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Kierkegaard, the Lost Evangelical

Abstract

In this article, we will argue that the thinker, Søren Kierkegaard, should be associated with Evangelicalism. We will first define Evangelicalism through its distinctives, arguing that it has four distinctives: (1) Its emphasis on a Christian's "rebirth" being the central moment in their spiritual life, (2) an epistemological emphasis on the Bible, (3) an outspoken presence in the public square, and (4) evangelism. After doing so, we will demonstrate that Kierkegaard exhibits all four of these distinctives. We will do so by utilizing a biographical reading of his works. Central to which is an understanding of Easter 1848 as a key moment in Kierkegaard's life, where he has a spiritual awakening or conversion.

Cover Page Footnote

Armen Oganessian, PhD in Divinity (University of Aberdeen), 2018

Kierkegaard, the Lost Evangelical

What makes a thinker an evangelical? “Evangelicals”, answers the National Association of Evangelicals, “take the Bible seriously and believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.”¹ The Evangelical Theological Society takes it a step further. In their doctrinal confession, they require their members to hold to “the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety” as the Word of God. Thus, their members must believe that the canon’s 66 books are inerrant in the autographs.² In his *Who is an Evangelical?*, Thomas Kidd argues that Evangelicals unify in their emphasis of the key moment of the individual’s “new birth.”³ Sherwood Wirt argues that evangelicals hold the view that the church is divinely called to proclaim the good news of God’s love and the gift of salvation.⁴ That is, Evangelicals are evangelists.

David Bebbington argues that evangelicalism has four tenets: One, a belief that an individual’s life needs to change. Two, a belief that all spiritual truth is found in the Bible. Three, public activism. Four, a belief that Christ’s death is crucial to atonement.⁵ We can thus summarize Evangelicals as having four major distinctives: One, the “rebirth” being a central moment in an individual’s spiritual life or narrative. Two, an epistemological emphasis on the Bible. Third, an outspoken presence in the public square. Fourth, closely linked to the third distinctive, they utilize their public presence to proclaim the gospel, effectively functioning as evangelists. In light of these distinctives, scholars and churchmen associate certain thinkers with Evangelicalism and its history. Figures like D.L. Moody, John Calvin, Herman Bavinck, Abraham Kuyper, Billy Graham, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, etc. One figure, however, is often missing from the list: Søren Kierkegaard. As it is described above, we should understand Kierkegaard as an Evangelical. Below, we will demonstrate how Kierkegaard’s thought parallels the emphasis in Evangelicalism.

¹ National Association of Evangelicals, “What is an Evangelical?,” April 18, 2023, <https://www.nae.org/what-is-an-evangelical>.

² The Evangelical Theological Society, “ETS Constitution”, April 18, 2023, <https://www.etsjets.org/about/constitution#A3>.

³ Thomas S. Kidd, *Who Is an Evangelical? The History of a Movement in Crisis*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 12.

⁴ Sherwood Wirt, *The Social Conscience of the Evangelical* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1968), 149.

⁵ Mark Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 19.

Kierkegaard, a Situational Theologian

Understanding Kierkegaard as an evangelical begins with reading his publications through a biographical lens. Kierkegaard was not a systematic theologian or thinker. Instead, we may describe him as a situational theologian. That is, he did not attempt to construct a complete systematic theology. Rather, he provided theological corrections tailored to his specific context. As such, doctrinal criteria typically associated with evangelicalism, such as total depravity, views on the sacraments, or eschatology, may not apply to him comprehensively.⁶ Instead, through a biographical reading, we observe Kierkegaard addressing and rectifying errors within his own circumstances. From these corrections, we can discern an emphasis that mirror the emphases of Evangelicalism.

As we will see, Kierkegaard offered corrections to the Danish Lutheran Church of his day, pointing out where the church fell short of exhibiting New Testament Christianity. To understand his position, one must consider it in the context of the established church. That is, if the church is not failing in some area, Kierkegaard would not offer correction. For instance, consider Bebbington's distinctive of "a belief that Christ's death is crucial to atonement." Kierkegaard would only address this issue if he observed his church failing to address it. If his context was not neglecting it, as is the case with the Lutheran Church, he would not address it.⁷ Think of it as an argument between an Evangelical Baptist and an Evangelical Presbyterian minister. In the context of the argument, the Baptist minister speaks on credobaptism and congregationalism, but he never brings up penal substitutionary atonement. He does not do so not because he lacks belief in it, but because both he and the Presbyterian minister share that belief. Therefore, there is no need to bring it up since they agree.

The Biographical Reading

Central to this biographical reading is Easter 1848. On Easter 1848, Kierkegaard had a spiritual awakening or conversion. In his own language, he had a "metamorphosis."⁸ We can understand this metamorphosis as him either "becoming a Christian" or turning to a traditional protestant conception of faith. Kierkegaard's spiritual conversion was a gradual process in which Easter 1848 was the culmination of a year of intense self-reflection sparked by the Adler and

⁶ Examples of such defining doctrinal positions can be found in Richard Quebedeaux, *The Young Evangelicals: Revolution in Orthodoxy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

⁷ One might assume that this distinctive would be found in *Sickness unto Death*. However, Kierkegaard is actually describing the experience of coming to faith in this work, rather than presenting a doctrinal treatise on soteriology.

