else he could do besides his regular routine of fasting, praying, living in peace, and purifying his thoughts, 'the old man stood up and stretched his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, "If you will, you can become all flame".'⁴ Disciples were to let their lives be filled and surrounded by such sayings, living into these spoken words so that they might come alive in the seekers' lives.

By lifelong attachment to a spiritual parent, the disciple hoped to attain a spirituality consisting of a deep inner peace, detachment from destructive physical and mental passions, an abiding quietude, a sense of lasting freedom from the concerns of the world, charity and complete reliance on God. These gifts could be received in so far as one lived a life of submission, self-surrender and obedience to the life of the *abba* or *amma*.

'Spiritual parent' in the monastic tradition

A second form of spiritual direction consists of what Janet Ruffing calls a 'medieval, Benedictine monastic model'.⁵ This

model continues the parent-child relationship established by the *abbalamma* tradition. The monastic pattern, however, modified the relationship by de-emphasizing the role of individual charismatic figures conveying to individual disciples a unique way of life. Rather, the monastery functioned as a regulated environment for training groups of individuals in a well-defined life of asceticism. Individual abbots and abbesses or spiritually mature monks and nuns took on the responsibility for guiding their 'children' in the ways of God, but the community's rule of life determined what was taught. The monastery was like a school with a set curriculum. The spiritual parent's task was to teach the common curriculum in a consistent, faithful manner. Thus, in the monastery the primary function of the spiritual parent shifted from that of life-mentor and role model to that of teacher.

The Benedictine monastic *schola* taught the ways of common prayer, spiritual reading of Scripture (*lectio divina*), work, obedience, silence and stability. Through constantly engaging these spiritual practices, the cenobite drew ever more deeply into a spirituality that was experienced as humility, purity of heart, compunction, hospitality and absorption into the image of Christ.

'Spiritual parent' in medieval lay movements

A third type of spiritual direction, a 'medieval, non-monastic' model, arose in concert with lay spirituality movements during the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries.⁶

Hadewijch of Antwerp, Catherine of Siena, Julian of Norwich, and other holy women embraced the ministry of spiritual direction as people began to recognize in them a gift for guiding others to deeper intimacy with God. Like the model of spiritual direction practised by the desert *abbas* and *ammās*, this form depended on charismatic individuals who attracted seekers through the bold commitment of their lives, the power of their wisdom and the insightfulness of their teachings. Further, the image of the spiritual director as parent remains strong in this model. For example, 'Catherine of Siena called her followers her "family" of which she was their acknowledged "mamma" regardless of the age differences among them'.⁷ Unlike the desert model, however, this medieval form of spiritual direction did not seem to entail such unquestioning devotion to the life and teachings of the spiritual parent. Letters and spiritual conversations, both with individuals and in groups, took the place of unique 'words' spoken to a submissive disciple in the desert

model and substituted for the formalized teaching of student-novices in the monastic model. Such loosening of authoritative oversight allowed for individuals to explore more freely their own unique spiritual lives in new ways, while leaving more openings for conflicts to split communities.

This relative freedom from the authority of the spiritual guide is not especially surprising. The lay movements themselves tended to foster spiritualities that emphasized the capacity of the individual to encounter God's presence apart from priestly or ecclesial mediation. Mystical and ecstatic experiences were a common feature of the spiritualities of the leaders and followers of these movements. In addition, the spiritualities of these movements found expression in ministries of charity and mercy that were not necessarily initiated or sanctioned by the church magisterium.

God and Christ as models for 'spiritual parenthood'

In each of the above types of spiritual direction the dominant image is that of 'spiritual parent'. But in what way, if any, is 'parent' a biblical image? Not surprisingly, certain voices in the spiritual direction tradition draw on New Testament references to the 'fatherhood' of God in characterizing the spiritual guide as parent. Further, the New Testament portrayal of Christ seems to have offered an important image of divine fatherhood. Both of these sources lie behind the words of Symeon the New Theologian:

Putting all things into the hands of your spiritual father, as in the hand of God, is an act of perfect faith . . . A person who has developed a living faith in his spiritual father, when seeing him, thinks he is seeing Christ himself. Being in his presence or following him, he firmly believes that he is with Christ and is following Christ.⁸

Paul as 'spiritual parent'

The apostle Paul has also served as a New Testament model for those who draw on the image of spiritual director as parent. The words of Basil of Caesarea illustrate this.

