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# The Ecclesiological Function of a Critic: Exploring the Ecclesiological Contributions of Søren Kierkegaard in His 'Attack' on "Christendom"

Anthony Mako  
amako09@georgefox.edu

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The Ecclesiological Function of a Critic: Exploring the Ecclesiological Contributions of Søren  
Kierkegaard in His 'Attack' on "Christendom"

Master's Thesis

Advisor-Dr. Daniel Brunner

Secondary Reader- Dr. Heather Ohaneson

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By Anthony Mako

Portland Seminary

Portland, Oregon

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## **Abstract**

Traditionally, Søren Kierkegaard has not been associated with the field of ecclesiology. Some simply do not see any ecclesiological merits to Kierkegaard's perspective, while others, who perhaps acknowledge Kierkegaard's connection to ecclesiology, view it as having a negating function. Additionally, growing disenfranchisement with the church has caused a renewed interest in Kierkegaard's 'attack'; however, this renewed interest often fails to account for the context into which Kierkegaard wrote. This paper will explore Kierkegaard's 'attack' on "Christendom" in context. It also engages the perspectives of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who show ecclesial implications for Kierkegaard's 'attack' in both agreement and disagreement. In the end, several important functions are shown for Kierkegaard's ecclesiological perspective.

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## Introduction

In a journal entry in 1852, Søren Kierkegaard anticipated a coming conflict which would separate him from the environment in which he had spent his entire life. On one hand he had grown up in, and been completely dedicated to, the church; on the other, he perceived the church to be far adrift from what the New Testament outlines as Christianity. For Kierkegaard, the New Testament, and more specifically the life of Christ, were the model for Christianity, but in his perception, “Christendom” had “only been made possible by making Christianity into something totally different from what it is in the N.T.” However, his conflict was far more personal than a fading dedication to an institution. Anticipating a “collision” with his life-long pastor he wrote:

Just think of the emotional conflict. There is a man I love with all my heart—but I know that if I present what Christianity is essentially he will be furious, will become my enemy. And Christianity commits me to it.<sup>1</sup>

The most striking aspect of this journal entry is that Kierkegaard wrote it under a heading which references Luke 14:26: “He who does not hate father and mother for my sake etc. is not worthy of me.”<sup>2</sup>

Søren Kierkegaard’s critique of “official Christianity” undoubtedly has had ecclesial implications well beyond his own context within the state church in Denmark in the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> What is less agreed upon is whether his ‘attack’ had a negative or positive result. His harsh, occasionally vague, language can often serve as the perfect ammunition for anyone with even the smallest grievance against his or her own church. Kierkegaard’s divisive yet compelling literary style often tempts the reader to translate his words

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<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers Vol. 6*, ed. Howard V. Hong, Edna H. Hong and Gregor Malantschuk (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967), 463.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 462.

<sup>3</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, “A result,” *Fatherland*, May 10, 1855, in Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon “Christendom” 1854-1855*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1944), 47.

into her or his own context. However, the forcefulness of Kierkegaard's critique causes it to explode out of his own context into many others. For example, in his article "Kierkegaard's Attack upon 'Christendom' and the Episcopal Church," Owen C. Thomas attempted to read Kierkegaard's critique into his context in the Episcopal Church. In a section on preaching Thomas said, "In regard to the Episcopal Church there is general agreement that preaching is generally poor and for the same reasons that Kierkegaard offers."<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, it seems that Kierkegaard could not have made it clearer, especially through his engagement with Mynster and Martensen, two of the most influential bishops of his time, that he was largely speaking to his own context. However, this narrow focus does not limit the helpfulness of Kierkegaard outside his context as long as his original intent, in context, is understood.

It is relatively rare that anyone would attempt to identify ecclesial themes in the literature related to Kierkegaard's 'attack.' In fact, Bruce Kirmmse represents the position of many others in calling Kierkegaard "anti-ecclesial," suggesting that Kierkegaard "did not think that Christian civilization was a good idea."<sup>5</sup> This paper will explore the truth of such claims. It will outline the general themes in Kierkegaard's 'attack,' and situate them within the context of Danish church history. Finally, it will be read through the lens of some who were influenced by Kierkegaard's writing. For reasons which will become clear, the readings of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer are especially helpful in this pursuit. In the end, this approach will show several ecclesiological functions for Kierkegaard's critique.

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<sup>4</sup> Owen C. Thomas, "Kierkegaard's Attack upon "Christendom" and the Episcopal Church," *Anglican Theological Review* 94, no. 1 (2012): 63.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce H. Kirmmse, "The Thunderstorm: Kierkegaard's Ecclesiology," *Faith and Philosophy* 17, no. 1 (January 2000): 87.

Generally, this project will address two ecclesiological questions. First, is the unification of persons under the label “Christianity” the fundamental goal of ecclesiology, or are the individual values of each person crucial to the identity of the body? And second, is the first question only relevant in times of extraordinary cultural pressure, or is it crucially important to have this corrective in mind at all times? In the end answers to these questions will be given which will show a clear ecclesiological function for Kierkegaard’s work. But, to begin one must first develop an understanding of Kierkegaard’s context through a brief history of the church in Denmark, and of what, precisely, Kierkegaard said in his “attack upon Christendom.”



## Chapter 1

### Kierkegaard's 'Attack' in Context:

#### A Brief History of the Danish State Church

Denmark was not introduced to Christianity until around 700 when Willibrord, an English monk came from Friesland. Before this time Denmark has been described as “Nordic heathendom” and very little is known about their spirituality aside from what one might gather from “Icelandic sagas” about the “Nordic gods.” The missionary efforts of England made very little immediate impact on Danish culture because the “worship and ethics” of Christianity seemed “incomprehensible to the heathen Vikings.” However, over the 300 years that followed, Danish culture began to merge with English culture through a combination of English missionary efforts to Denmark and “Viking expeditions to England.”<sup>1</sup> By 965 Denmark had adopted Christianity and was absorbed into the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>2</sup>

It was King Svend Estridsen (1047-1076) who had the most substantial impact in transitioning Denmark to a western European culture. During his reign Denmark developed “from a Viking kingdom into a national state.” A significant result of this transition was that under Estridsen the church was organized as an “ally of the King.” This marked the beginning of a blurring of lines between church and state which would become paramount to Kierkegaard’s critique. By 1100 Danish society was experiencing growth in “all important areas: education, economics, architecture, church ornamentation and the other arts.” Much of this growth was

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Schwarz Lausten, *A Church History of Denmark*, trans. Frederick H. Cryer (New York: Routledge, 2016), 6, ix, 3, 22, 14.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Lodberg, “Studying the ecclesiology of a national church: the Danish context,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 16, no. 2 (2016): 126, accessed October 17, 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1474225X.2016.1177308>.

attributed to Denmark's connection with the church in Rome.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the growth of culture was as indebted to the church as the growth of the church was indebted to the culture.

Since the focus of this section is not an in-depth history of the Danish State Church but rather an attempt to establish Kierkegaard's context, all the details of the Reformation's impact on Denmark will not be outlined here. It is sufficient to note that, much like many areas in Europe, by the 16<sup>th</sup> century Danish citizens had grown weary of the abuse of power of both Danish nobility and the Roman Catholic Church. Specifically, Danish nobility and the church had remained relatively insulated from the economic impact of a war with Sweden despite the fact that, generally speaking, "Denmark had become a society in crisis." At the same time the banished former King of Denmark, Christian II, had encountered Martin Luther in Wittenberg. Christian II and his wife eventually converted to Lutheranism. In 1524, Christian II began smuggling Danish translations of the New Testament back into Denmark. By 1556 the national church of Denmark had converted from Catholicism to Lutheranism. Significantly though, as Martin Schwarz Lausten noted, "the reformers did not create a new church in Denmark; rather, they renewed the church to bring it into conformity with...the Lutheran evangelical variety."<sup>4</sup> The structure of the church had not changed, it had simply become Lutheran.

Struggle among the citizens of Denmark continued through the 16<sup>th</sup> century and into the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In an attempt to avoid "near dissolution" in Danish society, Denmark instituted what Møller and Østergård described as "the most absolutist rule in all of Europe" in 1660. They went on to note, "Lutheran orthodoxy permeated all legislation even though the laws rarely

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<sup>3</sup> Lausten, *A Church History of Denmark*, 14-17, 25.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 94, 110, 115.

mentioned the concept ‘church.’”<sup>5</sup> Luther’s teaching that those in authority were put there by God accompanied the denominational transition. Luther had taught that authorities were “divinely ordained,” but he also distinguished between the functions of church and state with a “two kingdoms” principle, a distinction that seems to have been lost in the Danish context. In the words of Ernest Pasiciel, there is “the kingdom of God in which Christians dwell and which is governed by the Gospel” and “the kingdom of this world where evil exists and the Law must rule.”<sup>6</sup> Whether it was a matter of ignorance or necessity, during the 17<sup>th</sup> century the monarch also became the “authority-wielding father of the Danish church.”<sup>7</sup> In turn, the Royal Law of 1655 mandated that the King follow the Augsburg Confession. Where Danish leadership would emphasize the “divinely ordained” aspect of Luther, Kierkegaard would later emphasize the inherent conflict in Luther’s “two kingdoms” principle.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the state-sanctioned Evangelical Lutheran Church faced pressure from many different directions. Four of these influences are crucial in understanding the context of Kierkegaard’s critique of the church. First, by 1730, Halle Pietism, with its emphasis on “teaching, social work” and the “outward mission” of the church, had made a measurable impact on both the crown and Danish society. As an example, in an effort to boost Christian education, it was Pietism’s influence that led the state church to introduce “confirmation” as a “general obligation” for all Danish children in 1736.<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting, at this point, that though they remained active “participants” in the state church, the Kierkegaard family could also often

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<sup>5</sup> Jes Fabricius Møller and Uffe Østergård, “Lutheran Orthodoxy and Anti-Catholicism in Denmark – 1536-2011,” *European Studies*, no. 31 (2013): 173, 175.

<sup>6</sup> Ernest K. Pasiciel, “Martin Luther’s theology of the civil authority,” *Didaskalia* 11, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 30, 26.

<sup>7</sup> Lausten, *A Church History of Denmark*, 120.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 167, 174.

be found worshipping with a local pietistic Moravian congregation.<sup>9</sup> Second, in this time several revivalism movements attempted to challenge what they perceived to be stagnant members of the state church. One of the most substantial was led by N.F.S. Grundtvig who “renounced his priestly office” in 1826 and attempted to inspire “old-fashioned believers” to “withdraw from the state church and form their own congregations.”<sup>10</sup> Third, priests had grown completely dependent on the state. In the late sixteenth-century, the state began subsidizing the church and the salaries of its priests. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, all aspects of church finances had effectively become a state line item. So, instead of being viewed as “a special, holy class,” they were “seen as technical experts who could organize the church services and read the Holy Scriptures” in their original languages.<sup>11</sup> In other words, their primary role was not to connect the individual to God. Finally, shortly after Denmark’s entrenchment in absolutism, roughly forty years, the Enlightenment began. Suddenly many priests were forced to address “the modern, liberated man.” As such, their messages appealed to “reason” and “the truth of the Christian message,” which was a clear sign that many in the priesthood had adopted Kantian or Hegelian philosophies.<sup>12</sup>

To summarize, Denmark certainly shares some characteristics with the development of Christianity in some ‘higher profile’ Western European countries—Germany, England, and Switzerland to name a few—but its history is quite unique in a number of ways. First, a shift from “Nordic heathendom” to Christianity would have not only been a complete shift in worldviews but also would have affected every area of Danish culture. Then, within a relatively short period

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<sup>9</sup> Lee C. Barrett III, *Kierkegaard* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 9.

<sup>10</sup> Lausten, *A Church History of Denmark*, 211.

<sup>11</sup> Møller and Østergård, “Lutheran Orthodoxy and Anti-Catholicism in Denmark,” 171.

<sup>12</sup> Lausten, *A Church History of Denmark*, 194.

of time, roughly four hundred years, Catholicism was outlawed, at least in name, despite the fact that many of its structures remained. Shortly after, within two hundred years of Lutheranism permeating the religious landscape, it began to face critique from many different directions. In many ways, religion in Denmark was in a continual state of transition leading into Kierkegaard's time. It is also important to highlight that these shifts were decided by Denmark's leadership and did not necessarily reflect the collective consciousness or desire of the average Danish citizen.

