

CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

**"THE LIMITLESS HORIZONS OF PROLIXITY"**  
**THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF KIERKEGAARD'S**  
**CRITIQUE OF BIBLICAL EXEGETICAL METHOD AND**  
**PRACTICE**

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This dissertation entitled

**“THE LIMITLESS HORIZONS OF PROLIXITY”:  
THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF KIERDEGAARD’S  
CRITIQUE OF BIBLICAL EXEGETICAL METHOD AND PRACTICE**

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**Doctor of Philosophy**

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To Tricia

who is far more precious than jewels

&

Nathanael and Bryant

for being happily drug along

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## PREFACE

Gordon D. Marino remarks in his “Preface” to *Kierkegaard in the Present Age* that a “serious author is not necessarily one who can support his reading with 133 footnotes, or one who will not rest in his house-to-house scholarly fighting. . . . For Kierkegaard, a serious author is a concerned person who strives to speak to his reader in a meaningful way about meaningful things.” Although the reader will find some of the above in this dissertation, I aspire to be a serious author in the Kierkegaardian sense. Mostly, I try to show that Kierkegaard has some interesting things to say to us about biblical exegesis, and have tried to indicate what some of those things are.

I have been asked “Why Kierkegaard?” many times over the last few years. The answer is simple: his critique of biblical exegesis interests me. Kierkegaard is a bit like Joab, however: he is both familiar and strange; we know his type and yet know no one like him. As David needed to listen to Joab, and sometimes be corrected by him, so also we might do well to listen to Kierkegaard. But David could not trust Joab too far and we dare not trust Kierkegaard uncritically, either. And neither is to be imitated.

I became interested in Kierkegaard while a doctoral student at Calvin Theological Seminary. I owe much to the people associated with that institution, including its financial supporters. I stumbled across “What is Required” about the same time I began to appreciate “the superiority of precritical exegesis” while in class with Richard A. Muller. I began to discern the contours of the present dissertation while reading *Sickness Unto Death* in Lee Hardy’s course, *The Apologetics of Despair*. Professor Hardy allowed me to explore this

topic in a term paper for that course. Later he agreed to serve as co-supervisor of my dissertation. He is an excellent teacher and I have enjoyed studying under his supervision.

I was fortunate enough to spend a summer as a fellow at the Howard and Edna Hong Kierkegaard Library at St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota. I am grateful to Marino, curator, and to Cynthia Lund, resident friend of the scholars.

Though Turabian insists “one can properly omit formal thanks” for one’s dissertation committee, I am keenly aware of the burden serving on such a committee is. The assistance I have received, however routine at CTS, is not adequately dismissed as merely “routine.” Ronald Feenstra and Lee Hardy, my co-supervisors, have spent hours reading and editing with care. I apologize for making their work harder than it ought to have been. John W. Cooper has offered insightful criticisms and timely encouragement. C. Stephen Evans offered suggestions on sources I may well have overlooked. More than this, I am indebted to his formidable body of Kierkegaard scholarship and the way his presence continues to haunt the Kierkegaard Library at St. Olaf. I am especially indebted to Ronald Feenstra, however, not only for his care with my dissertation but for his constant support, direction, and encouragement throughout my doctoral studies. Ina DeMoor, who wears several hats at CTS, has also been a great help and encouragement to me and my family.

I have been greatly humbled by the support of my colleagues at Reformed Theological Seminary, too. Miles Van Pelt and Derek Thomas deserve special thanks for their unfailing support. Faris Paxton, my teaching assistant, helped proofread footnotes and the bibliography, and students and staff have prayed for me, taken a real interest in my progress, and rejoiced in its completion.



## ABBREVIATIONS

- BA *Book on Adler*. Edited and Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- CD *Christian Discourses*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- CA *The Concept of Anxiety*. Edited and translated by Reidar Thornte in collaboration with Albert. B. Anderson. Princeton University Press, 1980.
- CUP *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. 2 vols. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- EUD *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- FSE *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself!*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- FT *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- JFY *Judge for Yourself!*. In *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself!*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- JP *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*. 7 vols. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967-78.
- PC *Practice in Christianity*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- PF *Philosophical Fragments*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.
- PV *The Point of View for My Work as an Author: A Report to History and Related Writings*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- SUD *The Sickness Unto Death*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.

- TM *The Moment and Late Writings*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- WA *Without Authority*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation seeks to demonstrate that Søren Kierkegaard's critique of biblical exegetical methods and practices, and corresponding proposal, offers an interesting and relevant contribution to the current debate on biblical exegetical methods and practices taking place within the contemporary theological turn in biblical interpretation. The contemporary theological turn in biblical interpretation is represented in this dissertation by Timothy H. Polk, an important interpreter of Kierkegaard's exegetical method within the post-liberal tradition, and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, a leading contributor to the theological turn in contemporary biblical exegesis.

