

Stephen Faller, *The Art of Spiritual Midwifery: DiaLogos and Dialectic in the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge, UK: The Lutterworth Press, 2015). xix +142 pp. paperback

Stephen Faller presents, with obvious glee, what he owns as a personal project to investigate the history of midwifery as a spiritual metaphor and bring to light the potential of the metaphor to aid spiritual care-givers in the task of birthing all that God would have birthed in and through those they are involved with. The paradox in which “the very person giving birth [spiritually] is also the one being reborn” (12) sets the scene for the philosophical tone of the book and the complexities associated with, not just midwifery as a spiritual metaphor, but the inevitable dialectic that engages those who are involved in the voluntary act of encouragement of others into new or deeper spiritual formation.

Faller draws upon the ancient works of Socrates and Heraclitus for the framework of the book and, more recently, with the work of Kierkegaard so as to give a thorough philosophical foundation for his thoughts. This is further supplemented by reference to other philosophers and academics followed by practical application of the principles offered.

The book is divided into three parts, the first of which enlightens as to the metaphors of midwife, baby, and dialogue in relation to Socrates, Kierkegaard and assorted other scholars and academic practitioners. Part two looks at aspects of the care-giver’s method. These chapters include reference to objectivity, subjectivity and indirect communication; the use of Socratic irony for fruitful listening; Socratic negation as a tool to maintain non-directive counsel; and use of inductive logic to help the counselee into new freedom without denying or merely giving in to the causes of past, current and/or potential future difficulties resulting from previous unhelpful experiences. Part three moves into essential practicalities of the midwife/care-giver’s role including examining the form and use of parables (aside from their Biblical use) in terms of paradox and literary negativity, Jesus as an inductive logician, and the need for the care-giver to be centred and leave personal bias aside.

The final chapter includes pointers for care-givers from the *The Man who Listens to Horses* by Monty Roberts (New York: Ballantine, 1997)—a historical “horse whisperer” figure famed for his ability to communicate with horses with the uncanny degree of empathy needed to encourage horses to willingly submit to being ridden as opposed to being “broken” for riders. Part three ends with a few of the more recognizable aspects of the work of spiritual care-giving or spiritual

formation such as prayer, and the use and nature of questions so as to enable both parties to enter potential unknowns with confidence. The book closes with a Symposium in which the book, itself, is the subject of discussion by scholars and practitioners in a purposeful manner not unlike Plato's *Symposium* on love in the fourth century before Christ.

Faller establishes his points via thoughtful and engagingly artistic interaction with his sources, both ancient and more modern. He offers interesting quotes from a variety of quite unusual and secular sources including the Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu.

The flow of content seems to be aiming for readers who revel in mystery and adventure since, at times, definitions and clarifying material seem to be rather unhelpfully placed for those who do not naturally enjoy seeming incoherency in flow of thought. This is particularly so for the move in material from part two to part three which sees part three unexplainably jump into the use and nature of parables long before indicating in the chapter the purpose for this discourse; similarly in chapter six in which an example in clinical practice of negation rather leaves the intricacy of the term hanging until a definition of negation is later provided, and again in chapter nine where the concept of "center" is described as subjective (96) but not fully defined until after the statement that "It is profoundly obvious why a midwife should need to be centred" (98).

This latter incoherency represents something of a major lack particularly since Faller's use of the term centeredness, which he describes as "a kind of readiness for the business of midwifery" (99) and "a central interior practice" (101), is surprisingly detached from the definition that would have been expected in spiritual formation literature i.e. the centeredness in which one is specifically "awakened to the presence and action of the Holy Spirit" within, as can be found in the Classical spiritual discipline of centering prayer (cf. Patricia Brown *Paths to Prayer* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003, 140). The nearest Faller comes to linking centeredness with the spiritual realm, apart from indirectly by mere implication, is in the observation that "it is an interesting space to pray from" (101).

Faller's book presents thoughts on spiritual care-giving with the use of the novel concept of midwifery but perhaps over-focuses on the philosophical use of the metaphor across history and rather under-focuses on the wider spiritual issues that the metaphor inevitably engenders. Other more recent contributions to Spiritual Formation literature for graduate level studies can perhaps be better found in the likes of Henri Nouwen's *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (London: SPCK, 2011) which presents a beautifully fresh attempt at explaining and engaging with some of the

paradoxes of change and growth, or Paul Zahl's *Grace in Practice: A Theology of Everyday Life* (Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2007). These texts both contain distinctly less attention to underlying philosophy but are academically rigorous whilst also overflowing with practical application.

Whilst some helpful points do eventually emerge from Faller's well-articulated philosophical framework, it is unlikely that this text will become much more than a lesser supplementary text on a Spiritual Formation bookshelf outside Europe. As one of the symposium contributor's offered, albeit in the context of appreciation of Faller's scholarly work: "My students will [only] read the quote [at the start of each chapter] and the summary [at the end of each chapter] and call it a day!"(131)

*Reviewed by Dr V.J.D-Davidson*