Second, unlike Calvin and Zwingli in Switzerland, or Luther in Germany, Denmark had no single figurehead for its Reformation. Instead, the Lutheran Reformation was transferred into the Danish context. This is not altogether negative; however, it does leave open the possibility that, much like when an image is copied in a copier, small details disappear. This possibility of a diluted theology would become a large portion of Kierkegaard's argument.

Finally, ecclesiological structures and the state were intertwined from the beginning of Christianity in Denmark, so much so that, judging the success of one is virtually impossible without the other. Until the "abolition of absolutism in 1848...religion and government were affairs of state; all inhabitants...had to belong to the Lutheran faith in order to qualify as citizens."<sup>13</sup> The result was, leading up to the time of Kierkegaard's 'attack,' nearly 100% of Danish citizens were members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Death of Bishop Jakob Mynster**

It would be incorrect to say Søren Kierkegaard's written attack on the Danish State Church began with the death of Bishop Jakob Mynster, his long-time pastor. However, it is fair to mark this event as the beginning of his explicit 'attack,' or that moment when Kierkegaard's

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<sup>13</sup> Lausten, *A Church History of Denmark*, 229.

<sup>14</sup> Lodberg, "Studying the ecclesiology of a national church," 127.

theoretical disagreements with the Danish Lutheran Church were grounded in specific examples. While it may not be considered an ‘attack’ to present a theological position which counteracts what is widely accepted, as Kierkegaard had been doing for quite some time, the word ‘attack’ seems appropriate once specific names were provided as examples.

The Kierkegaard family had joined Bishop Mynster’s church, Our Lady, in 1820, due in large part to Mynster’s “charismatic personality.”<sup>15</sup> From that point on, Mynster was the only Lutheran pastor Søren, and perhaps more importantly, Søren’s father Michael, ever had. Alastair Hannay described Mynster as “perhaps Denmark’s most impressive cultural figure at the time.”<sup>16</sup> This fact, paired with his father’s great admiration for Mynster, caused Søren to seek out meetings with Mynster from a young age. However, Kierkegaard’s admiration for Mynster did not keep the two from conflict. Their relationship was a mixture of mutual respect and passionate disagreement. Their views on the role of the church serve as a good example of one of their long-standing disagreements. Mynster believed the church “offers you its peaceful refuge...that your heart may be warmed in gathering together with your brothers, yet without being disturbed by the hubbub of the world.” Kierkegaard also considered the church a refuge but for the individual. For him, one goes “alone, seeking forgiveness at the feet of the Lord.”<sup>17</sup> When Kierkegaard published *Training in Christianity* in 1850,<sup>18</sup> Mynster’s response was, “The

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<sup>15</sup> George Pattison, “Kierkegaard and Copenhagen,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. John Lippitt and George Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 54.

<sup>16</sup> Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 8.

<sup>17</sup> Pattison, “Kierkegaard and Copenhagen,” 54-55.

<sup>18</sup> “*Training*” is often translated “*Practice*.”

book has greatly embittered me. It is a profane game played with holy things.”<sup>19</sup> However, even this conflict did not stop their regular meetings together.

Bishop Mynster died on January 30, 1854 at the age of seventy-eight. Kierkegaard’s first reaction was to lament that Mynster was never able to confess that he had, for his whole life, presented a “toned-down version” of Christianity. Kierkegaard did not attend the funeral which took place in his neighborhood. However, he would later read a text of the eulogy given by Hans Lassen Martensen, Mynster’s eventual successor as the Bishop of Zealand. Joakim Garff, the author of an extensive biography on Kierkegaard, described Martensen’s sermon as “a rather turgid and overblown commemoration of the deceased”; but one aspect of the sermon became the catalyst for Kierkegaard’s sharp critique of the church.<sup>20</sup> Martensen said,

From this man whose precious memory fills our hearts, our thoughts are led back to the whole series of witnesses to the truth, stretching across the ages, from the days of the Apostles up to our own times...Our departed teacher also served as a link in this holy chain of witnesses to the truth, to the honor of God our Father.<sup>21</sup>

### **Kierkegaard’s “Attack Upon Christendom”**

In 1944, Walter Lowrie compiled and translated all of Kierkegaard’s writings published between 1854 and 1855 under the title *Attack Upon “Christendom.”* The first set of writings is from Kierkegaard’s *Fædrelandet* articles.<sup>22</sup> That the *Fatherland* was a “political journal,” as opposed to a religious publication, was quite an intentional choice by Kierkegaard to break

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<sup>19</sup> Mynster’s words, source not cited in, Walter Lowrie, introduction to *Training in Christianity*, by Søren Kierkegaard, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1944), xxiv.

<sup>20</sup> Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 727-729.

<sup>21</sup> Hans Lassen Martensen eulogy for Bishop Myster as quoted in, Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard*, 729.

<sup>22</sup> The English translation is “Fatherland,” which is how this publication will be referred to from this point forward.

outside the realm of usual religious discussion.<sup>23</sup> Over the course of two years, Kierkegaard would publish twenty-one articles in the *Fatherland*. Each article, other than the first, has the tone of a debate in print. Often it is clear that Kierkegaard is responding to an article published by someone else. Since the focus of this paper is to understand Kierkegaard's precise argument against the church only a small amount of the responses will be outlined here; however, this format does allow for a better understanding of Kierkegaard's justification for such strong language.

Kierkegaard's response to the death of Mynster, and more importantly to Martensen's posthumous assessment of Mynster's life, is far more nuanced than one might imagine. A cursory examination might suggest Kierkegaard was hurling insults at a dead man who could not defend himself. However, Kierkegaard viewed this timing as the best possible scenario for the inevitable 'attack' that he had been preparing for several years. It was out of respect for his own father that he did not criticize his father's pastor, Bishop Mynster, publically.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, Kierkegaard had long hoped that Mynster would see the need for reform and use his cultural status to solidify a message of reform in the mind of the common citizen. With Mynster's death, Kierkegaard understood he would need to be the one to popularize his own message.

Kierkegaard eventually described his critique in this way: "This I have religiously understood as my duty, and I do it also with joy."<sup>25</sup> As such, he was willing to bear whatever

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<sup>23</sup> Walter Lowrie, preface to *Training in Christianity*, by Søren Kierkegaard, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1944), 4.

<sup>24</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "Was Bishop Mynster a "witness to the truth," one of the genuine witnesses to the truth"—is this the truth?" *Fatherland*, December 18, 1854, in Lowrie, trans., *Kierkegaard's Attack Upon "Christendom" 1854-1855*, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "About a silly assumption of importance over against me and the view of Christianity I stand for," *Fatherland*, May 15, 1855, in Lowrie, trans., *Kierkegaard's Attack Upon "Christendom" 1854-1855*, 53.



consequences would arise in order to deliver his critique of the established church stating, “maybe it will go ill with me—well, that is what the New Testament presupposes...victory is only won by defeat!”<sup>26</sup> He fully expected that his critique would end with him being killed, which he was willing, and perhaps eager to endure. So, in his first article in the *Fatherland*, published almost a year after Mynster’s death on December 18, 1854, Kierkegaard began to exercise his “duty.”

“Against this I must protest,” wrote Kierkegaard referring to Martensen’s description of Mynster as “one of the genuine witnesses to the truth.” It was Kierkegaard’s assessment that “Mynster’s preaching...omits something decisively Christian...that part of Christianity which has to do with dying from the world.”<sup>27</sup> Put simply, according to Kierkegaard, Mynster’s sermons had removed any struggle from the Christian life, choosing instead to emphasize “enjoyment.” Furthermore, he suggested that even if Mynster’s sermons on Sundays did contain a small element of suffering, they would be seen as disingenuous because Mynster quickly returned to “worldly shrewdness on Mondays.” Instead, Kierkegaard outlined the qualities he deemed essential for a “witness to the truth”: poverty, lowliness, and abasement, among other things. In his view a “witness to the truth” is treated terribly by society, even to the point of crucifixion, which was unlike the accolades that Bishop Mynster had received over the course of his life.<sup>28</sup> For Kierkegaard, a witness to the truth must not only speak of, but also embody, the principals found in the New Testament.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, “The point at issue with Bishop Martensen,” *Fatherland*, January 29, 1855, in Lowrie, trans., *Kierkegaard’s Attack Upon “Christendom” 1854-1855*, 22.

<sup>27</sup> Kierkegaard, “Was Bishop Mynster a “witness to the truth,” 5.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 9, 7.

<sup>29</sup> David R. Law, “Kierkegaard’s anti-ecclesiology: the attack on ‘Christendom’, 1854-1855,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 7, no. 2 (2007), 88, accessed October 12, 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14742250701256146>.

Eventually, Kierkegaard's grievances with Mynster would extend to all clergy sanctioned by the state church of Denmark. In his estimation, it was precisely its relationship to the state that rendered them unable to communicate and embody the full gamut of expectations set by the New Testament. Instead, it was their own livelihood which served as the motivation for their words. To preach the Christianity of the New Testament would mean to preach "the doctrine for naught," at which point the clergy would be guilty of saying things that their state-funded career paths would nullify in their own lives. In Kierkegaard's words, this inconsistency does nothing less than make "a fool of God...for when in His Word He talks about lowliness, we understand it as making a career, becoming Your Excellency; and by heterogeneity to this world we understand a royal functionary."<sup>30</sup> For Kierkegaard, there is no greater itemized sin than to make a fool of God.

Suffering, or the lack of the communication of such, is a reoccurring theme in Kierkegaard's 'attack.' In his later writings, he makes clear the necessity for suffering in the Christian life, but he does little to define what precisely he wishes to see. Earlier, in *Training in Christianity* he had offered far more detail. For Kierkegaard, "Christ's life here upon earth is the paradigm." However, in his assessment, preaching in his time too often moved beyond Christ's life to his conquest in resurrection. With this the problem becomes that Christ is only seen "historically," which leads congregants to directly to celebration, skipping over the inevitability of Christian suffering.

Still, this does not answer the question of what is meant by *Christian* suffering. For this a "self-contradiction" is required, where a person's self-interest is "voluntarily" given up. Kierkegaard distinguished between Christian suffering, which is entered into by choice, and

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<sup>30</sup> Kierkegaard, "The point at issue with Bishop Martensen," 19.

“unavoidable human sufferings,” which every person will encounter at one point or another.<sup>31</sup>

For example, when a loved one dies, this cannot be categorized as Christian suffering because everyone will, at some point, experience this grief. Christian suffering, on the other hand, is not thrust upon a person, but willingly chosen.

Throughout his ‘attack,’ the New Testament is the ‘measuring stick’ against which all things Christian are evaluated. If one were looking for a single statement which summarized Kierkegaard’s position, one need look no further than his tenth article published in the

*Fatherland*:

O Luther, thou hadst 95 theses—terrible! And yet, in a deeper sense, the more theses, the less terrible. This case is far more terrible: there is only one thesis. The Christianity of the New Testament simply does not exist. Here there is nothing to reform; what has to be done is to throw light upon a criminal offense against Christianity, prolonged through centuries, perpetrated by millions (more or less guilty), whereby they have cunningly, under the guise of perfecting Christianity, sought little by little to cheat God out of Christianity, and have succeeded in making Christianity exactly the opposite of what it is in the New Testament.<sup>32</sup>

The strong possibility exists that this sort of statement, an appeal to follow the New Testament, which appears over and over in Kierkegaard’s ‘attack,’ is too vague to be helpful. To be fair, his appeal goes beyond an appeal to the New Testament suggesting nothing less than “contemporaneousness” with Christ.<sup>33</sup> This is one reason why he continually refers people to his earlier writings, such as *Concluding Postscript*, *Sickness unto Death*, and especially *Training in*

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<sup>31</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944) 109, 111-112.

<sup>32</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, “A thesis—only one single one,” *Fatherland*, March 28, 1855, in Lowrie, trans., *Kierkegaard’s Attack Upon “Christendom” 1854-1855*, 32-33.

<sup>33</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Instant No. 8* (Copenhagen: Bianco Luno’s Press, 1855), in Lowrie, trans., *Kierkegaard’s Attack Upon “Christendom” 1854-1855*, 242.