Despite significant advances in understanding Kierkegaard as an explicitly Christian thinker there remains a significant gap within Kierkegaardian scholarship related to his thoughts on biblical exegesis. Although this gap has been noted for decades, this dimension of Kierkegaard's thought has only very recently attracted significant attention. Likewise, despite common interests and concerns between Kierkegaard and at least some noteworthy contributors to the theological turn in biblical interpretation, Kierkegaard's critique of and proposal on biblical exegesis remains largely neglected within the current discussion. This is all the more surprising given Kierkegaard's recognized and much debated influence on Karl Barth, whom many contributors to the contemporary debate on theological exegesis identify as a founding father of this movement. This dissertation attempts to address both gaps by exploring the intersection between Kierkegaard's critique of and proposal on biblical exegesis with the current debate on exegetical methods and practices within the contemporary theological turn in biblical interpretation.

Located primarily in his discourse “What is Required,” Kierkegaard’s critique and proposal is especially directed towards and applicable to the family of critical exegetical methods as construed and practiced in modern, critical-era biblical studies. Kierkegaard’s critique is radical, however, and its application extends far beyond the kind of exegetical methods and practices that tended to dominate modern, critical-era biblical exegesis. Ultimately, Kierkegaard’s proposal calls contemporary exegetes to adopt a largely precritical (though not anti-critical) exegetical paradigm that conceives of the exegetical task as a profoundly spiritual discipline of faith *coram Deo*.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### *1.1 Approaching Kierkegaard*

Søren Kierkegaard, in *The Point of View for my Work as an Author: A Direct Communication, A Report to History*, presents himself as “a religious author” and asserts that “my whole authorship pertains to Christianity, to the issue: becoming a Christian, with direct and indirect polemical aim at that enormous illusion, Christendom.”<sup>1</sup> He insists this issue is not merely an intellectual curiosity to be dealt with in a detached, objective manner but is rather a deeply personal or subjective matter each person must face. Assuming this is an honest report, the central concern of Kierkegaard’s authorship is with what is existentially required to actually *become* a Christian person. As Sylvia Walsh observes, “Kierkegaard’s . . . purpose was to cast Christianity into reflection in such a way as to lead the reader to the decisive categories of Christian thought, and then out of reflection to the task of becoming a Christian and the simplicity of living Christianly.”<sup>2</sup>

For Kierkegaard, Christianity is not ultimately a system of doctrine (though he clearly admits that Christianity contains a definite doctrinal content), but a way of existing that is radically distinct from all other types or “spheres of existence.” He does not attempt a

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<sup>1</sup> PV, 23 (XIII 517-18).

<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Walsh, *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard’s Dialectic of Christian Existence* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University, 2005), 2.

systematic treatment of the content of Christian faith but rather an exploration and description of the qualifications of Christian existence over against other major types or spheres of existence. To reduce Christianity to a dogmatic system or doctrine is to allow the individual to escape from the radical demands of Christian existence. As Walsh states, “Kierkegaard claimed that knowing what Christianity *is* (knowing the truth objectively) is not synonymous with knowing what it means to *be* a Christian (knowing the truth subjectively or inwardly).”<sup>3</sup> He opposes such reductions of Christianity to what is merely objective without denying objective truth or its subjective significance through his complex “authorship.” This authorship consists largely of a descriptive project that attempts to expose the major non-Christian types of existence and sets Christian existence over against these alternatives.<sup>4</sup>

Due to the priority of subjectivity for Kierkegaard, it would be a mistake to count his aim as merely descriptive, even if his writings are largely descriptive in nature.<sup>5</sup> Description may be the best any author can do in order to clarify what is involved in becoming a Christian and living Christianly, but Kierkegaard’s aim is that his readers would actually *become* Christians not just be able to identify one if they see one—hence his surprisingly direct style for one well known for indirect communication. Yet Christianity cannot be given to someone as a finished product; each individual must personally appropriate

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<sup>3</sup> Walsh, *Living Christianly*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> “If . . . most people in Christendom are Christians only in imagination, in what categories do they live? They live in esthetic or, at most, esthetic-ethical categories,” PV, 43.

<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard’s concept of subjectivity is both unavoidable in Kierkegaardian studies and much contested. The issue will be taken up at some length later in this dissertation. For a helpful discussion of Kierkegaard’s subjectivity that is consistent with the position taken in this dissertation see C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Fragments and Postscript: The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1983), 115-135.