⁸ Walter Lowrie, *Kierkegaard*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), 2:391

Corsair episodes. We will review the Adler episode in our discussion of Kierkegaard's understanding of the Bible. The Corsair episode is a public feud with the publication "Corsair" and its manager Goldschmidt. This event helps Kierkegaard refine his self-image and task as a writer.⁹

The metamorphosis itself was a clear Christian confession with an appropriation of Christ as Savior.¹⁰ This confession designates a revision in Kierkegaard's thought. He began to view himself as "before God." He now understood his sin as not only forgiven, but also forgotten by God. Kierkegaard had a new decisive qualification of an individual: an individual's self-identity is derivative of their full consciousness of selfhood in relation to their sin.¹¹ The metamorphosis and new conception had a permanent effect on Kierkegaard, and it was the inspiration for all his subsequent writings.

This biographical reading diverges from that which Kierkegaard offers in a retrospective interpretation for his whole body of literature. In *The Point of View of My Work as an Author*, he suggests that his aesthetical writings were an indirect approach to speak to Christendom.¹² He states:

One does not begin thus: I am a Christian; you are not a Christian. Nor does one begin thus: It is Christianity I am proclaiming; and you are living in purely aesthetic categories. No, one begins thus: Let us talk about aesthetics. The deception consists in the fact that one talks thus merely to get to the religious theme. But on our assumption, the other man is under the illusion that the aesthetics is Christianity; for, he thinks, I am a Christian, and yet he lives in aesthetic categories.¹³

Earlier in the work, he asserted that the apparent duplicity in his body of literature was a conscious effort:

The first group of writings represents aesthetic productivity, the last group is exclusively religious: between them, as the turning-point, lies, the *Concluding Postscript*. This work concerns itself with and sets 'the Problem', which is the problem of the whole authorship, how to become a Christian. So it takes cognizance of the pseudonymous work, and of the eighteen edifying discourses as well, showing that all of this serves to

⁹ Lowrie, Kierkegaard, 2:347-63.

¹⁰ Ibid., 2:396.

¹¹ Ibid., 394-401

¹² Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, vol. 22 of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 33-41.

¹³ Søren Kierkegaard. *The Point of View, etc.*, trans. Walter Lowrie. (London: Oxford University Press, 1939). 41

illuminate the Problem-without, however, affirming that this was the aim of the foregoing production, which indeed could not have been affirmed by a pseudonym, a third person, incapable of knowing anything about the aim of a work that was not his own.¹⁴

Kierkegaard's assertion, however, is somewhat dubious. *Point of View* falls short of a true explanation of his full canon.¹⁵ It lacks an explanation for characteristic terms found in his earlier works. In addition, it ignores the pseudonymous writings' profound psychological concepts.¹⁶ In addition, Kierkegaard gives multiple opposing purposes for his earlier writings, confusing us as to which to follow. Are they to win Regine back or for Christendom? We are opting for the interpretation that Kierkegaard wrote earlier writings for Regine and not the benefit of Christendom.¹⁷ We will settle on the former due to a preference for Kierkegaard's journals. They delineate Kierkegaard's rationale better than *Point of View*.¹⁸

The Metamorphosis and the Rebirth

Kierkegaard's thought paralleling in Evangelicalism begins with his emphasis on the rebirth. Scholars often distinguish between Kierkegaard's earlier writings and his latter works. They view earlier Kierkegaard as predominately philosophical and the later as theological. *The Sickness unto Death* published in 1849¹⁹ marks the transition. Kierkegaard sent it to the publisher on June 29, 1849. On the same day, referencing the work's chosen pseudonym, he wrote in his journal, "The pseudonym is named Johannes Anticlimacus, in contrast to Climacus,²⁰ who claimed not to be Christian; Anticlimacus stands at the opposite extreme: a Christian to an extraordinary degree."²¹

In 1847, Kierkegaard felt a "metamorphosis" approaching, causing the eventual transition in his work that led to *Sickness*. He stated in his journal,

¹⁴ Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 13.

¹⁵ Ibid., xvi.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Lowrie. *Kierkegaard*. 1:238.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A New Translation* trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (New York, NY: Liveright, 2023).

²⁰ Climacus is the pseudonym for *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*.

²¹ Bruce H. Kirmmse, "Translator's introduction: The Algebra of the Spirit", in *The Sickness unto Death: A New Translation* by Søren Kierkegaard (New York, NY: Liveright, 2023), vii-xxxiii.