'Come my children, listen to me: I will instruct you in the fear of the Lord.' This is the voice of your faithful teacher, encouraging you to learn through his fatherly kindness. The disciple is truly the spiritual child of the teacher. The person who receives from another guidance in holiness is shaped by him and is brought to life, just as

the fetus of a mother is formed within her and is brought to life. For this reason Paul himself took upon himself the whole Church of the Galatians, which had fallen away from his earlier instruction and was, as it were, about to be aborted. Paul formed Christ in them anew and called them little children; and, when with pain and sorrow he corrected those erring children, he said that he was in labor in his soul because of his personal pain over those who had fallen away. 'My dear children, with whom I am in labor again, until Christ is formed in you.' Therefore, 'Come, children, listen to me . . .'⁹

Indeed, Paul's description of himself as a mother continuing to give birth to her Galatian children (Gal 4:19) is supplemented by his reference to himself as the Corinthians' 'father through the gospel' (1 Cor 4:15). In employing parental images, Paul is stressing that the members of the churches he has given birth to ought to imitate him (1 Cor 4:16), return to the childlike spirit of goodwill they felt toward him (Gal 4:15), and mature into the freedom of Christ that has delivered them from slavery under the law (Gal 4:21-31).

Of course, Paul's work among the churches he founded was more multi-faceted and expansive than the ministry of spiritual guidance that has developed over the ages. He was primarily an evangelist, spreading the gospel by planting churches and overseeing their progress. Spiritual direction, *per se*, was merely one aspect of Paul's role. Nevertheless, in the three classical models of spiritual direction I have outlined above, the parental image provided by Paul's ministry dominates. While the underlying image of the fatherhood of God occasionally bubbles to the surface, Paul's relationship with his 'children' seems to have served as the primary model for the desert's mentorships, the Benedictines' formative teaching and the charismatic wisdom figures of the medieval lay movements.

The ideal parent

In certain idealized forms, the Pauline role of the spiritual parent coincided with the description given by Bernard of Clairvaux:

Know, that you must be mothers to those that are assigned to you and not masters. If, from time to time, severity must be employed, let it be fatherly and not tyrannical. Show yourselves mothers in encouragement and fathers in correction . . . Why make more burdensome the yoke of those whose burdens you carry? Why should

this little child, bitten by the serpent, avoid the priest, when he ought to fly to him as he would to the breast of his mother?¹⁰

While our contemporary sensibilities may spark us to question the stereotypes of fathers and mothers Bernard employs, there is no question that he wants to encourage a spiritual parenthood that is gracious, freeing and loving. Unfortunately, such attitudes too often shrivel and die in the heat of ministry. In their place may linger the tyranny Bernard abhors – particularly when the underlying image of ministry is one that suggests hierarchy. Ironically, this danger is vividly demonstrated in the Pauline passages that serve as the primary sources of the parental image. In Galatians and 1 Corinthians Paul resembles any number of saddened, perplexed, angry parents, disappointed and frustrated to find that their children – with the rebellious nature of teenagers finding their own ways in life – no longer respect them, refuse to submit to the life they have modelled, have stopped following their teachings and resist obeying the truths they speak.

It is not surprising, then, that a strong strand of the spiritual direction tradition in western Christianity developed into an autocratic form of spiritual direction Janet Ruffing calls the 'Post-Tridentine Director of Conscience'.¹¹ In this model – which gave rise to the term 'director' – spiritual direction and confession were necessarily a part of the same relationship. Even more clearly than in earlier forms of spiritual guidance, the spiritual director's task was to judge whether the penitent was faithfully avoiding sin and to enforce necessary correctives. This task included the preservation of orthodoxy in the face of the threat of perceived heresies, and assumed that the spiritual life of the penitent was governed by the spiritual director. Ruffing points out that this type of spiritual guidance was particularly susceptible to abuse, as it perpetuated a spirituality in which the spiritual director mediated connection with God, individuals were allowed to suffer at the hands of incompetent or tyrannical directors and the directee was placed in the role of a helpless infant. The seeds of authoritarianism inherent in the image of spiritual guide as parent come to full flower in the 'director of conscience'. Unfortunately, in the modern era this authoritarian tendency has influenced virtually all traditions of spiritual direction, even those – such as the Ignatian approach – that many would argue do not depend on a parental model.