*Christianity*.<sup>34</sup> Kierkegaard's general assertions in these texts will be explored momentarily in order to develop a well-rounded understanding of Kierkegaard's position. But first, Kierkegaard's clear understanding of his function is helpful. Despite several references to Luther, Kierkegaard did not view himself as a reformer. Instead he referred to himself as "an accomplished detective talent."<sup>35</sup> Therefore, he asked for one thing; "Quite simply: I want honesty"<sup>36</sup> Generally, his goal was to awaken people to the reality that the Christianity they practiced, or more appropriately, that they were born into, was a watered-down version which did not properly communicate the expectations of the Christianity of the New Testament. For this omission, he blamed the state and the clergy, who were in connection.

Kierkegaard made it clear that he did not blame the congregants themselves; in his view they had been led astray. So, why make such a specific example of Mynster? The death of Bishop Mynster offered him the opportunity to use a specific example, one whose words he was quite familiar with, to address a much larger issue. It is crucial to remember: Kierkegaard had been writing about these concepts for years. Though he took no pleasure in using a man whose father greatly respected—at least there is no evidence in his own words of this fact, he was urgently compelled to put an end to this facade that many called the church.

In addition to the specific example of Bishop Mynster, Kierkegaard also framed his 'attack' in broader philosophical terms. In his view, the Christian State makes Christianity "impossible." It is in the best interest of the "priest" to have as many as possible "call

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<sup>34</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "With reference to an *anonymous* proposal made to me in No. 47 of this newspaper," *Fatherland*, April 7, 1855, in Lowrie, trans., *Kierkegaard's Attack Upon "Christendom" 1854-1855*, 40.

<sup>35</sup> Kierkegaard, "A thesis," 33.

<sup>36</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "What do I want?" *Fatherland*, March 31, 1855, in Lowrie, trans., *Kierkegaard's Attack Upon "Christendom" 1854-1855*, 37.

themselves Christian.” To achieve this, the expectations are lowered to allow as many members as possible, but this is a self-serving action since available monies are directly connected to the number of members/citizens.<sup>37</sup> The sheer number of Christians in Denmark was itself a problem for Kierkegaard. He points to the words of Christ which say, “Narrow is the gate...and few are they that find it.” Therefore, his assumption was that if “countless battalions of millions of Christians” are counted within Christian orthodoxy, then Christianity has been reduced to “twaddle.”<sup>38</sup>

The more fundamental issue, more than the full inclusion of all citizens in the church, was Kierkegaard’s interpretation of the appropriate relationship between church and state, or rather their inverse relationship. He reminds his readers that “Christianity is related to a kingdom which is not of this world”; therefore, to give loyalty to Christ is to give loyalty to “the opposite of the state.”<sup>39</sup> Once again, this meant that the loyalty of the “priest” was divided precisely when Christ demands the full loyalty of his followers. A certain distinction is crucial at this point. It is not that Kierkegaard necessarily characterizes the clergy as some sort of evil class who intentionally leads congregants down the wrong path, though they were guilty, in his eyes, of failing to embody lowliness. Instead, the issue was a failure on the part of the clergy to draw congregants to a higher set of expectations, which, in Kierkegaard’s estimation, is what the New Testament demands. So, the common person is only a Christian in name. They were given the title of Christian when they were baptized as an infant and therefore, they were never

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<sup>37</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Instant No. 1* (Copenhagen: Bianco Luno’s Press, 1855), in Lowrie, trans., *Kierkegaard’s Attack Upon “Christendom” 1854-1855*, 85.

<sup>38</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Instant No. 2* (Copenhagen: Bianco Luno’s Press, 1855), in Lowrie, trans., *Kierkegaard’s Attack Upon “Christendom” 1854-1855*, 100, 105, 108.

<sup>39</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Instant No. 3* (Copenhagen: Bianco Luno’s Press, 1855), in Lowrie, trans., *Kierkegaard’s Attack Upon “Christendom” 1854-1855*, 130.

presented with a fundamental aspect of Kierkegaard's theology: a choice. A choice between two opposing kingdoms. A choice between suffering and enjoyment. And most of all, an opportunity to break "with everything to which one naturally clings." For Kierkegaard, this is how one *becomes* a Christian.<sup>40</sup>

Choice was an ever-present theme in Kierkegaard's work. In *Either/Or* he writes, "The true eternity lies not behind either/or but ahead of it."<sup>41</sup> A similar theme is found in *Training in Christianity* only with more explicitly theological language. Kierkegaard suggested the humanity of Christ, upon entering the world, "comes into collision with the established order." Within Christ there is a paradox, which Kierkegaard calls "the God-Man paradox." When humanity interacts with this paradox, a conflict is created. Since it is "unthinkable," or unreasonable,<sup>42</sup> for humanity to fully understand this paradox, of a man also being divine, humanity is then faced with a choice: to "believe" or to be "offended."<sup>43</sup> Kierkegaard goes on to give examples from scripture of those who faced this decision. For example, upon hearing the words, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them," Jesus' disciples inquire, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"<sup>44</sup> Kierkegaard points to Jesus' reply, "Doth this offend you?"<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Instant No. 7* (Copenhagen: Bianco Luno's Press, 1855), in Lowrie, trans., *Kierkegaard's Attack Upon "Christendom" 1854-1855*, 202-220.

<sup>41</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life (Penguin Classics)*, ed. Victor Ermita, trans. Alastair Hannay, (Westminster: Penguin Books, 2004) 48.

<sup>42</sup> Kierkegaard's line of thinking here is clearly juxtaposed against a Hegelian line of thought. He directly addresses Hegel's view of consciousness in this same section of *Training in Christianity*.

<sup>43</sup> Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, 85-87.

<sup>44</sup> John 6:56-61 (NRSV)

<sup>45</sup> Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, 101.

In many ways, Kierkegaard's concept of *the offense* is at the core of his 'attack,' because what he suggests is the fundamental problem with the Mynster, Martensen, the state church, etc., is that they have removed "the possibility of offense." The concept had disappeared from all preaching and people were baptized into the church and into citizenship as early in life as possible. Therefore, they had made it possible to "become Christians" without noticing the offense. He wrote, "In Christendom they no more give offence...to have become believers they must have passed through the possibility of offense." Christ responds with, "Blessed is he who is not offended in me."<sup>46</sup>

For Kierkegaard, neither the necessity of suffering, nor the possibility of offense, arise out of reading of the historical Christ, but rather from one having full "contemporaneousness with Christ." In his usual unreserved manner, Kierkegaard remarked, "An historical Christianity is...unchristian confusion; for what true Christians there are in each generation are contemporary with Christ, have nothing to do with Christians of former generations, but everything to do with the contemporary Christ."<sup>47</sup> At first reading it may seem that Kierkegaard was suggesting there is no Christian benefit to historical Christianity. This is unlikely, however, given Kierkegaard's regular interaction with scripture and with historical theologians, especially Luther. Instead, he seems to be referencing problems of interpretation. He reminded his readers that "what God understands by compassion...is utterly different from what man's understanding is," and this will be the case at any point in time. Therefore, for example, to attempt to live out a compassionate life based on historical Christianity is, in a sense, doubly wrong. It is wrong

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 105-109, 101.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 68.

because one has no level of confidence that historical Christians fully understood God and wrong because there is no effort to translate this misunderstanding into one's current context.

To speak of the process of “becoming” a Christian is to speak of a process where one is “transformed into likeness with God,” which, for Kierkegaard, can only happen if one becomes “contemporary with Christ,” who is actively engaged in the world. In the same way, the proper way to engage with the historical Christ is not to live after the fact, but to engage with the contemporary Christ in the same way that the contemporary Christ lived in history.<sup>48</sup> To attempt to translate this concept into simple terms, Christians are called to suffer because the contemporary Christ suffered in history, and continues to suffer now. Similarly, Christians are still presented with the possibility of offense; the choice was not already made in history.

At this point it may seem as if Kierkegaard did not communicate any comforting aspect of Christianity. While it is true that Kierkegaard seems to be more interested in awakening his readers to the conflict before them rather than putting them at ease, it is more appropriate to say that he would not diminish the fullness of what Christ offers by making the Christian life appear to be easy. He opens *Training in Christianity* with the words “Come hither!” But, in his estimation, before the phrase is finished, one must understand what it means to “come.” They are faced with the decision of whether to believe or be offended; they recognize the suffering Christ encountered in his humanity; and, they hear the invitation of Christ contemporaneously. “The Inviter,” Jesus Christ, inherently creates a conflict through the incarnation. At this point, Kierkegaard suggested, “about him nothing can be known, He can only be believed.” Only then is the phrase completed, “‘I will give you rest.’ That caps the climax—He will help!”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 67-70.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 11, 26, 28, 42.



In many ways, Aaron Edwards is right to describe Kierkegaard's 'attack' as "radically anti-congregational."<sup>50</sup> At minimum, Kierkegaard was "anti-congregational" as far as the Danish State Church was concerned. After all, one of Kierkegaard's most aggressive suggestions in his 'attack' was: "by ceasing to take part...in the public worship of God, as it now is, thou hast constantly one guilt the less, and that a great one."<sup>51</sup> At the same time, if Kierkegaard was correct in asserting that the state church was entirely disconnected from the New Testament ideal of Christianity, then it could be argued that there would be no better ecclesial act than to dismantle this system. Kierkegaard himself, who had been an active member of the church his entire life, stopped attending around the same time he began his explicit 'attack.' However, his decision to stop attending church cannot be seen in a vacuum without taking into account the many years of reform he had attempted. Little is known about his personal decision to disengage other than to note, this was not a decision made in a moment but something more like a decision to finally act on his own convictions.

Before *The Instant No. 10* was published, Kierkegaard collapsed in the street.<sup>52</sup> While in the hospital, many "well-meaning people" tried to convince him to take back his strong words, but Kierkegaard would not recant.<sup>53</sup> In a final act of protest, Kierkegaard "refused the last

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<sup>50</sup> Aaron Edwards, "Taking the "single individual" back to church: The possibility of a Kierkegaardian ecclesiology," *Theology Today* 72, no. 4 (2016), 432, accessed October 12, 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0040573615610419>.

<sup>51</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Instant No. 9* (Copenhagen: Bianco Luno's Press, 1855), in Lowrie, trans., *Kierkegaard's Attack Upon "Christendom" 1854-1855*, 259.

<sup>52</sup> Per Lowrie footnote in *Attack' on Christendom*, 273, it was found completed on Kierkegaard's desk after his death.

<sup>53</sup> This reference to Luther's common phrase, "I cannot and will not recant," is in the style of Kierkegaard, who used Luther's well known phrase at many points in his writing.

sacrament from a clergyman with the demand that it should be sent by a layman—one who was not a flunkey of the state.” He died on November 11, 1855.<sup>54</sup>

### **Conclusion**

An exploration of the history of the Danish church shows, at least on some level, an unstable theological foundation from the very beginning. Perhaps nothing makes this clearer than the fact that Kierkegaard was able to present such a strong critique of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark using mostly his own interpretation of decisively Lutheran theology. The reality was, at many points in its history, either the state supported the church or vice versa. The economic and cultural status of Danish society was dependent on this intertwined relationship. Danish clergy of the time could easily be added to this equation. There is no doubt that Kierkegaard’s ‘attack’ is specifically directed toward his own context. After all, it is exceedingly rare that nearly one hundred percent of the citizens of a given country would all be members of the church, let alone the same denomination.

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<sup>54</sup> Robert Perkins, *Søren Kierkegaard*, (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1969), 8.