“Something is stirring within me which points to a metamorphosis.”²² The stirring began at the end of the previous year, 1846, as he turned his writing focus to pastoral themes.²³ It eventually culminated in the “metamorphosis” on Easter of 1848.²⁴ In the accompanying journal entries, he writes that his “whole being” was changed. Continuing in his self-reflection, Kierkegaard meditates on the forgiveness of sin. Since God had entirely forgotten his sin, he had become a new man. He hardly recognized himself.²⁵ He now lives his life before God.²⁶

So, before *Sickness*’ publication, Kierkegaard underwent a self-described metamorphosis. Using the evangelical language, we can describe this metamorphosis as his rebirth. Following it, his works become explicitly Christian. The shift in writing and self-revaluation was the process of Kierkegaard “becoming a Christian.” Central to this thesis is *The Sickness unto Death*. In *Sickness*, Kierkegaard discusses his *poet-existence*, introduces the “before God” terminology and replicates Luther’s doctrine of justification.

We now turn to *Sickness* itself. Emanuel Hirsch²⁷ called it the “masterpiece of Kierkegaard as a Christian writer.”²⁸ It is principally the religious replication of the non-religious *Fear and Trembling*. The two works examine the same problems of repentance and faith. *Fear* is the non-ecclesiastic examination. *Sickness* is the pastoral examination.²⁹

In writing *Sickness*, dwelling on sin’s dreadfulness and doubting its forgiveness, Kierkegaard duplicates Luther’s conversion episode.³⁰ The work reflects Kierkegaard’s new faith. He now subscribes to *Sola Fide*. As its subtitle suggests, *Sickness* is a psychological exposition into this new faith. Its psychology, however, is different from what we consider psychology today. The work’s end is religious;³¹ it is for the reader’s edification.³² Kierkegaard prescribes medication for the reader’s *sickness*: faith.³³ The prescription centers

²² Søren Kierkegaard, *The Soul of Kierkegaard: Selections from His Journal* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 128.

²³ Walter Lowrie: *Kierkegaard*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), 2:398-4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 396.

²⁵ Kierkegaard, *The Soul of Kierkegaard*, 137.

²⁶ Søren Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 1948), 210.

²⁷ A German protestant theologian who published in 1933.

²⁸ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness unto Death*, 133.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

³⁰ Lowrie, *Kierkegaard*. 2:409.

³¹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness unto Death*, 133-36.

³² *Ibid.*, 133. We can compare this assertion to *The Concept of Dread*’s psychological discourse, which Lowrie ultimately found unbeneficial even though it had helpful qualities.

³³ *Ibid.*, 139.

on the atonement. That is, Kierkegaard uses a psychological examination of one's faith in the atonement to eradicate the reader's sickness.

As he describes in his journal, we can interpret *Sickness* by transposing an earlier book concept on it. Kierkegaard titled the earlier book "Thoughts Which Heal Fundamentally, Christian Therapeutic." He intended to discuss the atonement by demonstrating its need and where an individual manifests sin. He hoped to do so in three parts: (1) "Thoughts which Wound from Behind-for Edification", (2) "About the Consciousness of Sin" and (3) "Fundamentally Healing the Christian Therapeutic. The Atonement."³⁴ One can transpose two of the three parts on to *Sickness*. "Consciousness of Sin" corresponds to the section of *Sickness* titled "Despair viewed under the aspect of consciousness."³⁵ "Healing the Christian Therapeutic. The Atonement" corresponds to "Despair is Sin."³⁶ When read as such, the two sections express an evangelical soteriology.

The Sickness, Sin, and the Spirit

The interpretation reads thus: Kierkegaard suggests there is a *sickness* that leads to death. This sickness is despair.³⁷ He, in turn, understands despair as taking three forms. (1) The despair at not being conscious of having a self, which is improperly called despair. (2) The despair at not willing to be oneself. (3) The despair at willing to be oneself.³⁸ The first form of despair is unconscious of itself. It is the most common in the world. It is the despair that Christianity calls *the world* or paganism. The individual that shares in this despair is the natural man.³⁹ He suffers from what Kierkegaard calls primary sin.⁴⁰ It is relieved through a revelation of God.

The two "despairs" that are properly called despair, (2) and (3), are positional properties. They derive from being conscious that one is an eternal being. It is one's self-consciousness of being an eternal consciousness. This self-consciousness leads to despair in a specific context: when one is before God. The two despairs are the property of the individual in his relation to God.⁴¹ Before God, one despairs at (3) their willingness or (2) unwillingness to be themselves because of sin. They despair before God because of their *primary sin*. Yet, the two forms of despair are in themselves a secondary manifestation of sin. Sin's

³⁴ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness unto Death*, 135.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 175-208.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 208-13

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 146. Each of these forms of despair recalls the definition of Christianity through faith. The opposite of sin is not virtue but faith; faith is the antithesis of each of these three states.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁴⁰ Lowrie, *Kierkegaard*, 2:413.

⁴¹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness unto Death*, 146.

secondary manifestation is a *sickness* in “the spirit.” By spirit, Kierkegaard is referring to an individual’s self-identity. It is how one relates their finitude to their eternity. The spirit is how a human relates their finiteness to the infinite in unity. It is the relationship to the *relationship*. The spirit is the third positive actor through which one achieves unity. Despair is a *sickness* within this relationship. A *sickness* derived from the individual incorrectly understanding themselves.⁴²

Thinking of it chronologically, in a person’s natural state, the person first suffers from (1) the despair of not being conscious of having a self. They attained to the knowledge of *sin*, primary sin, by a revelation of God. They then manifest one of the two secondary forms of sin, the two despairs properly called despair. The individual despairs *before God* at (3) his willingness or (2) unwillingness to be the Self. This despair is a sickness in the spirit. It is an incorrect self-identity.