RECOVERING SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

In spite of the shortcomings of spiritual direction styles based on Pauline images of spiritual parenthood, Christians have embraced these models in a variety of situations, historical eras, and cultural contexts. As the Church moves into its twenty-first century, however, parental models continue to become less appropriate, less helpful, less fruitful. New understandings of the relationship of spiritual formation to human development, to women's experience and to the influences of cultural contexts encourage the search for approaches to spiritual guidance that are not as one-dimensional and hierarchical as spiritual direction models based in parental images.¹²

As I have stated, the search for contemporary approaches to spiritual direction must include looking to the New Testament. But where do we begin? I believe the gospel portrayals of Jesus' ministry offer at least one profound, expansive image for contemporary models of spiritual direction: the image of friendship.

Jesus as friend

In the midst of the lengthy 'farewell discourse' of John 13—16, Jesus' words about friendship offer us a central image for contemporary spiritual guidance relationships: 'I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends . . .' (Jn 15:15). In the 'farewell discourse' Jesus is conveying to his disciples, his friends, the truth about who he is, what his life has meant, where he is headed, the manner in which he will always remain with them and how they are to live as a result of his abiding presence. In calling his disciples friends, Jesus is emphasizing the intimacy they are enjoying with him. They have been offered all the knowledge and experience they need to continue in the way in which Jesus has led them. They are not like servants or slaves who come and go at the master's beck and call, oblivious to the deeper meanings and broader movements of life. No, Jesus has told them what he knows of God, has shown them what he knows of the ways of God. So now they are full partners with him in his ministry, facing the same kind of persecution Jesus has faced (Jn 15:18-21), able to bear the same kind of fruit that Jesus has borne (Jn 15:16).

Spiritual director as friend

Clearly, John 15:15 is not to be taken as Jesus' manifesto for spiritual directors. Jesus is not speaking here of the particular ministry of spiritual guidance that arose in the Church centuries after the Gospel of John was written. In fact, these words, like Jesus' ministry, represent a breadth of concern that exceeds the scope of spiritual direction.

Jesus' words about friendship are but one piece of his 'last testament', which is his most complete self-disclosure to those who will further his ministry.¹³

Still, certain voices in the spiritual guidance tradition have recognized in Jesus' words about friendship a powerful image for the spiritual direction relationship. In fact, the notion of spiritual director as friend appears rather frequently throughout the various traditions of spiritual guidance. Usually, however, spiritual friendship is characterized as merely one dimension of spiritual parenthood: the image of friendship is lifted up when the tenderness and loving-kindness of the director needs to be stressed. Occasionally, though, the image of spiritual friend has been more dominant. Spiritual guidance in the Celtic church, for instance, seems to have drawn on a 'soul-friend' (*anamchara*) tradition that existed before Christianity arrived in Ireland.¹⁴ Rather than spiritual parent, mentor, master or confessor, the soul-friend appears to have been more like a trustworthy spiritual counsellor, a person gifted in helping his or her peers discern the ways of God.

Outside the Celtic tradition, perhaps the most vivid descriptions of spiritual director as friend come from Aelred of Rievaulx:

What happiness, what confidence, what joy to have a person to whom you dare to speak on terms of equality as to another self. You can also without shame make known whatever advances you have made in the spiritual life. You can entrust all the secrets of your heart to him and before him you can lay out all your plans. What, therefore, is more pleasant than to unite your spirit to that of another person and of two to form one. No bragging is to be feared after this and no suspicion need be feared. No correction of one by the other will cause pain; no praise on the part of one will bring a charge of excessive flattery from the other . . . Friendship is a moment quite near to that perfection which consists in the love and knowledge of God so that a person goes from being a friend of his fellowman and becomes the friend of God, according to the words

of the Savior in the Gospel, 'I will not now call you servants, but my friends'.¹⁵

Notice that Aelred's words do not couch spiritual friendship in terms of a parental model of spiritual direction. To do so would be to set the spiritual director up as a kind of elevated Jesus figure, graciously deigning to grant his coveted friendship to the directee. In fact, in Aelred's description, the spiritual guide is not a Jesus figure at all. Rather, director and directee are friends of one another, and so together are friends of Jesus, the one who washes their feet (Jn 13:1–20). The mutuality of the friendship that occurs in the spiritual direction relationship reflects Jesus' call to befriend, to love one another (Jn 15:12–14).¹⁶ Through this friendship, both parties in the spiritual guidance relationship experience the friendship of Jesus, the love of God.

