

What contribution can the Celtic 'soul-friend' make when considering contemporary one-to-one approaches to discipleship and spiritual formation?

Abstract

This paper explores the topic of one-to-one discipleship with particular reference to the Celtic concept of the soul-friend, examining the question 'what contribution can the soul-friend make to one-to-one approaches to discipleship and spiritual formation?'

The topic is significant because it touches on an aspect of Celtic spirituality which is growing in popularity, and it also considers one-to-one relationships as part of discipling. It also touches on the important practice of confession.

The paper looks at how the original soul-friend figure may have operated and compares this with more modern expressions, and it does this by looking at three modern communities - the Iona Community, the Northumbria Community and the Community of Aidan and Hilda. The paper also looks in more detail at one of the most significant aspects of the soul-friend relationship - at least originally - private confession.

The assignment engages with a range of significant written sources and provides a critique of those resources in coming to its conclusions. There is also firsthand interviews with those from relevant contemporary communities.

The conclusion the paper draws is that there is some distinctions to be found between original and more modern understandings of the role of the soul-friend, there are also distinctions to be found between soul-friendship and other one to one discipling relationships, and finally that there is still a place for private confession within the life of a Christian - and that this is in fact a healthy practice.

Contents Page

Chapter 1 - The Celtic soul-friend..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Origins **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Early influences **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Modern renderings of soul-friendship..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Chapter 2 - Soul-friendship and other one to one relationships Error! Bookmark not defined.

Comparisons between soul-friendship and other one-to-one relationships **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Soul-friendship and the Spiritual Director **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Critique of soul-friendship **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Contribution of soul-friendship - confession **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Chapter 3 - The place of confession in contemporary discipleship..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

The place of confession today **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Conclusion 3

Appendix 1 - Questions for one-to-one interviews Error! Bookmark not defined.

Appendix 2 - 'Way of Life' of Community of Aidan and Hilda Error! Bookmark not defined.

Appendix 3 - Rule of Northumbria Community..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Appendix 4 - Rule of Iona Community..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Conclusion

This dissertation has been concerned with the contribution the Celtic Christian understanding of the soul-friend can make to the life of discipleship and spiritual formation, particularly when considering one-to-one relationships.

The first chapter looked at the origins of and early influences on the soul-friend figure, as well as more modern renderings of the role through a look at the Iona Community, the Community of Aidan and Hilda and the Northumbria Community. It became clear that there was some variation. The original figure operated in the context of a monastic community, which included adherence to a rule of life and meant that the members of the community were eating, working and praying together - as well as receiving personal direction from their soul-friend.

In the three more contemporary communities this was not the case. While they all adhered to some sort of rule they were often geographically separate. As well as differing cultural contexts there was also a distinction in emphasis. The original form of soul-friendship had a much stronger focus on confession and penance and could be quite rigorous in nature, indeed one of the communities considered actively avoided incorporating soul-friendship into their way of life as a pastorally sensitive response to a wider phenomenon experienced in the church at the time. Although that was the case, they subsequently introduced it and consider it to be a valuable part of their community life.

In chapter two there was a broader discussion around some of the other one-to-one relationships - specifically mentoring, counselling and spiritual direction. The distinction between soul-friendship and the first two was easy to establish and was based on the location of the primary emphasis of the relationship.

The distinction between soul-friendship and spiritual direction was more difficult to establish, and in fact any distinctions found were really quite minimal mainly revolving around issues of training and the question of who can be a soul-friend and who can be a spiritual director. I suggested that the soul-friend figure could fit more comfortably into the local church context, whereas someone seeking a spiritual director often looks outside their

local congregation, so divorcing that relationship from a wider community that helps to prevent an over-individualisation.

Throughout chapters one and two it became clear that private confession was an important feature of soul-friendship and chapter three discussed this in more detail, seeking to provide a case for a recovery of the practice. Although seemingly harsh to modern ears - and perhaps carrying some negative connotations - confession and penance were in fact shown to be healthy and life-giving practices, despite an acknowledgement of some of the issues around confession. The chapter identified relief of guilt as one of the main benefits.

There was also a recognition that there may be a need to adjust the language to make it more palatable to modern ears but nonetheless the soul-friend is someone who would stand with another and provide a safe space for honest confession to take place - a practice that has benefits for an individual's relationship with God, self and others.

Further work could helpfully be done to consider the actual shape the soul-friend relationship would take within the local congregation and the steps needed to bring that about. I was recently involved in delivering a short introduction to a group of interested people in a local congregation and I saw this as being a good first step along the road to seeing soul-friendship operating in the local congregation. There would need to be a balance between guidance and instruction as to what a soul-friend is and does on the one hand, whilst not being overly prescriptive and controlling on the other - the phrase "high accountability, low control"¹ comes to mind.

A bigger issue is whether a change is needed in the wider congregation and the way a particular church is structured if they decide to go down this route. I say this because a stronger sense of community than what presently exists in many churches may well be needed to ensure the safest possible environment within which a soul-friendship relationship can take place. If not, as was hinted at in chapter three, the soul-friend relationship could easily play into the hands of an over-individualistic culture and so actually be detrimental to someone's spiritual formation as it may turn into a consumer spirituality.

¹ M. Breen, *Leading Missional Communities*, (Pawleys Island: 3 Dimension Ministries, 2013), p10.

Although only mentioned in passing, Bonhoeffer brings an interesting perspective to this topic that is worth further exploration. In a different culture and context he sought to develop a community with something of a monastic edge to it at the seminary in Finkenwalde. He is the source of a quote that inspired the Northumbria Community in their endeavours, claiming that "the renewal of the church will come from a new kind of monasticism."² Indeed it is not unrealistic to suggest that his book 'Life Together' is something of a rule of the community life and within that book, and at least one other³ - he dedicates a chapter to confession and its significance within the community. Bearing this in mind it may prove fruitful to take a deeper look at the work of Bonhoeffer and what he writes about community, confession and one-to-one relationships within the broader framework of a life of discipleship.

I also think that it would be interesting to see more work done on the potential for the soul-friend role and the practice of confession within modern medicine. If human beings are an integrated whole of body, mind and spirit what place would there be for seeing confession forming part of a medical check-up. It could indeed be the case that unconfessed secrets or a deep sense of guilt is bringing with it anxiety and worry that is manifesting in some physical symptoms. In this regard it would be fruitful to do further work on the soul-friend, confession and the hospital chaplain - maybe the hospital chaplain could facilitate more overt confession within their conversations.

² Northumbria Community, *A Way for Living*, p3.

³ Bonhoeffer, D, *Spiritual Care*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985).