## Chapter 2

### Kierkegaard and Barth

Criticisms of Kierkegaard began almost immediately, as one might expect given his chosen medium—a public newspaper. In the very same issue in which Kierkegaard’s initial article was published, no. 295 of *Fatherland*, Bishop Martensen published a response. In his view, Kierkegaard’s parameters only allowed a martyr to be considered a “truth-witness,” in response to which he offered, as rebuttal, the example of the apostle John who was not martyred. While this rather specific counterpoint has not endured as a primary critique of Kierkegaard’s work, another issue Martensen raised has. Martensen described Kierkegaard as a man “without church and without history, and who seeks Christ only in the ‘desert’ and in ‘private rooms.’”<sup>1</sup> Many have shared similar critiques of Kierkegaard’s withdrawal and have expressed it in language similar to David Law’s “anti-ecclesiology.”<sup>2</sup>

Another theologian who expressed strong reservations to Kierkegaard’s seemingly anti-ecclesial writings was Karl Barth. However, Barth’s reading of Kierkegaard offers much more than one critique of Kierkegaard; it offers the opportunity for engagement with Kierkegaard’s ‘attack’ on a number of levels. Philip Ziegler has narrowed Barth’s criticisms of Kierkegaard into three main categories: “first that Kierkegaard’s work succumbs to a dour legalism, second that it promotes a pious individualism at the expense of the church as a community with social and political responsibility, and third, that it promotes a new fixation upon subjectivity.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Lassen Martensen, “*I Anledning af Dr. S. Kierkegaards Artikel i ‘Fædrelandet’ Nr. 295,*” *Berlingske Tidende*, 302, December 28, 1854, as cited in, Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, ed., *The Moment and Late Writings* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 360-362.

<sup>2</sup> Law, “Kierkegaard’s anti-ecclesiology,” 86.

<sup>3</sup> Philip G. Ziegler, “Barth’s Criticisms of Kierkegaard – A Striking out at Phantoms?” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 20, no. 4 (October 2007): 434, accessed December 15, 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2400.2007.00266.x>.

Admittedly, these three categories were not developed with explicit reference to Kierkegaard's 'attack'; however, for several reasons they become an appropriate lens for evaluating Kierkegaard's ecclesiological contributions. First, although it is not known precisely which of Kierkegaard's works Barth read, his library included German translations of *Training in Christianity* and *The Moment*.<sup>4</sup> This suggests, at minimum, that he had taken these two texts into account when forming his critique. In addition, since Barth has been reported to have read a limited amount of Kierkegaard's actual writings, and since these two texts are widely considered a part of the 'attack' literature, it seems fair to assume Barth's critiques have at least some relation to Kierkegaard's 'attack.'

Second, these three themes have appeared in countless critiques of Kierkegaard. In some cases, they have endured because of their connection to Barth, and in other cases they arose independently of Barth. In either case, these three categories represent the most common critiques of Kierkegaard's 'attack.'

Third, Barth's relationship to Kierkegaard is rather sporadic. Sometimes he would agree with Kierkegaard on a topic only to disagree in later writings. However mutable Barth's perception, Kierkegaard can be characterized as a noteworthy influence in both the cases where the two figures ended up in agreement, and when they ended on opposite sides of the spectrum.

Fourth, Ziegler's categories offer the opportunity to examine the extent to which Barth misunderstood Kierkegaard's writings, which in turn, will give the opportunity to clarify Kierkegaard's perspective. Just as Barth's critiques of Kierkegaard can serve as a representation

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology Its Genesis and Development, 1909-1936* (New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1995), 235.

of the critiques of others, Barth's occasionally faulty readings of Kierkegaard can represent faults in the readings of others.

Finally, Ziegler's categories are precisely the areas in which Kierkegaard was most influential ecclesiologically. Put simply, though Barth's assessment of Kierkegaard may not always be the most effective scholarly interaction with Kierkegaard's 'attack'; especially related to the field of ecclesiology, it does provide a rather convenient framework.

### **Barth's Relationship to Kierkegaard**

Before analyzing the three categories outlined above, it would be beneficial to make some general notes about Barth's relationship to the writings of Kierkegaard. Aaron Edwards has suggested, "Barth is often seen as one of the primary catalysts for the Kierkegaardian 'renaissance' in early twentieth-century Germany."<sup>5</sup> It is not extraordinary that a theologian's assessment of another's work would evolve over the course of one's life. However, in the case of Barth's relationship to Kierkegaard, Barth's shifting, and at times seemingly contradictory, opinions beg to be questioned and analyzed.

More evidence of Barth's fluctuating opinion of Kierkegaard's work will be shown in each of the following sections; however, in order to make it explicitly clear, one example of this changing relationship is seen in the following. In *The Word of God and The Word of Man*, first published in 1928, Barth lists Kierkegaard in a line of theological forefathers which also include "Luther, Calvin, Paul, and Jeremiah." These men represent a line juxtaposed against the likes of Schleiermacher who "never possessed a clear and direct apprehension of the truth that man is

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<sup>5</sup> Aaron Edwards, "A Broken Engagement: Reassessing Barth's Relationship to Kierkegaard on the Grounds of Subjectivity and Preaching," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no. 1 (January 2014): 61, accessed January 10, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/ijst.12043>.

made to serve *God* and not God to serve man.”<sup>6</sup> Ironically, Barth would later claim that Kierkegaard was the one who brought Schleiermacher’s thought into the nineteenth century.

Soon after, in *The Epistle to the Romans* (1919), Barth cites Kierkegaard several times, even uncharacteristically adding an exclamation after writing, “it is precisely we [Christians] who proclaim the right of the individual...”<sup>7</sup> However, by the time of *Church Dogmatics* (1956), Barth would caution against “allow[ing] ourselves to be crowded again into the same *cul de sac* on the detour via Kierkegaard,” suggesting instead that reconciliation is grounded in “the community of God,” the church, “and not the individual Christian as such.”<sup>8</sup> Eventually, Barth would come to say, “not even in *Romans* was I a real friend of Kierkegaard, let alone a Kierkegaard enthusiast.”<sup>9</sup>

One possible reason for Barth’s early celebration of Kierkegaard’s work was, as Kimlyn Bender suggested, that in Kierkegaard, Barth found an “ally” in his “decisive break with Schleiermacher’s legacy and Neo-Protestantism.”<sup>10</sup> It is entirely possible that Barth quickly aligned himself with Kierkegaard because of Kierkegaard’s clear writings against the reasonability of faith. After all, it is hardly possible to read any of Kierkegaard’s works without seeing at least one reaction against Hegel and the Liberal Theology, which was pervasive in his

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1956), 196.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* sixth edition, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 116.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 150.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Barth, ‘To Dr. Martin Rumscheidt, Toronto – 1 November, 1967’, in *Letters 1961-1968*, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 273, as cited in, Edwards, “A Broken Engagement,” 62.

<sup>10</sup> Kimlyn J. Bender, “Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth: Reflections on a Relation and a Proposal for Future Investigation,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17, no. 3 (July 2015): 296, accessed January 15, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/ijst.12105>.

context. This would include the texts associated with his ‘attack.’ Perhaps Barth was so eager to have some historical basis for his own reaction against Neo-Protestantism that he aligned himself with Kierkegaard before having the opportunity to examine his theology fully—an overreaction he would attempt to resolve in later writings.

On the other hand, many question the extent to which Barth actually understood Kierkegaard’s claims. There is the aforementioned problem of not being sure which texts Barth actually read. In addition, Lee Barrett has suggested the possibility that Barth’s understanding of Kierkegaard was “so inadequate” that he missed even the “basic dynamics” of Kierkegaard’s work.<sup>11</sup> This possibility exists for two main reasons. First, the first German translations of Kierkegaard, done by Schrempf and Gottsched, have been diagnosed with “grave deficiencies.” As such, the translations read by Barth contained “considerable abridgements” and “chance formulations” because of a failure to grasp Kierkegaard’s linguistic strength.<sup>12</sup> Second, it appears the more widely Barth read Kierkegaard, the less Kierkegaard was cited in Barth’s works. So, it is plausible that Barth simply did not know the Kierkegaard he was citing early on.

To echo an earlier sentiment, this line of evidence is neither to disparage nor to discredit Barth’s interaction with Kierkegaard. Barth was, in fact, quite candid about his evolving understanding of Kierkegaard which helps place Barth firmly within the scope of this project.

Upon winning the Sonning Prize in 1963, Barth addressed his relationship to Kierkegaard. As he

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<sup>11</sup> Lee C. Barrett, “Karl Barth: The Dialectic of Attraction and Repulsion,” in *Kierkegaard’s Influence on Theology, Tome I: German Protestant Theology*, ed. Jon Stewart (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 19.

<sup>12</sup> Here Marcia Morgan translates Martin Kieffhaber. Martin Kieffhaber, *Christentum als Korrektiv* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald Verlag, 1997), 26, as cited in Marcia Morgan, “Adorno’s Reception of Kierkegaard: 1929-1933, *Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter* 46 (Sept 2003) <https://www.sorenkierkegaard.nl/artikelen/Engels/095.%20Adorno's%20reception%20of%20kierkegaard.pdf>.

foresaw accepting the prize, which is given in Copenhagen, he described an imaginary encounter with Kierkegaard on the street where he heard him utter the words,

So this is how things are with you, my dear friend, at the end of your theological and other life. This – gallant witness to the truth! – is what you have come to...to the point at which they offer you a State prize – and that on the basis of merits that are somewhat curious from the Christian point of view...Apostles, if I remember rightly, were not awarded prizes.<sup>13</sup>

It would seem that though Barth had come to dismiss many aspects of Kierkegaard's theology, Kierkegaard's words remained a standard Barth measured himself against. However, Barth eventually described Kierkegaard's influence as an "immunization." He wrote, "I consider him to be teacher whose school every theologian must enter once. Woe to him who misses it – provided only he does not remain in or return to it."<sup>14</sup> In this light, one ecclesial function of Kierkegaard's critique becomes clear. Whether one comes to agreement with Kierkegaard's assessment or rejects it, once it has been confronted, the reader has no choice but to interact with it, which spurs some sort of growth in one direction or the other: to either move with it or do the work of rejecting it.

### **Legalism which fails to capture the joy of Christianity**

The first of Ziegler's categories is related to Barth's claim that interactions with Kierkegaard's writings "can only make one sour, gloomy, and sad." On this topic, Barth's chief objection was with the way the process of becoming Christian was communicated. He wondered whether it was necessary that Christians "taste again and again the bitterness of the training

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<sup>13</sup> Karl Barth, "A Thank-You and a Bow–Kierkegaard's Reveille," in *Fragments Grave and Gay*, ed. Martin Rumscheidt, trans. Eric Mosbacher (London: Collins, 1971), 95-96.

<sup>14</sup> Barth, "A Thank-You and a Bow," 100-101.



required.” While not necessarily dismissing the reality of Kierkegaard’s claims, it appears Barth wished the foci to be faith, hope and love.<sup>15</sup>

Although one’s emotional reaction to another’s writing hardly seems like an appropriate reason to dismiss their claims, it is nevertheless mentioned here because many others share similar critiques. Bishop Martensen, in his first response to Kierkegaard, expressed disagreement with Kierkegaard’s narrow definition of suffering, which in his view can only be physical suffering to the point of death. This limits ‘witnesses to the truth’ to being born out of “extraordinary times and under extraordinary trials,” the consequence of which is that “the church at no time ceases to be militant.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Mallery Fitzpatrick Jr. described Kierkegaard as having lived in “the loneliness of truth,” which caused him to miss the “organic fellowship.”<sup>17</sup>

One wonders whether Kierkegaard would even attempt to refute this area of critique. Instead he may have been tempted to utter an affirmation of these claims. In many ways he had already: “the truth is that to become a Christian is to become unhappy for this life.”<sup>18</sup> In many ways, this becomes a theological conflict which, despite being a worthy topic, does not fall within the scope of this project. Still, there are ecclesiological issues at play here. In order to explore them the question must shift from whether Kierkegaard was ‘correct’ to articulate

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<sup>15</sup> Barth, “A Thank-You and a Bow,” 99.

<sup>16</sup> Martensen, “On the Occasion of Dr. S. Kierkegaard’s Article in *Fædrelandet*, no. 295,” 362.

<sup>17</sup> Mallery Fitzpatrick, Jr., “Kierkegaard and the Church,” *The Journal of Religion* 27, no. 4 (October 1947): 261, accessed September 19, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1198867>.