The nature of spiritual friendship

What are the characteristics of spiritual friend in spiritual guidance? In *The Church in the power of the Spirit*, Jürgen Moltmann offers an extended commentary on the notion of friendship conveyed by John 15:15 and supplemented by the portrayal of Jesus as 'a friend of tax collectors and sinners' (Lk 7:34).¹⁷ For Moltmann, 'friend' describes 'the inner relationship' at the heart of the communion between God and humankind and between persons.¹⁸ Jesus models this friendship in his relationships with those around him, and calls all people to befriend one another. In fact, Moltmann posits friendship as the ultimate expression of the gospel: 'When, in the field of human relationships, the parent-child relation comes to an end, when the master-servant connection is abolished and when the privileges based on sexual position are removed, then what is truly human emerges and remains; and that is friendship'.¹⁹ True friendship fosters a spirituality of freedom and affection, which allows us to recognize, respect and accept who we are. Friendship is 'a human relationship which springs from freedom, exists in mutual freedom and preserves that freedom'.²⁰

While not necessarily intended to describe the nature of spiritual direction, Moltmann's words help us flesh out a friendship model of spiritual guidance. In a spiritual direction relationship modelled after Jesus' notion of friendship, the directee's spirituality is not governed by the director. Nor does the director infantilize the directee, taking the stance of spiritual expert, clearly seeing the way ahead and

working to keep the obedient directee on a preconceived path. Rather, the director honours the experience of the seeker, welcomes the directee in love and strives to establish a sacred environment of safety and trust in which the directee can freely explore where and how God is in his or her life. The director recognizes that the primary relationship is between God and the directee. So the director is the loyal friend who remains true through thick and thin, encouraging, reflecting back what she notices, asking questions, probing as necessary, offering insights and suggestions when appropriate, and always speaking the truth in love. Spiritual directors set aside their own agendas concerning their directees' lives, and instead seek to help these spiritual friends uncover their own unique ways with God.

Aspects of spiritual friendship in the ministry of Jesus

The spiritual friend's willingness to let directees discover their own ways with God appears in prominent aspects of Jesus' ministry. The gospels portray Jesus using stories, parables and questions to invite people to explore their own spiritual lives. Rather than laying out an agenda for the lives of the people he encountered, Jesus challenged them to seek God's way in their own experience. When people asked Jesus a question, he often turned it back to them, changing it, refocusing it so that they might receive it as an opening to God. For instance, when a lawyer asked Jesus, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus refused to give him the answer. Instead he began to draw out the lawyer's own sense of what it means to live with God: 'What is written in the Law? What do you read there?' (Lk 10:25-26). With these and other questions – such as 'Who do you say that I am?' (Mt 15:15) and 'What do you want me to do for you?' (Mk 10:51) – Jesus constantly challenged people to discern for themselves how God was moving in their lives. Jesus was the trusted spiritual friend, continually pointing his companions back to their own relationship with God.²¹

Various forms of spiritual friendship

Viewing spiritual direction as a relationship between friends may suggest to some Christians that the only legitimate forms of spiritual guidance are those in which two or more persons serve as spiritual guides for one another, alternating roles or engaging in a group dialogue. Certainly the friendship model encompasses – even encourages – this style of spiritual direction. On the other hand, the image

of spiritual friendship need not discourage those traditions in which certain persons develop a particular ministry of spiritual guidance at the service of others. Further, it should not be seen to encourage incompetence or lack of wisdom in spiritual guidance relationships. Shared ignorance will never define a vital spiritual friendship. This is as true of spiritual direction relationships in which peers serve as guides for one another as it is in those relationships in which one person consistently serves as the spiritual director. The key lies in the attitude the spiritual guide brings to the relationship. Even directors within a system that encourages rather one-dimensional hierarchies can fruitfully ground their own spiritual direction relationships in the image of friendship.

The expansiveness of the spiritual friendship image allows it to serve as the source of a variety of metaphors for spiritual direction. For instance, Margaret Guenther's description of the spiritual director as 'midwife to the soul' characterizes a profound kind of spiritual friendship:

The midwife is present to another in a time of vulnerability, working in areas that are deep and intimate. It is a relationship of trust and mutual respect. Unlike most physicians, she does not fear her professionalism will be threatened by a degree of intimacy with the women who have come to her for help. She is willing to be called by her given name, even as she addresses the birthgiver by hers. She does things *with*, not *to*, the person giving birth.²²

Similarly, the metaphor of 'spiritual companion' flows from the spiritual friend image. As companion, the spiritual director accompanies the directee on his spiritual journey. The director knows something of the journey. Perhaps she has already travelled this way. Or perhaps she has heard it described by others. In any case, she is accomplished at pointing out the sights along the way and helping the directee notice, embrace and interpret what is coming around the next bend or over the next rise. Further, as the directee describes what he sees on this journey, the spiritual director herself encounters God's presence in new ways. Through the sharing of one spiritual journey, these companions, these friends, both receive new experiences of friendship with God.