Christian doctrine.<sup>6</sup> Some have suggested that from Kierkegaard's own perspective we ought to regard his authorship as an elaborate evangelistic project.<sup>7</sup> Though perhaps overstated—I would argue that his authorship reflects a more comprehensive, pastoral interest and purpose than it does a purely evangelistic concern—this reading of Kierkegaard's authorship is generally accurate and quite helpful. From this vantage point we can clearly discern that his aesthetic and philosophical works, written 1843-46, were intended to function apologetically—"the aesthetic literature to dispel the illusion that those who live under aesthetic categories are Christian and the philosophical discourse to show that one cannot reflect oneself into Christianity."<sup>8</sup> The primary aim was to clear the ground in order to present in his religious authorship what he took to be New Testament Christianity presented. This becomes his exclusive concern beginning in 1847.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This seems to account for Kierkegaard's famous final statement in "First and Last Declaration," a short signed statement appended to CUP, 625-30 (VII 545-49): "Oh, would that no ordinary seaman [Lowrie: "half-learned man"] will lay a dialectic hand on this work but let it stand as it now stands," 630. The descriptive and indirect form of his pseudonymous authorship has what Evans, in *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript*, calls "an essential relation to its content," 5. This is due especially to the content's existential nature. David R. Law, *Kierkegaard as Negative Theologian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), comments that the "reason for [Kierkegaard's insistence on] this . . . is that Kierkegaard wishes to communicate existential truths. The danger facing the interpreter is that of taking these truths and translating them into a series of objective propositions. Thereby the dialectical tension of the works, whereby the reader is confronted with questions to which he must make a personal, existential response, is eliminated and replaced with a simple communication of information," 4-5. One strongly suspects that a similar insistence would be maintained with regard to Kierkegaard's "discourses" or direct communication. It is obvious that Kierkegaard believes the Bible has been treated in just the way he fears his own authorship will be treated.

<sup>7</sup> Walsh contends that "Kierkegaard's purpose in depicting the existential qualifications of Christianity was therefore more evangelical than theological," *Living Christianity*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Walsh, *Living Christianity*, 3. In a footnote in *Point of View* Kierkegaard lists "*Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, *Repetition*, *The Concept of Anxiety*, *Prefaces*, *Philosophical Fragments*, *Stages on Life's Way*—along with eighteen edifying discourses which were published successively" as his aesthetic corpus, 10. Everything else, he asserts, "is exclusively religious" except *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* which, at least conceptually, lies "between them" and represents "the turning point" in that it "concerns itself with and sets 'the Problem', which is the problem of the whole authorship: how to become a Christian," 13.

<sup>9</sup> Although there is a rough approximation between the conceptual distinction between Kierkegaard's aesthetic authorship and his religious authorship and chronology, with 1846-47 as the turning point, Kierkegaard insists that this is misleading in that some explicitly religious writings (e.g. the first *Two Edifying*

On this reading, Kierkegaard functions as a missionary to Christendom,<sup>10</sup> especially in its mid-nineteenth century Danish expression.<sup>11</sup> To this end he enters into and

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*Discourses*) appeared almost simultaneously with *Either/Or*—the first of his aesthetic writings (See PV, 29-32 [XIII 521-24]). Still, his aesthetic authorship is confined to 1843-46 and comprehends all the products of his pseudonymous *characters* except for the intriguing Anti-Climacus: SUD (1849) and PC (1850). The pseudonyms function within the corpus as authorial characters in something like an acted-out novel. Kierkegaard is able to distance himself from their writings in varying degrees. See “A First and Last Declaration” appended to CUP, 625-30 (VII 545-49). See also Evans’ concise comments in *Kierkegaard’s Fragments and Postscript*, 6-9 and Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain “Introduction,” in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, 4-5.

<sup>10</sup> Kierkegaard, in explaining why he began as an aesthetic writer, finds fault with “a certain party of the orthodox . . . that . . . band together in a little circle and strengthen one another in thinking that they are the only Christians—and thus do not know anything else to do with all Christendom than to declare that they are not Christians.” If, however, “there actually are no true Christians in Christendom, then these [orthodox apologists] are *eo ipso* obliged to be missionaries, even though a missionary in Christendom will always look different from a missionary in paganism,” PV, 47 (XIII 534-35).

<sup>11</sup> Early- to mid-nineteenth century Danish Christendom was strongly influenced by German Romanticism and Idealism and especially the speculative philosophy of Hegel. The relationship of Kierkegaard to Hegel has generated innumerable articles and several substantial volumes including Stephen Crites, *In the Twilight of Christendom: Hegel vs. Kierkegaard on Faith and History* (Chambersburg: American Academy of Religion, 1972); Niels Thulstrup, *Kierkegaard’s Relation to Hegel*, trans. by George L. Stengren (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Mark C. Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel & Kierkegaard* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000); and Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Hegelian influence on early- to mid-nineteenth century Danish society is clearly on display in the works of Johan L. Heiberg (1791-1860) and Hans L. Martensen (1808-1884). Heiberg is widely credited as having introduced Hegelian philosophy to Danish high society. He maintained “the leading Copenhagen salon of its time [which] came to include the gifted young theologian Hans L. Martensen as one of its most prominent members.” Kierkegaard was also “on close terms with the Heibergs,” Bruce H. Kirmmse, *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 139. Martensen is best known today as Kierkegaard’s teacher and one of his primary polemical targets. Three of Martensen’s religious treatises are now available in translation in Curtis L. Thompson and David J. Kangas, *Between Hegel and Kierkegaard: Hans L. Martensen’s Philosophy of Religion* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997).