<sup>18</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Instant No. 6* (Copenhagen: Bianco Luno’s Press, 1855), in Lowrie, trans., *Kierkegaard’s Attack Upon “Christendom” 1854-1855*, 189.

suffering as fundamental aspect of faith, to whether Kierkegaard was articulating a “Lutheran” perspective.<sup>19</sup>

Craig Hinkson has suggested that English-speaking scholarship has largely ignored the matter of Kierkegaard’s connection to Martin Luther despite the fact that, in his view, “Kierkegaard was regarded as having taken up Luther’s mantle as no other theologian of the nineteenth century.” In fact, it was Barth’s development of dialectical theology, under the influence of Kierkegaard, which Hinkson believed was a primary motivator for the resurgence of Luther in the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> For this reason, Hinkson has worked to show Kierkegaard firmly in line with Luther in many areas, but most specifically with Luther’s *theologia crucis*.

Much of Luther’s language is just as jarring as Kierkegaard’s on the topic of suffering. For Luther, it is precisely when someone is “visibly humbled, tempted, rejected, and slain” that they are “inwardly exalted, comforted, accepted and brought to life” through the work of the Spirit.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Luther said of Christ, “you must die if you would live under this King. You must bear the cross and the hatred of the whole world.”<sup>22</sup> Understanding Luther’s perspective would seem to counteract Bishop Martensen’s suggestion that Kierkegaard’s critique is “without history.” In reality, in this area Kierkegaard was completely in line with the Lutheran perspective. However, Hinkson’s most relevant observation was: “Luther numbers *suffering* in

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<sup>19</sup> For the remainder of this section it will be necessary to distinguish between the polity of the Lutheran church (Lutheranism), especially in the context of the nineteenth century Danish Lutheran Church, and one who follows the theology of Martin Luther (Lutheran).

<sup>20</sup> Craig Hinkson, “Luther and Kierkegaard: Theologians of the Cross,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3, no. 1 (March 2001): 28.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Luther, *Weimarer Ausgabe* 4, 82, 14-21, as cited in, Hinkson, “Luther and Kierkegaard,” 32.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Luther, *Weimarer Ausgabe* 5, 69 (*Luthers Werke* 14, 342), as cited in, Hinkson, “Luther and Kierkegaard,” 37.

all its forms, but persecution in particular, as an essential ‘mark’ of the church.”<sup>23</sup> He goes on to show direct correlations between Luther’s “the crucified Christ” and Kierkegaard’s “Absolute Paradox,” between Luther’s “*deus absconditus*” and Kierkegaard’s concept of “the Unknown,” and between Luther’s “God hidden in sufferings” and Kierkegaard’s “God incognito.” Most importantly, Hinkson suggested both Luther and Kierkegaard move the theology of the cross “from the realm of mere cognitive theory” to “the personally costly realm of praxis,” and he points to Eduard Geismar, who suggested Kierkegaard’s significance was “to have reintroduced [Luther’s theology of the cross] at a time when it had vanished.”<sup>24</sup>

However, it is compulsory to interject Vernard Eller’s perspective at this point. Eller’s assertions will be far more prominent in the next chapter, but on this topic he provided a necessary qualification. He would agree that Kierkegaard had no doctrinal differences with Luther, but would interject Kierkegaard’s “fundamental criticism” of Luther—that Luther became a “politician.” Eller demonstrates that Kierkegaard viewed Luther’s reformation as incomplete because he emerged “as a success rather than a martyr.”<sup>25</sup> So, it is unfair to leave the impression that Kierkegaard and Luther were aligned on all matters. Still, it is significant that Kierkegaard’s allegedly “gloomy” perspective was rooted in Luther, the namesake of the denomination behind the Danish State Church.

It is worth clarifying again, the theological merits of Luther’s *theologia crucis* and their prominence in any given ecclesiological system are still firmly open for debate. However, it is

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<sup>23</sup> Hinkson, “Luther and Kierkegaard,” 37.

<sup>24</sup> Eduard Geismar, *Religionsfilosofi. En Undersøgelse af hvad Religion og Kristendom er*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gads Forlag, 1930), 342, as cited in, Hinkson, “Luther and Kierkegaard,” 45.

<sup>25</sup> Vernard Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship: A New Perspective* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 302-03.

important to note that Kierkegaard's critique was directed at Lutheranism, specifically in the Danish State Church. If Kierkegaard were, as he well may have been, directing these words toward any other ecclesiological system, it would be fair to open them for theological debate. Since the 'attack' was in the context of Lutheranism, it is likely that Kierkegaard's goal was simply to insert the Lutheran perspective back into Lutheranism.

This distinction reveals a series of ecclesiological questions. What, if any, doctrinal agreements are necessary in order for the Body of Christ to truly be gathered? Is it enough that those who claim Christianity are gathered together in a given space, or must they share some level of creed and practice? Kierkegaard suggested that suffering is a fundamental distinctive for Lutherans and something that had disappeared in Lutheranism. It also appears that, at least at one point in his life, Luther concurred. If Kierkegaard was correct, then his claim that Christianity did not exist in the church of his day is undergirded by the words of Luther himself, which would give a true Lutheran no choice but to critique the church, for the sake of the church.

### **Subjectivity vs. Objectivity**

The second of Barth's criticisms, which appear in Ziegler's framework, is his apprehension toward Kierkegaard's emphasis on subjectivity. In fact, according to Aaron Edwards, it was "Kierkegaard's repeated emphasis on 'subjectivity' that most troubled Barth."<sup>26</sup> As was noted earlier, toward the end of his life, Barth accused Kierkegaard of having advanced Schleiermacher's existential legacy. He further described Kierkegaard as having offered a dangerous "experiment with subjectivity that as such regarded itself as truth," and whose conception of faith was "groundless and without object."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Edwards, "A Broken Engagement," 57.

<sup>27</sup> Barth, "A Thank-You and a Bow," 100.

It is impossible to overstate the shift in Barth's perspective on this topic over the course of his writings. Early in his career he wrote that Kierkegaard was "only too right" to say "the subjective is the objective."<sup>28</sup> Again, using Barth in this way is not intended to demonstrate inconsistencies within Barth's thought, as such, but rather to counteract common criticisms of Kierkegaard and, in turn, to clarify the meaning and function of his writings. In this case, Barth offers the opportunity to counteract the notion that Kierkegaard's concept of subjectivity left him disconnected from any "absolute" understanding of God, which resulted in his departure and disparagement from the church.

It is true that Kierkegaard claimed that "truth is subjectivity." In fact, he made this claim many times. His *Concluded Unscientific Postscript*, written under the pseudonym Climacus, is almost entirely dedicated to justifying this claim. Many of the details in this text are not directly relevant to this project; however, a few seem quite helpful. First, Climacus was quite clear that the truth of Christianity is an "objective issue." He went on to say, "the subjective issue is about the individual's relation to Christianity."<sup>29</sup> Kierkegaard's notion of subjectivity, especially related to Christianity, is closely related to his emphasis on choice, or in language associated with the 'attack' literature, "the instant." In "the instant" one is faced with a decision which *must* be viewed as subjective rather than objective. To view the decision as objective is to attempt to "evade some of the pain and crisis of decision."<sup>30</sup> This concept is intricately related to Kierkegaard's strong move away from the prevalence of Enlightenment thinking and Modern Liberal Theology in his day, which emphasized reason and logic in the process of faith.

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 137, as cited in Ziegler, "Barth's Criticisms of Kierkegaard," 440.

<sup>29</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 17.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 129.

Barth, as many others have done, misunderstood Kierkegaard's distinction between subject and object, or subjectivity and objectivity, with the claim that Kierkegaard was "groundless and without object." Presumably his assertion would be better aimed at relativism than Kierkegaard's subjectivity. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard never moved away from referring to God as "absolute." Yet, even this label is not without nuance, which comes in the terminology of the "Absolute Paradox."

Kierkegaard's concept of the absolute paradox, at least as it is utilized in the 'attack' literature, has been outlined in an earlier section. However, he most fully outlines this concept in *Philosophical Fragments*. The existence of God is never in question, but one must admit the "unknown" nature of God, which is "the limit to which the Reason repeatedly comes." As Kierkegaard said, "if the God is absolutely unlike man, then man is absolutely unlike God; but how could Reason be expected to understand this?" Therein lies the paradox; "to obtain the knowledge that the God is unlike him, man needs the help of God; and now learns that the God is absolutely different from himself."<sup>31</sup> Therefore, subjectivity (relation to God) is required rather than objectivity (knowledge of God). Put simply, one cannot objectively *know* the Unknown; one can only be related to it.

In the later part of his life Barth was quite concerned with distinguishing between theology and existential philosophy, and he was concerned Kierkegaard's focus had drifted from the former to the latter. If one were to compare Kierkegaard's actual writings with later iterations of existentialist philosophy, one may come to the same conclusion as Aaron Edwards who has suggested, "it is apparent that Barth cannot separate Kierkegaard from his existentialist

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<sup>31</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David Swenson and Howard V. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), 55-58.

legacy.”<sup>32</sup> As someone who has been called the father of both existentialism and postmodern theology, Kierkegaard is especially susceptible to being read through the lens of the assertions of those who followed him. This is precisely the skepticism Alasdair McKinnon has directed at Barth’s criticism of Kierkegaard. He suggested that Barth’s primary engagement was with what he called “the phantom Kierkegaard,” which is a fictional amalgamation of Kierkegaard with Barth’s contemporaries, such as Brunner and Bultmann. Barth was certainly prone to read Kierkegaard through the eyes of his contemporaries. As he began to distinguish himself, he was in turn forced to distance himself from his understanding of Kierkegaard which was, in reality, a “phantom.”<sup>33</sup>

At first glance one may sense a drift away from any exploration of Kierkegaard’s ecclesiological contributions. On the contrary, Barth’s misguided critique is worth contradicting because it is a misunderstanding shared by many others, namely that Kierkegaard’s association with existentialism leaves him without any absolute perception of God. If this were the case, then his departure from the Danish State Church could be classified as a theological drifting, which would almost certainly undermine his ‘attack.’ Furthermore, this section serves as a badly needed reminder not to read Kierkegaard, or his ‘attack’ literature, through the lens of any modern conceptions of the movements he is credited as having influenced. Ecclesiologically, this section should have a sizable impact on any attempt to find a function for the ‘attack’ literature in a modern setting. In short, it would be relatively easy to explain away harsh critique from one who had ‘drifted off into the realm of philosophy,’ but it would be much more difficult

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<sup>32</sup> Edwards, “A Broken Engagement,” 63.

<sup>33</sup> Alasdair McKinnon, “Barth’s Relation to Kierkegaard: Some Further Light,” *Canadian Journal of Theology* 13 (1967), 32, as cited in, Ziegler, “Barth’s Criticisms of Kierkegaard,” 437.

to dismiss the critique of one who had committed his or her life to exploring the depth of Christianity.

### **Individualism**

The final of Barth's critiques which appear within Ziegler's framework is potentially the most obstructive when it comes to establishing any sort of positive ecclesiology in Kierkegaard's 'attack.' Eventually Barth would disparagingly use the term "holy individualism" to broadly characterize Kierkegaard's work. In the same document he posited a series of questions with which anyone attempting to identify ecclesiological contributions in Kierkegaard's work is forced to wrestle. He asked, "where in his teaching are the people of God, the congregation, the church; where are her diaconal and missionary charge, her political and social charge?" Additionally, Barth rhetorically identifies the absence of any application of the scriptural charge to "love thy neighbour as thyself."<sup>34</sup>

This appears to be the most widespread and prominent critique of Kierkegaard, which began with his contemporaries and has reappeared in every epoch in the history of the church. It has already been shown in Bishop Martensen's initial response to Kierkegaard. Another of Kierkegaard's contemporaries, J. Victor Bloch, chastised Kierkegaard for stepping "outside" the church and then beginning to "prate that the church has vanished, since he does not see it anymore." With this critique, Kierkegaard, in Bloch's view, "has contradicted not only himself, but he has contradicted the Lord, who has promised his church an eternal life with victory over the forces of darkness."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Barth, "A Thank-You and a Bow," 99.

<sup>35</sup> J. Victor Bloch, "*I Anledning af Forslaget til Dr. S. Kierkegaard*," *Fædrelandet* 94 (April 24, 1855, as cited in, Hong and Hong, trans. *The Moment and Late Writings*, 369.