The abiding friendship of Jesus

As we have seen, the farewell discourse of Jesus in John 13—16 grounds the ministry of spiritual direction in an image of spiritual friendship. Contemporary spiritual directors will do well to keep returning to Jesus' words. For besides calling his disciples 'friends' in this so-called final testament, Jesus promises that he will remain with them always in the form of 'another Paraclete' (John 14:16).²³ In the Johannine tradition, Jesus is the first Paraclete – the first Helper, Advocate or Consoler – and the Holy Spirit is the second (1 Jn 2:1). Jesus assures his disciples that this second Paraclete will come to teach them, bring them truth, strengthen them, encourage them, testify on Jesus' behalf and abide with them as Jesus himself has dwelt with them. In short, this Spirit of truth will remain with them 'to carry on the earthly work of Jesus'.²⁴

With this promise, spiritual guides can trust that Jesus is the friend who abides with them still. Jesus, through the continuing presence of the Spirit, befriends the director and directee, offering freedom, support, wisdom. So the spiritual guide need not bear the burden of 'getting it right'; the directee's spiritual life is not ultimately the director's responsibility. The spiritual guide does not have to be the spiritual father or mother, the expert, the guru. Instead, the director is a spiritual friend who has honed a particular gift, a gift of attentiveness, a gift of discernment. The spiritual guide's task is to keep pointing the directee to the living presence of Jesus who is abiding with them in the Spirit. In this way these spiritual friends will continue to live in the freedom of the one friendship that lasts for ever.

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NOTES

- 1 The three forms of spiritual direction I describe here are named according to the typology in Janet Ruffing, *Uncovering stories of faith: spiritual direction and narrative* (New York, 1989), pp 2–17. For a thorough history of spiritual direction, see Kenneth Leech, *Soul friend: the practice of Christian spirituality* (San Francisco, 1977), pp 34–89.
- 2 Ruffing, p 3.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Benedicta Ward (trans), *Sayings of the desert fathers* (Kalamazoo MI, 1975), p 103.
- 5 Ruffing, p 5.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p 7.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p 9.
- 8 Symeon the New Theologian, *Chapitres théologiques, gnostiques et pratiques*, ed J. Darrouzès, Sources chrétiennes, vol 51 (Paris, 1957), quoted in Jerome M. Neufelder and Mary C. Coelho (eds), *Writings on spiritual direction* (New York, 1982), p 18.
- 9 Neufelder and Coelho, p 20.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p 31.
- 11 Ruffing, p 12.
- 12 For examples of newly forming perspectives on spiritual formation see Kathleen Fischer, *Women at the well: feminist perspectives on spiritual direction* (New York, 1988); Margaret Guenther, *Holy listening: the art of spiritual direction* (Cambridge, 1992); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We drink from our own wells: the spiritual journey of a people* (Maryknoll NY, 1984); Elizabeth Liebert, *Changing life patterns: adult development in spiritual direction* (New York, 1992).
- 13 Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (New York, 1955), p 582.
- 14 Leech, pp 49–50.
- 15 Aelfred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual friendship*, (trans) M. E. Laker (Kalamazoo MI, 1974), quoted in Neufelder and Coelho, pp 33–34.
- 16 Brown, p 664. Brown notes that the word *philos* means friend in the sense of beloved one, or my beloved.
- 17 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the power of the Spirit* (New York, 1977), pp 114–121.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p 115.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p 116.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Much of the material in this paragraph was first developed in my article 'The art of spiritual direction' in the journal *Youthworker* (July/August 1997), pp 47–48. Jesus' manner of using questions for spiritual guidance was first brought to my attention by Tom Schwanda in his lectures for the Graduate Certificate in the Art of Spiritual Direction, San Francisco Theological Seminary, January 1997. Also see Carolyn Gratton, *Guidelines for spiritual direction* (Denville NJ, 1980), pp 27–32.
- 22 Guenther, p 87.
- 23 For a thorough analysis of 'Paraclete', see Brown, pp 1135–1144.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p 639.