The Cure

Kierkegaard describes how one overcomes the despair of self-identity. He does so by finding a new self-identity with faith. Kierkegaard reversely defines faith as a transparent and willing self-identity found in deriving it from God. Kierkegaard relates this definition of faith to sin, stating that faith is the opposite of sin. Citing Romans 14:23, he defines sin by affirming the statement’s converse of “whatsoever is not faith is sin.”

At the end of *Sickness*, Kierkegaard proposes a definition of Christianity. He states, “The opposite of sin is not virtue but faith.”⁴³ This definition is “the most decisive definition for the whole of Christianity.”⁴⁴ In light of reading *Sickness* as a discussion of the atonement, we understand the proposed definition as expressive of Kierkegaard’s soteriology. Kierkegaard views justification as found solely in faith. Faith, not virtue, is the opposite of sin.

Thus, reading Kierkegaard’s tone from the introduction, we understand *Sickness*’ purpose as offering a cure for despair, mirroring Luther who helped his followers with the anxiousness about how “he may satisfy the law.”⁴⁵ This cure is the atonement ministered through faith, offering the individual a self-identity free of despair, transparently grounding him in God. Thus, we can understand Kierkegaard placing an authority on the rebirth. In keeping with the Evangelical emphasis, Kierkegaard understands one’s self-identity in keeping with the new birth. He understands Christian forgiveness connected with a metamorphosis where the whole identity is understood as changed and before God.

⁴² Lowrie, *Kierkegaard*, 2:413

⁴³ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness unto Death*, 213.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 208-13.

⁴⁵ Martin Luther, *Christian Liberty* (Philadelphia, PA: Lutheran Publication Society, 1903), 13.

The Authority of Scripture

To understand Kierkegaard's conception of the Bible and revelation we must turn to *The Book on Adler*. We will again use our biographical lens to read the work. Kierkegaard originally wrote it in 1846. It then went through multiple revisions throughout his life. Yet, the socially sensitive Kierkegaard never published it. He opted not to because it is his response to an event that caused a public stir regarding the minister Adler. Adler had a confused definition of revelation and was eventually dismissed from his post. After his removal, Kierkegaard felt further admonishment was in poor taste. Nonetheless, his would-be response sheds light on his own view of scripture.

The Life of Adler

Like Kierkegaard, Adler was born in Copenhagen to an affluent family. Also, like Kierkegaard, he received an M.A. Finally, he paralleled Kierkegaard by spending a year in study in Germany. The two, however, diverged in their thinking. Adler had a fondness for Hegel. The German philosopher greatly inspires his early writings.⁴⁶

Despite having a prominent academic position, Adler accepted a pastorate for two rural parishes in 1841. In the same year, he had a "vision of light" that turned him against Hegelianism. Adler claimed that Christ requested he burn his early writings where Hegelianism is prominent. A little more than a year after the Hegelian bonfire, in 1843, Christ would be kind enough to dictate to Adler a majority of a large work titled *Several Sermons*. Adler publishes *Several Sermons* at his own expense. The publication and accompanying claim of divine inspiration or direct revelation eventually led to a public commotion and Adler's termination from the pastorate.

After the church excused him, Adler published other books, including *Several Poems*, *Studies and Examples*, *Attempt at a Systematic Presentation of Christianity in Its Logic*, and *Theological Studies*.⁴⁷ Kierkegaard purchased all of these works by the summer of 1846.⁴⁸ The works and Adler himself occupied Kierkegaard's thoughts for the next two years.⁴⁹ Adler's claim of direct revelation

⁴⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *On Authority and Revelation: The book on Adler, or A Cycle of Ethico-Religious Essays*, trans. Walter Lowrie (London: Harper Torchbooks, 1969), v-viii.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, ix-x.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Lowrie, *Kierkegaard*, 2:382.

would engage Kierkegaard both intellectually and spiritually with questions about authority and revelation. These questions are the subject of *On Adler*.⁵⁰

Kierkegaard's Response to Adler

Kierkegaard understood Adler as in drastic error. His claim to divine inspiration was heretical. In the discussion of "The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle" from *On Adler*, Kierkegaard engages with this error.⁵¹ He begins with two categories: "Genius" and "Apostle." He argues the two are qualitatively different, belonging to different qualitative spheres. A Genius belongs to the sphere of immanence. He is "what he is by himself, that is, by what he is in himself." An Apostle belongs to the sphere of transcendence. He is what he is by his divine authority.