Much more recently, Mallery Fitzpatrick Jr. considered it rather difficult to claim Kierkegaard had any up-building effect on the church, because “he does not write at length on this and fails to use the terminology familiar in discussions of ecclesiology.” But, her ultimate assessment was that Kierkegaard overemphasized “Christology” and neglected “ecclesiology.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, even Aaron Edwards, who will be shown to have developed an ecclesial function for Kierkegaard’s individualism, admits Kierkegaard’s “radically anti-congregational focus appears to so denigrate ecclesial consciousness that one wonders if Kierkegaard truly loved the church at all.”<sup>37</sup>

The main reason Barth’s “holy individualism” critique is so impactful is because it would be pointless to attempt to diminish the concept of “the individual” in Kierkegaard’s ‘attack,’ in this limited scope and in his theology in general. One could easily characterize his ‘attack’ as an appeal to ‘the individual’ to remove herself or himself from the institution of the church and instead move into an individual relationship with God. After all, he stated in no uncertain terms, “As an individual, quite literally as an individual, to relate oneself to God personally is the formula for being a Christian.”<sup>38</sup> So, as Anders Holm said, “if there is any sense in speaking of a positive ecclesiology in Kierkegaard, it is determined by his view of Christianity as a matter of the individual.”<sup>39</sup>

Despite the tone and content of Kierkegaard’s ‘attack,’ and despite his emphasis on the ‘individual’ before God, it seems unlikely that Kierkegaard’s intention was to withdraw from any sort of ecclesial context. Holm suggests that for most of his life Kierkegaard was “one of the

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<sup>36</sup> Fitzpatrick, “Kierkegaard and the Church,” 258-259, 261.

<sup>37</sup> Edwards, “Taking the “single individual” back to church,” 431.

<sup>38</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon “Christendom,” 1854-1855*, 274.

<sup>39</sup> Anders Holm, “Kierkegaard and the Church,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. John Lippitt and George Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 112.

most regular churchgoers in Copenhagen.” It was less than two years before his death that he stopped attending.<sup>40</sup> So, searching for ecclesiological streams in his thought is not an attempt to justify the existential wanderings of a brilliant man, as some might expect, but rather an attempt to reconcile the opposing ideas that a man who attended church more faithfully than most for fifty years suddenly had enough and ‘set the church on fire’ as he walked away. Barth’s critique of Kierkegaard’s “holy individualism” seems entirely fair, but perhaps there is some ecclesial benefit to this concept.

It appears to have been in this spirit that Aaron Edwards offered an ecclesiological function for Kierkegaard’s concept of the ‘individual.’ To begin, he notes the significance of the fact that Kierkegaard “never begins with oneself *in se*, but with the self before God, and for God.” This strong sense of one’s self before God helped to guard against “the corrosive impact of crowd-consciousness.” Kierkegaard, in the words of Edwards, marked a difference between a “crowd,” where the individual disappears as one of many, and a “community,” where the individual is “qualitatively essential” for the “community’s existence.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, the crowd speaks with one voice but the community is built on the gathering of each individual voice. Edwards ultimately argued,

[Kierkegaard] succeeds in highlighting, more clearly than any other thinker in the modern period, what can go awry (existentially and ecclesiological) when the significance of individual decision is minimized by an assumed concept of congregation...Kierkegaard’s “single individual” is actually not “single” at all but united to Christ, and—therewith—to His body.<sup>42</sup>

In light of Edwards’ suggestion, and in light of the context during the time of Kierkegaard’s authorship, where the church and the state were so intertwined that is was

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>41</sup> Edwards, “Taking the “single individual” back to church,” 439-440.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 445.

impossible to know which voice was setting the direction for Christians in Denmark, Kierkegaard's concept of the "individual" now has the possibility of being deeply ecclesial.

Another way of looking at Kierkegaard's distinction between the "crowd" and the "community" could be through exploring the reason the group has been gathered. The "crowd" is gathered to maintain the strength of a group. Inversely, the "community" consists of those who have been brought together because of their shared communion with the "Absolute." Here is where Kierkegaard's concept of the "individual," and his consistent assessment that "Christianity does not exist," come together.<sup>43</sup> If the "crowd" is labeled Christian, then all those who gather together under its umbrella are called Christians even if their only motivation is that they be unified. However, if the "community" is a gathering of individuals before God, then their shared characteristics determine the label of the group. It would appear that there could not be any more important ecclesiological distinction than this.

### **Conclusion**

In 1963, toward the end of his life, Barth published an article which attempted to explain his lifetime of interactions with Kierkegaard. To do so he suggested three types of theologians. The first had missed Kierkegaard altogether. They had been living relatively secure with their place in the world and with themselves from the beginning. In his words, "so far as they are concerned, Kierkegaard lived, suffered, and struggled in vain."

The second type had, somewhere along the way, wrestled with Kierkegaard and was pulled into his line of thinking. They end up consumed with existential wrestling. For this type, "Kierkegaard has become a system."

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<sup>43</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "The religious situation" *Fatherland*, March 26, 1855, in Lowrie, trans., *Kierkegaard's Attack Upon "Christendom" 1854-1855*, 29.

The third type, Barth suggested, is made of those who “read Kierkegaard and attended his school – but ha[ve] passed out of it.” They have faced Kierkegaard’s negation and have come out hopeful. They too “could not return to the flesh-pots of a bourgeois Christianity...[they] could never again ignore or suppress the ‘no’ uttered in the Gospel to the world and the church. But...they could now just hear it and bear witness to it as the ‘no’ enfolded in God’s ‘yes.’”<sup>44</sup>

Barth viewed himself as the third type of theologian; as one who had taken the perspective of Kierkegaard seriously, had used it in the best possible way and then moved beyond it to pursue the positive which arose out of Kierkegaard’s negation. Ziegler’s framework for Barth’s criticisms has given the opportunity to do several things. As an example of more widespread critique, Barth’s perspective offers the opportunity to hold Kierkegaard’s writing against the fire. In the areas where Barth’s reading was insufficient, it offered the opportunity to clarify Kierkegaard’s original perspective. Lastly, when Barth’s criticism was well founded, as was the case with individualism, a functional positive arose through the work of Aaron Edwards.

Overall, it would seem that three ecclesiological possibilities exist after what has been outlined in this chapter. First, it is possible that certain critics are correct to say that Kierkegaard has no ecclesial function at all. However, this would need to operate under the assumption that Kierkegaard’s only goal was to destroy the institution, which is unlikely given his commitment to the church for most of his life.

Second, there is the possibility of Barth’s third type of theologian, those who had wrestled with Kierkegaard and, although their work went in a different direction, they were impacted by having encountered his ‘attack.’ Even Barth came close to admitting that any

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<sup>44</sup> Karl Barth, “Kierkegaard and the Theologians,” in *Fragments Grave and Gay*, ed. Martin Rumscheidt, trans. Eric Mosbacher (London: Collins, 1971), 102-104.

ecclesial contributions he made were due, in some part, to having encountered Kierkegaard. Barth's reception of Kierkegaard rarely denied the reality of his perception of the church; he simply advocated for the hope found in reformation as opposed to, in his view, Kierkegaard's gloomy withdraw into individualism. Presumably, Barth would claim the work of a critic is incomplete and requires a partner to carry it into usefulness.

Finally, it is possible to view Barth's criticisms, and others like it, as unfounded, especially because of the evidence of his misunderstanding outlined in this chapter. As was the case with Edwards' "Taking the Single individual back to church," this perspective would suggest Kierkegaard's 'attack' has its own ecclesial function without any additional work. It would also suggest that the role of the critic alone is necessary in some cases. In the following chapter, further examples will be given that support just such a claim.

## Chapter 3

### Discipleship as a Foundation for Ecclesiology

Although Barth's interaction with Kierkegaard provides a helpful framework, any ecclesiological outcomes which have been shown are, admittedly, somewhat indirect. That is to say, Barth certainly did not adopt Kierkegaard's critique and usher it into a new era. This chapter will explore more explicit functions for Kierkegaard's ecclesiological critique, primarily through an exploration of Kierkegaard's influence on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but extending to modern implications as well.

It would seem that Bonhoeffer's relationship to Kierkegaard has only been casually recognized until relatively recently. Matthew Kirkpatrick, whose text *Attacks on Christendom in a World Come of Age* is especially helpful in this section, has suggested that although "specialists of both authors" have "widely recognized" Kierkegaard's influence on Bonhoeffer, the evidence has appeared "exclusively in footnotes, digressions, and the occasional paper." Kirkpatrick further suggested that his book, written in 2011, was the first "comprehensive study" ever conducted.<sup>1</sup>

### Comparing the writings of Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer

Previous scholarship on Kierkegaard's relationship to Bonhoeffer is somewhat odd because several authors draw a significant connection between the two but their analyses are often only briefly mentioned in somewhat vague terms. For example, in *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Ernst Feil, though he only did so in a footnote, suggested "many of the terms of [*The Cost of Discipleship*] have their counterparts" in Kierkegaard's works. In the same

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew D. Kirkpatrick, *Attacks on Christendom in a World Come of Age: Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer, and the Question of "Religionless Christianity"* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series Book 166) (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), Kindle, 1.

note he suggested that “the decisively negative view of worldliness was quite likely framed under the impact of Kierkegaard.”<sup>2</sup> Feil’s relatively few mentions of Kierkegaard juxtaposed against his suggestion of Kierkegaard’s broad impact is curious to say the least.

André Dumas, in *The Context of Bonhoeffer’s Theology*, offers far more evidence of the relationship between Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard but, generally speaking, Dumas is unable to go much further than showing how Bonhoeffer is “like Kierkegaard.” He suggested that in certain writings “Bonhoeffer is a pietist...in the same way that Kierkegaard is a pietist in the *Edifying Discourses* and in *Training in Christianity*.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, and quite significantly, Dumas saw striking similarities between Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer in their pursuits. He noted, “Like Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran who challenged established Lutheranism’s application of sound doctrine to the world around it, but who was deeply committed to the main emphases of Luther’s discoveries.”<sup>4</sup>

There are two places where Bonhoeffer shows Kierkegaard in a line of “genuine Christian thinking” with “Paul, Augustine, Luther...and Barth.” In “Concerning the Christian Idea of God,” this reference comes as Bonhoeffer is exploring the implications of God’s “hiddenness” through Christ’s incarnation and death. In the following sentence, Bonhoeffer remarked, “God is where death and sin are, not where righteousness is.”<sup>5</sup> The second place where Bonhoeffer placed Kierkegaard in line with “genuine Christian thinking” was in a lecture on “The Theology of Crisis” given in 1931. Here Kierkegaard’s name was mentioned as

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<sup>2</sup> Ernst Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Martin Rumscheidt (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), 224, fn. 45.

<sup>3</sup> André Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian of Reality*, trans. Robert McAfee Brown (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1968), 118.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 243.

<sup>5</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Concerning the Christian Idea of God,” *The Journal of Religion* 12, no. 2 (April, 1932): 184.

Bonhoeffer opened the lecture with an appeal to American students to see the merits of Barthian theology.<sup>6</sup>

Still, the obstacle in connecting Bonhoeffer to Kierkegaard is that Bonhoeffer's writings contain relatively few references to thought outside his own. Therefore, in order to show a strong influence, it is necessary to show similarities between the writings of Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer, as Kirkpatrick, Dumas, and others have. Of particular help is Dumas' suggestion that Kierkegaard made an "identical point" to Bonhoeffer on the topic of "costly grace."<sup>7</sup> Both described grace in the historical context of Luther's understanding of grace. Bonhoeffer immediately followed with a clarification: "then [Luther's] followers changed the "answer" into the data for a calculation of their own."<sup>8</sup> Nearly one hundred years before, Kierkegaard had followed a passage on Luther's understanding of grace with: "the next generation slackened; it did not turn in horror from exaggeration in respect to works...into the path of faith. No, they transformed the Lutheran passion into a doctrine, and with this they diminished also the vital power of faith."<sup>9</sup>

To be clear, the intention here is, of course, not to suggest any impropriety on the part of Bonhoeffer in these similarities. It is simply to briefly highlight the underemphasized point that Kierkegaard's 'attack' had a profound impact on Bonhoeffer. Many other examples could be shown if one were to further explore the work of the authors cited in this section.

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<sup>6</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928-1936*, ed. Edwin H. Robertson, trans. Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 362.

<sup>7</sup> "Cheap Grace" is a concept widely attributed to Bonhoeffer; Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 122-23.

<sup>8</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. Chr. Kaiser Verlag München, R. H. Fuller, and Irmgard Booth (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1949), 54.