Belonging to the sphere of immanence, a Genius has only an immanent teleology. His humanity limits his contribution and its assimilation. Belonging to the sphere of transcendence, an Apostle is "absolutely teleologically positioned paradoxically." He offers something paradoxically new. His contribution is not an anticipation pertaining to humanity's development.⁵²

Adler viewed himself as an Apostle. He believed his works were like those of the apostle Paul, believing Christ directly revealed them. They are not Paul-like by exhibiting a similar quality, aesthetic value, or message but by offering something paradoxically new. Adler understood himself as belonging to the sphere of transcendence.⁵³

Belonging to the sphere of transcendence, the Apostle has this paradigm of authority in the Church because he has an express mandate from Christ.⁵⁴ The mandate is different from any concept or message derived from a dialectic method found in an immanent teleology. It has an absolute teleological position. It is not subject to any critique from an immanent teleology. The Apostle, therefore, is the paradigm of authority in the Church.

Adler demonstrated misconception of both spheres. Replying to questions regarding his claims of direct revelation, he stated, "Revelation was perhaps too

⁵⁰ Ibid. This point undergirds Walter Lowrie's view that the major theme of the work is revelation, hence why he retitles it in his English translation to *On Authority and Revelation*.

⁵¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, vol. 24 of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 173-85.

⁵² Ibid., 174-5.

⁵³ He held this view rather than seeing himself in terms of poet-existence. Operating from an immanent teleology leaves room to be a writer in God's service. It only excludes offering something paradoxically new.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

strong an expression.”⁵⁵ Adler was not able to distinguish between a genius and an apostle. Either his preaching constituted new revelation, or it did not.

Other individuals in Adler’s time also lacked a correct conception of authority and revelation. Among Kierkegaard’s contemporaries, there was the notion that to describe the Apostle Paul as a genius, to wonder at his dialectic ability, to extoll the profundity of his thought was to exalt the absolutely teleologically positioned saint.⁵⁶ Kierkegaard viewed this as an error. If Paul’s value derives from his dialectic ability and his genius, then this assured that he and his message have an immanent teleology. Consequently, the New Testament and the whole of Christianity lose their paradoxical position of an absolute teleology, sliding to an immanent teleological position. They become subject to any dialectical critique.

Sliding into an immanent teleological position, Danish Christianity derives its value from its tradition and geographical location. It becomes isomorphic with national identity. Kierkegaard describes Adler’s *Christian*⁵⁷ existence as exhibiting this isomorphism.⁵⁸ He states:

Adler was born, raised and confirmed in geographical Christendom. For these reasons, just as all other *Christians* do, he considered himself a Christian. In this same manner, he became a theological licentiate and a priest. Adler would continue this nominal *Christian* existence until a curious fortune befell him. “That through a profound impression made upon his life he came into serious touch with the decisive experience of what it means to become a Christian.” The State Church would not allow this experience to reach its fruitful end, cutting it off.⁵⁹

Though Adler’s behavior justified the State Church’s actions, “all the same the epigrammatical application still remains—that as heathen he became a Christian priest, and when he got somewhat nearer to the experience of becoming a Christian he was deposed.”⁶⁰ In other words, when Adler was a Hegelian, he was comfortably accepted as a Christian minister, but when questions of revelation and authority arose, he was dismissed from his post.

⁵⁵ Kierkegaard, *On Authority and Revelation*, ix.

⁵⁶ Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, 174.

⁵⁷ *Christian* in the sense implied by Religiousness A as described below.

⁵⁸ Lowrie, *Kierkegaard*, 2:382-3.

⁵⁹ Kierkegaard, *On Authority and Revelation*, 55.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 55.

The Confusion of Intellectualism

This confusion in Danish Christendom between the absolute teleological and immanent position leads to the error of intellectualism, giving precedents to the Scriptures' "genius" and "dialectic ability" instead of its authority. Kierkegaard asserts that learned and eloquent defenders of Christendom with their glittering and triumphant proofs to trust Christianity undermine that which they seek to prove. These proofs are para-logistic arguments that subscribe the success or truthfulness of Christianity to its endurance despite the elapse of eighteen centuries, transforming the eternal truth into a hypothesis.

Ultimately, the proofs are self-undermining. Inherent to their form, they conceive eternal truth as a hypothesis. Then the learned defenders confirm it, as a hypothesis, as true. They "sink" the eternal truth "to the point of proving its truth by the fact that it has endured for so many years,"⁶¹ being less true than when it originated. This is wrong. An eternal truth is equally and continuously true, having the same continuous truthfulness or truth-value when it originated as it currently does.⁶²

A Christian must be able to discern the difference between the *historical element of Christianity* and the *history of Christianity*. The historical element of Christianity is the paradox of the incarnation. With the incarnation, the eternal came into existence in a moment in history. The history of Christianity is the history that followed that moment.⁶³

In discerning between them, a Christian must be disillusioned by proofs of the incarnation. It is not something men should or even can test. Instead, it tests men. The incarnation occurred in a moment in history. It is now beyond the reach of the human intellect. Instead of being grasped intellectually through historical proofs, it now manifests by causing intellectual offense. This offense is the first step to true belief.⁶⁴ So, rather than providing proofs, Christendom must remove the barrier of the eighteen centuries. It must aid the individual to accept the paradox.⁶⁵

In this we get a glimpse into Kierkegaard's conception of Scripture's authority. He understands it being beyond the "genius" of humanity. Its value comes from being a revelation of God, attributing something beyond the ability of human intellect. Thus, Kierkegaard understands the Bible as the authority in the Church. It is above any "dialectical" critique.