<sup>9</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourselves! And Three Discourses 1851*, trans. Walter Lowrie, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944), 202.



It is worth noting that, like Barth, Bonhoeffer drifted from agreement with Kierkegaard in some areas. Dumas observed, “Bonhoeffer drew from Hegel as the formal model for his Christology, ecclesiology and ethics.” He went on to suggest, “one could say that Barth and Bultmann began as Kierkegaardians; Bultmann remained one, while Barth became a Hegelian – which is what Bonhoeffer always was!”<sup>10</sup> So, further evidence is required to suggest Bonhoeffer exemplifies an ecclesial function for Kierkegaard over what has already been shown in Barth. This evidence is shown in a comparison of their ‘attacks.’

### **Comparing the ‘Attacks’ of Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer**

Investigating the similarities in the ‘attacks’ of both Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer would appear to be a crucially important ecclesiological task. The reason is that Kierkegaard’s ‘attack’ is generally disparaged. Kirkpatrick describes the evaluation of some, such as biographers Bain and Allen to be that Kierkegaard “simply presented an acosmic pessimism against the true gospel of Christ.”<sup>11</sup> At the same time, Bonhoeffer is often celebrated as an essential voice in ecclesiology. In just one example, Guido de Graaff has described certain aspects of Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology as “crucial for understanding...the connection between Christ’s vicarious representation on the one hand, and the multiple ways in which Christians might be called to act vicariously after [Bonhoeffer’s] example on the other.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, evidence that their ‘attacks’ are virtually the same would require a shift in perception of either Kierkegaard or Bonhoeffer.

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<sup>10</sup> Dumas, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 31.

<sup>11</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Attacks on Christendom in a World Come of Age*, 175.

<sup>12</sup> Guido de Graaff, “Friends with a Mandate: Friendship and Family in Bonhoeffer’s Ecclesiology,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 30, no. 4 (2017): 399.

Bonhoeffer's 'attack' is best seen in his writings from prison where he outlines his "religionless Christianity." Kirkpatrick has summarized Bonhoeffer's fundamental grievance as being "that revelation has become 'religion,' where the truths of Christianity have become interpreted and forged through the light of humankind's own mind rather than that of God."<sup>13</sup> In April 1944, Bonhoeffer wrote, "Even those who honestly describe themselves as 'religious' do not in the least act up to it, and so they presumably mean something quite different by 'religious'."<sup>14</sup> At this point, it is entirely fair to suggest that Bonhoeffer's use of "religious" is nearly identical to Kierkegaard's "Christendom."

More specifically, Bonhoeffer suggested that "man bec[ame] radically religionless" when the "'religious *a priori*' of mankind" was separated from its foundation in God and was instead "a historically conditioned and transient form of human self-expression." He even went so far to suggest that "*a priori* does not exist at all."<sup>15</sup> Of course, this claim, though it may offer more nuance than Kierkegaard, is essentially the same as Kierkegaard's claim that "Christianity does not exist." In fact, in a letter authored just one month before, Bonhoeffer had explicitly referenced Kierkegaard suggesting he, along with a group of others, had "a necessary attribute of greatness."<sup>16</sup>

Like Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer also emphasized an absence of the articulation of suffering in the church. It seems appropriate to say that Bonhoeffer read Luther's theology of the cross through a Kierkegaardian lens. However, in many ways, Bonhoeffer offers more detail on the reason suffering is necessary for Christians. Kirkpatrick framed Bonhoeffer in this way: "the

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<sup>13</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Attacks on Christendom in a World Come of Age*, 186.

<sup>14</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1971), 279.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 280.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 229.

strength and calling of true Christianity is not to rule over the world in separation from it, but rather to stand alongside God in his suffering, to partake of it within the world.”<sup>17</sup> This view allowed Bonhoeffer to draw an important distinction between “Human religiosity,” which “makes man look in his distress to the power of God in the world: God as *deus ex machina*,” and “the Bible,” which “directs [people] to God’s powerlessness and suffering.” He added, “only the suffering God can help.”<sup>18</sup>

Kirkpatrick also shows strong evidence of direct alignment between Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer in several other areas. For example, though their terminology was different, both were opposed to the field of apologetics because in it “religion” (Bonhoeffer), or “Christendom” (Kierkegaard), is what is defended, not God.<sup>19</sup> Bonhoeffer also adopted Kierkegaard’s concept of “contemporaneity with Christ,” as well as Kierkegaard’s views on subjectivity. In *Christology* he wrote,

*Absolute* certainty about an historical fact can never be acquired by itself. It remains a *paradox*... That means that for the church an historical fact is not past, but present; that what is uncertain is *the absolute*, what is past is present, and what is historical... is *contemporaneous* (Kierkegaard)<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, in many of his writings, Bonhoeffer was as critical of the church as Kierkegaard ever was. At one point Bonhoeffer remarked,

Church is an institution for preserving Christian piety and morals. It “must” be kept for the people—otherwise it gets carried away. It “serves” public life, order, the state. It is an institution that is not a good model of organization, not very influential, not very impressive, in need of improvement in the extreme.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Attacks*, 192.

<sup>18</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 361.

<sup>19</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Attacks*, 206-7.

<sup>20</sup> Emphasis added on terminology shared with Kierkegaard. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, trans. John Bowden (London: Collins, 1974), 74, as cited in, Kirkpatrick, *Attacks*, 150.

<sup>21</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933* Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works vol. 12, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen, trans. Isabel Best and David Higgins (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 263.

To be clear, this section of Bonhoeffer's writing discussed the "duality" of the church and his writing is equal parts honest assessment and hopeful imagination. Just after the above quote, Bonhoeffer wrote that the church's only pure function is to proclaim "the message of the living God." Still, his overall assessment is that the "atmosphere" in the church is "relatively thin and the horizons restricted"; what is needed are "reformers" who will "push open the windows."<sup>22</sup> With striking similarity, Kierkegaard had previously described the church with the metaphor of a hospital where "the whole building is full of poison," and so "the patients are dying like flies."<sup>23</sup>

What has been outlined here is in full alignment with Kirkpatrick's analysis of Bonhoeffer's relationship to Kierkegaard. In addition, Kirkpatrick makes several more connections, and shows evidence from an analysis of Bonhoeffer's library of Kierkegaard's works, which details which texts Bonhoeffer highlighted and what notes he made. Overall, Kirkpatrick's claim that "Bonhoeffer immersed himself in Kierkegaard, found himself in Kierkegaard, and therefore wrote his own words from within Kierkegaard" seems well founded.<sup>24</sup> Kirkpatrick is not alone; Christiane Tietz, in *Kierkegaard's Influence on Theology*, suggested the same: "Kierkegaard was of utmost importance for Bonhoeffer."<sup>25</sup>

Most convincingly, for his doctoral dissertation on the topic of Bonhoeffer's theology of revelation, Geffery Kelly was able to interview Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's close friend. In Kelly's interview Bethge suggested the possibility that Bonhoeffer's concept of "cheap grace"

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Instant No. 4* (Copenhagen: Bianco Luno's Press, 1855), in Lowrie, trans., *Kierkegaard's Attack Upon "Christendom" 1854-1855*, 139.

<sup>24</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Attacks*, 20.

<sup>25</sup> Christiane Tietz, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Standing "in the Tradition of Paul, Luther, Kierkegaard, in the Tradition of Genuine Christian Thinking," in *Kierkegaard's Influence on Theology Tome I: German Protestant Theology*, ed. Jon Stewart (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 46.

was directly influenced by Kierkegaard. In addition, Bethge confirmed that Kierkegaard's book *Der Einzelne und die Kirche. Über Luther und den Protestantismus* (The Individual and the church: About Luther and Protestantism) "did serve as a direct source for several sections of *The Cost of Discipleship*." Kelly's general assessment was, "Bonhoeffer is remarkably close to [Kierkegaard]."<sup>26</sup> The implications of this under-emphasized connection are crucial to this project, but before exploring them, it is appropriate to interject Vernard Eller's perspective here.

### **"Radical Discipleship"**

Generally, Vernard Eller's task in *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship* was to frame Kierkegaard as sectarian rather than an ecclesologist per se. Eller built upon the framework which was developed by Ernst Troeltsch in *The Social Teaching of Christian Churches* and shows a problem with the term "church," which can refer to several different classifications.<sup>27</sup> For example, it can refer to either the full spectrum of "the ecumenical body of Christ" or "any given line on that spectrum."<sup>28</sup> Divergently, the term "sect" either refers to a given point on the aforementioned spectrum or a point off of the spectrum, as would be the case with any group which is not associated with Christianity.

Eller's exhaustive exploration of semantic differences is not altogether relevant to this project, but it contains a number of important points. First, if Kierkegaard's 'attack' is seen against "church," then he is open to a critique which is more prominent than one might expect; a critique which Bonhoeffer faces far less often. Perhaps because of his multidisciplinary focus, Kierkegaard's Christian commitment and theological capabilities are often called into question.

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<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey B. Kelly, "The Influence of Kierkegaard on Bonhoeffer's Concept of Discipleship," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (1974): 150, 154.

<sup>27</sup> See Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches Vol 2*, Halley Stewart Publications (New York: Allen & Unwin; Macmillan, 1956).

<sup>28</sup> Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship*, 50.

Put simply, in this classification, Kierkegaard is seen as attacking Christianity, or Christ, as much as “Christendom,” because in some ways “church” is related to all three. However, if Kierkegaard is seen as sectarian, then, as Eller suggested, his writings could be compared with those of John Wesley, George Fox, or Menno Simons rather than thought of as the critique of an outsider to Christianity<sup>29</sup> This distinction is crucial for understanding the rest of Eller’s perspective.

Second, he points to Emil Brunner’s writing on “the Ekklesia.” Brunner suggested a fundamental “misunderstanding of the Ekklesia as the church, as a sacred institution,” which happened when “faith was misunderstood as affirmation of doctrine or of facts.” Instead, the Ekklesia exists for the sole purpose of bearing a “double witness” to Christ—“through the Word that tells of what [Christ] has bestowed upon it,” and through “life corroborate each other.”<sup>30</sup> Eller further said, in summarizing Brunner, “For [the Ekklesia] in which the individuals participate is precisely not a thing, but a Person—the Christ.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, if the Ekklesia is ever gathered outside of Christ, or more clearly, any purpose outside of Christ, it ceases to be the church. Though Aaron Edwards never invoked Brunner’s perspective, his view of Kierkegaard’s distinction between the “crowd” and the “community” is similar to Brunner’s. Eller was in agreement in noting: “the community must *come to be*; the community of Christians must *be created* as those who are Christian.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>30</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation, Dogmatics: Vol. III*, trans. David Cairns and T.H.L. Parker (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), 134-35.

<sup>31</sup> Eller, Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship, 62.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 296.

Finally, Eller mentions very little about Bonhoeffer's alignment with Kierkegaard. In fact, Eller minimized the similarities between the two, which is why Eller's perspective is interjected here. Eller suggested that Bonhoeffer's religionlessness was temporarily conceived and lacked "consistency of application." In Eller's mind Bonhoeffer's concept was entirely related to the cultural circumstances which surrounded him and therefore it did very little to change his "churchly view of the church."<sup>33</sup> This is perhaps why Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology is celebrated while his notion of "religionless Christianity" is underemphasized in the zeitgeist which surrounds him.

### **Analyzing Bonhoeffer's Alignment with Kierkegaard**

Even with Eller's reticence with aligning Bonhoeffer fully with Kierkegaard, the section before makes it virtually impossible to ignore their similarities. If it is true, as several have suggested, that the attacks of Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard are nearly identical, then the difference in the reception of the two, among those in the church, would seem to be based on a limited number of variables, the most obvious of which is the difference in their contexts.