⁶¹ Kierkegaard, *On Authority and Revelation*, 57.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 58

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Understanding this conception, we may define Kierkegaard's view of scripture as Evangelical. Like Evangelicals, his paradigm of authority is the Bible. Also like Evangelicals, he understands it as revelation, distinct from a simple construction of the human intellect. Finally, if not in the language of inerrant or infallible, he views it beyond the critique of human reason.

The Attack

Having established Kierkegaard's view of salvation and Scripture as in accordance with Evangelicalism, we now turn to Kierkegaard as a public thinker. In accordance with the evangelical distinctive of having an outspoken presence in the public square, we will see that Kierkegaard's latter writings are a public criticism of the established Danish church.

As we stated earlier, Kierkegaard had a conversion experience during the Easter of 1848. On April 19, in his journal, he declared, "My whole Nature is Changed." After the experience, Kierkegaard published *The Sickness unto Death*,⁶⁶ *Lilies of the Field and The Birds of The Air*, *The High Priest—The Publican—The Woman that was a Sinner*, *Training in Christianity*, *An Edifying Discourse, About my Work as an Author, For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself!*.⁶⁷

After Kierkegaard wrote these works of self-examination and relatively tame criticisms of the established church, he wrote twenty-one articles in the *Fatherland*. These articles include "This Has to Be Said—So Be It Now Said", "Instant", "What Christ's Judgment Is About Official Christianity", and "The Unchangeableness of God."⁶⁸ These articles are harsher, explicitly attacking the established Church.⁶⁹

The majority works published after 1848 are part of a singular effort.⁷⁰ They are what we can describe as a correction for the Danish church. We may describe the earlier writings like *For Self-Examination*, *Judge for Yourself!*, and *Training in Christianity*, as the subtle criticism. They are subtle compared to the harsher criticisms seen in the *Fatherland* articles.⁷¹

"Christendom" is the target of both the subtle and the harsher criticisms. By "Christendom", we mean the Danish Church's official representatives and inhabitants. Kierkegaard took exception to its promotion of the philosophical

⁶⁶ As discussed, *Sickness* was written before Easter 1848. It expresses Kierkegaard's experience of coming to faith.

⁶⁷ Lowrie, *Kierkegaard*, 2:610.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself! and Three Discourses*, trans. Walter Lowrie (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), v.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, v

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, v-vii

modernization of Christianity. He was critical of the Church representatives who promote the adoption of scientific methodology and democratic liberal anthropology.

The Subtle Criticism

Kierkegaard published *Training in Christianity*, September 27, 1850. He published *An Edifying Discourse*, intended to accompany *Training*, three months later just before Christmas of the same year.⁷² *Training in Christianity* was not only accompanied by a latter work, but was itself the accompaniment of a previous writing, *The Sickness unto Death*. Kierkegaard used the pseudonym Anti-Climacus for both *Sickness* and *Training*.

Thus, we understand *Sickness*, *Training* and *An Edifying Discourse* as united in expostulation and intention. Kierkegaard intended to publish *Sickness* and *Training* in one volume, which was to have as its title “The Collected Works of Completion” or, as he thought later, “of Consummation.”⁷³ *Training* accompanies *Sickness* by emphasizing a different aspect of the same theme. *Sickness* marks the emergence of Kierkegaard’s new literary and theological ambition. *Training* and *An Edifying Discourse* is the consummation of this ambition.⁷⁴ Thus, the “Anti-Climacus” pseudonym expresses Kierkegaard’s new theology.⁷⁵ *Training* was “an Endeavor to Introduce Christianity into Christendom” (its proposed subtitle).⁷⁶ It endeavored to introduce Christianity, as described in *Sickness*, to the Danish Christian community, which was an endeavor Kierkegaard continued the rest of his life.

Training as the Introduction

Though it was only its tentative beginning,⁷⁷ we can think of *Training In Christianity* as characteristic of the whole campaign it starts.⁷⁸ Thus, it may serve as an introduction to the full spectrum of propositions, objections and consultations of the whole, both the subtle and harsher, criticisms. It exhibits Kierkegaard’s polemic conception of New Testament Christianity, opposing the “Christianity” of Denmark’s established Church. *Training* discusses the qualifications of the Christian life, contrasting the New Testament’s definition of

⁷² Lowrie, *Kierkegaard*, 2:604

⁷³ Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, xxii

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Lowrie, *Kierkegaard*, 2:431.

⁷⁸ The works were written in 1848 but published in 1850. It is important to note that Kierkegaard had trepidation about publishing these criticisms.

Christianity to the Christendom of Denmark. Kierkegaard argues that the discrepancy is due to Christendom's institutional intellectualism, all of which are themes found in the rest of the subtle and the harsher criticisms. As such, we will discuss the criticisms by concept, relying on *Training* using the other works of the criticisms as auxiliary and referring to them only to highlight particular points.⁷⁹

The Polemic Religion

John Elrod calls these later writings “Kierkegaard’s polemic Religion.” It is Kierkegaard’s attack upon the established order.⁸⁰ He then addresses Kierkegaard’s use of language during this attack. Kierkegaard used the terms “religion” and “religious” to identify the philosophical modernization or accommodation of the new established order of Denmark. Due to Grundtvig’s identification of the modernization of Denmark as essentially religious, Kierkegaard perceived that an equal and essentially religious attack was required in retaliation. In his religious attack, Kierkegaard redefined key Christian categories. These redefined categories related polemically to Christendom.⁸¹

Thinking of its pseudonym, we again understand *Training* as the matured edition of an earlier writing. It is the re-edition of the Climacus writings. Anti-Climacus mirrors Climacus, discussing the same theme of true Christianity. With *Sickness*, the pseudonym defines true Christianity. With *Training*, the same pseudonym discusses how to practice true Christianity.

To understand how to practice true Christianity, we must begin with Kierkegaard’s distinction between *religiousness A* and *B*. *Religiousness A* is the common religiousness of the baptized church, but not the religiousness of true Christianity. *Religiousness B* is true Christianity. *Training* is an account of *B*, discussing its polemic with (A) the “Christianity” that is isomorphic with Danish national identity.

In the preface of *Training*, Kierkegaard tells his reader he must first exercise himself by putting off his customary mode of thought before understanding the work. If the reader does not exercise himself, he will relate to the presented problem as nonexistent. He does so “for the curious reason that he has already solved it long ago, but in an inverted way.”⁸² The preface is addressing one who falls under the categorization of *religiousness A* (Christianity as isomorphic with Danish national identity). With the exercise, Kierkegaard

⁷⁹ Walter Lowrie, *Four lectures on Kierkegaard*, folder 10, box 6, Walter Lowrie Papers, Firestone Memorial Library (Princeton, NJ).

⁸⁰ John W. Elrod, *Kierkegaard and Christendom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 193.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Lowrie, *Kierkegaard*, 2:424.

prepares such a reader for a discussion on a problem that finds its resolution in true Christianity.

We thus see the work as delineating a polemic religion. Kierkegaard has a projected audience of anyone who understands Christianity as isomorphic with Danish national identity. He hopes to demonstrate to the Dane that their conception of Christianity is incorrect, demonstrating for them how to practice true Christianity.

The practice begins with exchanging simple admiration for Christ for actually following him. Kierkegaard expresses discontentment with the common disposition of being simply admirers of Christ. He sees the common notion that the Church's purpose is accomplished as an invention of the devil. Such notions only serve to hinder self-meditation on the qualifications of following Christ, encouraging a disposition of simple admiration.⁸³

Kierkegaard's discontentment with the Church's triumphalism is also seen in his view of the responsibility of the laity. He believes it is not an ecclesiastical responsibility to oppose or dispute with "the World." It is the responsibility of the individual Christian. The Christian fulfills his responsibility in his own context, jeopardizing themselves. Ironically, in the context of Denmark, the individual has the responsibility of opposing Christendom itself. They must oppose Christendom's delusion that everyone are Christians as a matter of course. They must oppose the idea that Christianity has triumphed or that the Church has Christianized world.⁸⁴

The Polemic and the Reformer

With this opposition to Christendom, we can think of Kierkegaard as a neo-reformer. His criticisms are not from one attempting to destroy the church but from one attempting to reform it to the New Testament ideal.⁸⁵ This is seen in *Judge For Yourselves!* where Kierkegaard gives a call for a reformer to protest against the established Church. He even offers his service to anyone who assumes this responsibility. Kierkegaard would follow the Reformer 'step by step, never budging from his side.'⁸⁶

The reformer must insist that true Christianity is that Christianity which is in accordance with the New Testament.⁸⁷ Kierkegaard then laments the fact that there is no such reformer. As for himself, Kierkegaard prays that God would preserve him from making things worse by mendaciously wanting to carry out a

⁸³ Lowrie, Kierkegaard, 2:426

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 2:471

⁸⁷ Ibid. 2:472

reform. The evil of the day is not the Establishment, in itself, even with its many faults, but the evil inclination of flirting with reform and yet never reforming to New Testament Christianity.⁸⁸

Kierkegaard eventually sheds this pretense, openly attacking the Established Church of the later harsher criticism. He had a forethought strategy and intention for the latter more harsher criticisms. He aimed to outline the discrepancy between the New Testament and Christendom. The criticisms represent a stern reproach of the established church made by one from within the church.⁸⁹ The reproach itself was a consistent consequence of the New Testament position.⁹⁰

Anti-institutional Intellectualism

This reform begins with the scientific, propaedeutic, and apologetic attempts that were typical of Denmark's ecclesiastical structure. The church's failure to practice New Testament Christianity derives from these attempts. In turn, the attempts derive from the ecclesiastical structure's institutional intellectualism and its theological accommodation of European philosophy, science and politics.