Bonhoeffer's context is widely known and yet certain elements are necessary to properly evaluate the differences between his and Kierkegaard's. Many of the previously cited writings of Bonhoeffer were authored after Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933. Bonhoeffer was one of the first to attempt to remind the church "of its duty to resist the state when the state is acting unjustly." However, Bonhoeffer's warnings were largely ignored which led him to join the "Confessing Church" roughly one year later. In 1935, he accepted leadership of multiple seminaries within that movement, but those were shut down by the Gestapo in 1940. Although Bonhoeffer's pacifist stance had motivated him to leave Germany before that point, he returned a

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 333.

short time later choosing to actively resist instead of withdrawing. Upon his return, Bonhoeffer began to work with “Abwehr” in the plot to assassinate Hitler. He was imprisoned on April 5, 1943 and it was in prison where he developed his concept of “religionless Christianity.” Finally, Bonhoeffer was executed on April 9, 1945.<sup>34</sup>

Another unfortunate, yet necessary, aspect of Bonhoeffer’s context is the exploitation of certain writings of Luther’s by the Nazi regime. Later in his life, Luther authored *On the Jews and Their Lies* which is “anti-semitic” to say the least. In it Luther outlined “seven severe recommendations concerning the Jews.” Although many Protestants “attempted to stay neutral” in the conflict associated with these writings, Christopher Probst has suggested that “most believed the German *Volk* to be an ‘order of creation.’” Additionally, certain Protestant scholars, who were aligned with the “anti-Jewish policies of Hitler,” provided “scholarly respectability for the regime,” using some of Luther’s writings to do so.<sup>35</sup>

Of course, it would be inappropriate to overstate Luther’s contribution to the issues at play in Nazi Germany; however, it must be admitted that certain aspects of Luther were read in support of the Third Reich. That being said, Luther’s actual writings are not the issue here as much as differing hermeneutical approaches to Luther. Most obviously, this conflict is present in choosing whether to emphasize Luther’s theology of the cross or his later writings, and in applying Luther’s “two kingdoms” principle. In one case, certain factions used Luther to undergird the claims of the state. As was the case in Kierkegaard’s Denmark, Luther’s concept of “divinely ordained” leaders was emphasized. In the other case, Bonhoeffer, seeing Luther

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<sup>34</sup> Christiane Tietz, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 43-46.

<sup>35</sup> Christopher J. Probst, ““An incessant army of demons”: Wolf Meyer-Erlach, Luther, and “the Jews” in Nazi Germany,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 23, no. 3 (Winter 2009): 442, 446, accessed February 28, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/hgs/dcp042>.



through a Kierkegaardian lens, emphasized the theology of the cross over Luther's later writings and understood the "two kingdoms" principle to mean the church was required, in this case, to resist state actions. While Kierkegaard was certainly not the only influence on Bonhoeffer, his influence had a great deal to do with Bonhoeffer's awareness of his calling to resist.

### **Conclusion**

The remarkable similarities between the attacks of Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer as well as the evidence which shows Kierkegaard's influence on Bonhoeffer invites one question related to ecclesiology: if their attacks are virtually the same, how is it that in modern perceptions Kierkegaard is often labeled "anti-ecclesial" while Bonhoeffer's ecclesiological legacy is taught and celebrated? Negative perceptions of Kierkegaard's work have been outlined throughout this project. In Bonhoeffer's case, Brendan Leahy exemplified the opinion of many others in describing Bonhoeffer as a "one of the great theologians, churchmen, and martyrs of the twentieth century."<sup>36</sup> While Kierkegaard's ecclesiology has been described as negative, deconstructionist or 'anti,' Leahy used phrases like "reforming" and an attempt to "rediscover the ecclesial identity" to describe Bonhoeffer. Awareness about the similarities between their attacks would require a resolution to these conflicting perceptions.

First, it has already been noted that although they were generally aligned theologically, the two diverged in certain areas of doctrine. More specifically though, one must admit a difference in tone between the two, namely that, as Kirkpatrick observed, "While Bonhoeffer attempted to express the future form of Christianity, so Kierkegaard explicitly sought to avoid doing so."<sup>37</sup> So it could be said, their grievances were the same, but Bonhoeffer went on to

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<sup>36</sup> Brendan Leahy, "'Christ Existing as Community': Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Notion of Church," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 73 (2008): 32.

<sup>37</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Attacks*, 198.

develop a clear vision for ecclesial reform. However, it is not entirely fair to claim Kierkegaard had no concrete outcome for reform; it was just that his vision was rooted in the past, specifically in the New Testament.

That being said, to speak of reformed conceptions of ecclesiology in either Kierkegaard or Bonhoeffer is to miss the point. One of the most compelling aspects of their attacks is that their ecclesiology was rooted in their Christology. That is to say, for both Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer, the church is formed in Christ, and so institutionalization is inherently antithetical to that notion. On this topic, Eller suggested that Kierkegaard specifically was not interested in “reformation” at all but rather “reformulation.”<sup>38</sup>

As modern scholars reflect on the legacies of both Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer, the most obvious difference would be in their contexts. Kirkpatrick has clearly noted the general differences between the two:

For Kierkegaard, society had lost itself in the ease of life, denying the strenuousness of the gospel message, and was using the church as a source of comfort. Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the individual was against society’s promotion of the mass...Bonhoeffer on the other hand was met with a very different situation. Theology had become individualized at the expense of the church.<sup>39</sup>

With this, the unified pursuits of both Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer become clearer. Upon first reading, Kirkpatrick’s suggestion could be seen as placing Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer on opposing sides of a spectrum of individualism; however, neither Kierkegaard nor Bonhoeffer advocated a proper system for church. Once again, the church is not formed on one set of values or another, but formed in Christ: the community of individuals before God.

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<sup>38</sup> Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship*, 301

<sup>39</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Attacks*, 221.

It is important to note, neither made a substantial impact immediately. Kierkegaard was ostracized and Bonhoeffer was martyred. Is it possible that the difference in perceptions between the two simply relates to Tertullian's well-known phrase, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church"? Perhaps, but it is doubtful that either Kierkegaard or Bonhoeffer had any desire to receive credit for their positions; their goal was ecclesial honesty, honesty that the church had allowed itself to be influenced by factors outside of Christ.

This leads to one of the most fascinating connections between Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer, and in turn to an ecclesiological contribution by Kierkegaard. It has already been noted that Kierkegaard maintained that he was not a reformer, though in many writings he expressed a hope that a reformer would aid his task. He viewed himself as the light which would reveal the atrocities of the church but new another was needed. Furthermore, Kierkegaard always expected that his attack would end with his martyrdom. It is in light of these facts that Kirkpatrick said, "Bonhoeffer embodies the character of a Kierkegaardian reformer."<sup>40</sup> So, in many areas, Bonhoeffer's ecclesiological contributions are Kierkegaard's ecclesiological contributions.

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<sup>40</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Attacks*, 221.

## Chapter 4

### Conclusion

Søren Kierkegaard has managed to evade a fully encompassing classification to this day. He is, among other things, essential to the realm of philosophy, celebrated in the realm of literature, and occasionally invoked in the realm of theology, but his ecclesiological contributions have, generally, either been ignored or classified as negative. His ‘attack’ was blunt, occasionally sarcastic and repetitive, but his thesis was clear: The Danish State Church had drifted away from being gathered in Christ and had been institutionalized, which caused a severe blurring of the line between Christ’s ideals and state concerns.

The scope of research for this project has, to some degree, intentionally ignored figures who are generally in line with Kierkegaard and instead explored figures who are generally considered to have been influential in modern theological circles. In exploring Kierkegaard’s influence over Karl Barth, it was shown that Kierkegaard, the critic, has several ecclesiological functions despite the fact that Barth diverted from Kierkegaard’s theology. The story in which Barth imagines encountering Kierkegaard on the street demonstrates that even after Barth had dismissed most of Kierkegaard’s assertions, he could not fully let go of Kierkegaard’s critique of the church. It seems fair to summarize Barth in saying: he did not find Kierkegaard’s tone edifying, he disagreed with Kierkegaard’s association with certain theologians, he did not like how Kierkegaard was interpreted among his contemporaries, but he could not, in the end, say that the fundamental claims of Kierkegaard’s ‘attack’ were untrue. Furthermore, an exploration of Barth allowed for the opportunity to correct widely held misunderstandings of Kierkegaard’s perspective.

Bonhoeffer allowed the opportunity to see a Kirkegaardian ecclesiology in perhaps the most urgent context. Though one cannot say Bonhoeffer was entirely aligned with Kierkegaard's theology, the fundamental aspects of their attacks were nearly identical. On some level, each time someone points back to Bonhoeffer to show the importance of the church resisting the state, they are also pointing back to Kierkegaard, though generally they may not be aware of it. Bonhoeffer, admittedly, seemed to be far more interested in helping the develop the future of the church; however, one wonders whether he would have returned home again and again to resist, had he not had a Kierkegaardian foundation. Bonhoeffer demonstrated a function of Kierkegaard, the critic, even when the function is not immediately available. At times a critical assessment is helpful, even when the corresponding solution has not been imagined.

Still, a certain suggestion of Vernard Eller's, which has not been mentioned to this point, looms over any attempt to explain away Kierkegaard's deconstructionist position. He wrote,

Thus the only way for a sectary to preserve his church is to become as radically obedient as possible and leave the preserving to God. He, in all conscience, *must* do the one thing that the "church" man, in all conscience, *cannot* do: risk the martyrdom of the church itself in the interests of unconditional obedience. S.K. saw what was at stake.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps there is one categorization that 'sticks' to Kierkegaard: "radically obedient." Throughout his life, he was willing to endure the consequences of his calling. He embodied his own theology which suggested that faith was not reasonable but instead required a leap. He openly criticized the church which he knew would make a man he loved his enemy. Even his departure from church, a system he had been committed to his entire life, was the embodiment of his beliefs. If Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer were both right, that the church is gathered into Christ by Christ, then whatever collapses when it is deconstructed is not the church but rather an

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<sup>1</sup> Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship*, 304.

institution founded on other values. Perhaps this is what Kierkegaard meant when he said, “Christianity does not exist” and “Let it collapse.” As Eller might have suggested, only when the institution collapses can the church truly be reformulated in Christ.

Further research would be required to translate Kierkegaard into a modern setting. Even a cursory understanding of the Danish State Church should suggest that Kierkegaard cannot be proof-texted in a North American ecclesial setting, for instance. However, such research could provide a number of interesting conclusions which could prove useful in modern ecclesiology.

In the introduction of his *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, reflecting on the difficulties of ecclesiology in a modern setting, wrote,

In an individualistic, post-modern cacophony of differing voices and pluralism, it does not sound appealing to begin talking about a collective called the church, especially since the term *church* for better or worse has been loaded with so many unfortunate connotations from authoritarianism to coercion to antiquarianism.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps a proper reading of Kierkegaard, who has been called “the first post-modern theologian,” could have some contribution to ecclesiology in modern times.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, a proper understanding of Kierkegaard’s concept of the individual and of subjectivity could have some impact in reconciling an increasingly post-modern mindset with the Ekklesia.

The goal of this research was never to justify Kierkegaard’s ecclesial position per se. In truth, it simply began as an attempt to understand why Kierkegaard’s faith is often called into question and how a lifelong church attender’s legacy could simply be that he walked away from church. In the end, the questions which were asked at the beginning of this thesis have answers: First, is the unification of persons under the label “Christianity” the fundamental goal of

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<sup>2</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical & Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Perkins, *Søren Kierkegaard*, 41.

ecclesiology, or are the individual values of each person crucial to the identity of the body?

Kierkegaard suggested that the conditions under which the church is gathered are *the* fundamental question of ecclesiology. In Kierkegaard's mind, the community of individuals before God guards against a crowd mentality which spreads outside values among the group. Furthermore, each individual before God serves as accountability for the group as a whole.

Secondly, is the first question only relevant in times of extraordinary cultural pressure, or is it crucially important to have this corrective in mind at all time? Bonhoeffer's ability to resist in the midst of extraordinary circumstances was, at least in part, due to his Kierkegaardian reading of Luther. So, in at least this specific case, Kierkegaard's forceful re-introduction of Luther's theology of the cross in times which could be deemed un-extraordinary, was just as crucial as Bonhoeffer's Kierkegaardian reading of Luther. However, Kierkegaard's greatest strength was that he did not allow the suggestion that 'things are not as bad as they could be' to cloud his understanding of what the church was originally instituted as. As modern ecclesiologists face a more widespread realization of the negative impact of religion, they would do well to interact with Kierkegaard's 'attack,' which essentially realizes the negative impact of religion but does not dismiss Christ's interaction with the world as though the two concepts are mutually exclusive.

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