The attempts chiefly manifested in the theological lectures of the day. Kierkegaard disdained theological lecturers and taught against their practice.⁹¹ His disdain arises from the academic institutions' attempt to modernize Christendom. As we have seen, Kierkegaard despised the proofs of Christ's divinity. The proofs are satirical. In the portion the proofs increased in popularity and certainty, there was a decrease in the percentage of the Danish population that was convinced of Christianity. Kierkegaard states, "Now that it has been proved, and on a prodigious scale, Christianity is the truth—no one is found, or next to no one, who will make any sacrifice for the sake of it."⁹²

The Church had become too intellectual, leading to a decline in individuals who would make any sacrifice for its sake. Thus, it led people away from the New Testament, which has as its chief requirement sacrifice. That is, in its attempt to legitimize Christianity, Christendom created a polemical divide between it and the Christianity of the New Testament. Through its institutions, the Danish ecclesiastical structure was at odds with New Testament Christianity. It exonerated its members of the qualifications of Christianity found in the New Testament, the chief of which is imitating Christ in suffering.

⁸⁸ Lowrie, Kierkegaard, 2:472.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 467-8

⁹⁰ Ibid. 468

⁹¹ Lowrie, "Four lectures on Kierkegaard."

⁹² Ibid.

The correction is the fulfillment of the unfulfilled requirement. Kierkegaard described two ways to understand suffering. One can suffer or he can become a professor of the fact that another suffered.⁹³ The ecclesiastical structure's intellectualism exonerates its practitioners from the New Testament's requirement of suffering.

Kierkegaard also had a disdain for New Testament commentaries. They only served to obscure the New Testament's teaching. He states, "For God's sake, let us be delivered from any commentary."⁹⁴ Their only task was to interpret and reinterpret the New Testament until a reader did not have to follow its edicts. The difficulty did not lie in understanding the actual claims and instruction of the New Testament. It was in the fact that its readers, through the instruction of Biblical commentaries and theological professors, interpreted it to suit their dispositions.⁹⁵

Like with the proofs of Christ's divinity, theological professors and commentaries served society only in separating the nineteenth-century individual from the New Testament. They interpreted the New Testament to suit the nineteenth-century disposition. Kierkegaard viewed the ecclesiastical structure of Denmark, through its professors and commentaries, as intellectually legitimizing the dismissal of the New Testament's edicts. In doing so, the ecclesiastical structure created a tension between itself and New Testament Christianity.⁹⁶

Kierkegaard, the Evangelist

Kierkegaard's critique of the established church goes beyond mere correction. Similar to the reformers he emulates, he perceives this as a matter central to salvation. To illustrate the issue, he offers an analogy:

When one sees a man holding the axe wrong and chopping in such a way that he is likely to chop everything but the log, one does not say how wrongly the woodsman handles the axe; but one will say, the man is not a woodsman.⁹⁷

Like with the woodsman, Kierkegaard does not understand the established church as merely having errors. Instead, he believes the established church cannot rightfully be identified as truly Christian.

⁹³ Lowrie, "Four lectures on Kierkegaard."

⁹⁴ Lowrie, *Kierkegaard*, 2:539.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 552.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 545.

As another example, consider Kierkegaard's deathbed conversation with Pastor Boseon. During this exchange, Boseon asks the question, "Do you rely on grace?" Kierkegaard responds, "Certainly. What else?" He then proceeds to ask Boseon his own question "Can a person truly be a Christian without being a disciple?"⁹⁸ Once again, this illustrates Kierkegaard's perspective that the themes of his critique go beyond mere errors, delving into the fundamental question of whether a person can rightfully be called a Christian within the established church of Denmark.

Hence, we can understand his polemic as an evangelistic campaign. In his endeavor to introduce authentic Christianity to Christendom, Kierkegaard aims to inspire true discipleship to Christ. Within this polemic, Kierkegaard argues against a particular disposition. He observes that grace is often discussed merely as a disposition to sin, or at best, an excuse for giving up the pursuit of righteousness.⁹⁹ Consequently, he contends that individuals with this mindset do not genuinely possess grace. Through the polemic, Kierkegaard strives to convey to his readers what true Christianity, rooted in the New Testament, entails, in the hope that they will shed the misconceptions of their previous disposition and embrace genuine grace.

Conclusion

The entirety of Kierkegaard's criticisms illustrate his outspoken presence in the public square and, as an extension, portray him as an evangelist. Consequently, Kierkegaard embodied all four distinctives of an Evangelical. Firstly, he understood the "rebirth" as central to an individual's spiritual life. Secondly, he placed an epistemological emphasis on the Bible. Thirdly, he had an outspoken presence in the public square. Lastly, he utilized the public sphere to call individuals to embrace authentic Christianity, thereby fostering a deep understanding of God's grace and effectively fulfilling the role of an evangelist.

⁹⁸ Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon Christendom*, xvi.

⁹⁹ Lowrie. *Kierkegaard*. 2:577.

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