Nowhere in Kierkegaard’s authorship is the Hegelian influence on Christendom more evident than in the writings of his authorial character Johannes Climacus: *Philosophical Fragments* (1844) and the pivotal *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846). The very notions of “fragments” (over against “system”) and “unscientific” Kierkegaard included in the titles to these two works suggests Kierkegaard’s stance against the Hegelian interpretation of Christianity. But it would be a mistake to misunderstand Kierkegaard as absolutely anti-Hegelian in every respect. His relationship to Hegelian thought is beyond the scope of the present dissertation but is clearly more complex than this. Even Climacus’s two works would not be interpreted strictly in relation to Hegelian Idealism.

While stressing the importance of Hegelian Idealism as a background to Climacus, Evans rightly cautions readers that it “is by no means the case that Climacus’s thought has no relevance except in relation to Hegelianism,” *Kierkegaard’s Fragments and Postscript*, 18. He argues that Kierkegaard’s critique of the form of religion prevalent within nineteenth century Danish Christendom “is rather exceptionally pertinent and fresh,” 18. For one thing, the “condescending attitude” toward religious faith and Christianity as something to be transcended that was “present in popular Hegelianism [is a] view of faith still present today in many people, including many who have never heard of Hegel,” 21. Even in Kierkegaard’s own day, immanent religion or religiousness A, to which Christianity had been largely reduced, “was exemplified not only by Hegel but by thinkers like Schleiermacher.” Even “many contemporary religious perspectives would fit” this description, 25.



pseudonymously inhabits the dominant cultural types or “spheres of existence” current within, but cleverly disguised by Christendom. In this way he carries out his purpose as a missionary to Christendom “incognito”—in a manner, that is, analogous with his description of the incarnation.<sup>12</sup> For Kierkegaard, Christendom is an “enormous illusion” precisely because it maintains that nearly all its citizens are Christian.<sup>13</sup> This claim is both ridiculous and dangerous when one compares Danish society and culture with Christianity and the radical demands of faith as expressed in Scripture. Christendom, he was convinced, simply had to be exposed as an illusion—as the lie it is—for there to be any hope of anyone becoming an actual Christian. To this end, he felt obligated to engage this “enormous underlying confusion” and “dreadful illusion” and, having done so, came to see his entire

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It “is important to note that Climacus’s attack, if justified, applies not only to Hegelianism, but to a tremendous amount of classical liberal theology and even to a great deal of theology today,” 26. Not only Hegelians, but even many self-styled orthodox defenders of Christianity had transformed Christianity into an essentially learned and scholarly affair. “Being a Christian had been confused with philosophical speculation over the meaning of dogma or historical investigation of ancient manuscripts and texts,” 29. Ultimately, Evans concludes, “the careful reader will discover again and again in all of the Kierkegaardian literature [that] the problems addressed there are . . . still relevant and pertinent, even if we do not agree with the views expressed. Kierkegaard’s problems to a large extent are still our problems,” 27.

Evans’s caution against an overly strict interpretation of Climacus’s works against its Hegelian background is even more applicable to “What Is Required.” It seems best to view Danish Hegelianism as one particular, local expression of the much larger phenomenon that was Kierkegaard’s primary target: the counterfeit form of Christianity practiced within Christendom. Perhaps certain disturbing features of Christendom found their clearest available expressions within the Hegelian interpretation of Christianity, but Kierkegaard’s criticisms apply much more broadly and penetrate much more deeply than is exhausted by reading him against Hegel. Ultimately, Hegelianism is understood by Kierkegaard to be an instance of a much more profound phenomenon that occurs whenever and wherever sinners handle holy things.

<sup>12</sup> PV 23-26, and 34 (XIII 517-19, and 525). Kierkegaard comments that “an illusion [such as Christendom] can never be removed directly, . . . basically only indirectly. If it is an illusion that all are Christians, and if something is to be done, it must be done indirectly, not by someone who loudly declares himself to be an extraordinary Christian, but by someone who, better informed, even declares himself not to be a Christian.” 43 (XIII 531). Hence Kierkegaard’s apologetic method of indirect communication. On the necessity of identifying with those under the illusion of Christendom see 45-47 (XII 533-35). But note, this indirect or even incognito approach is required in order to produce a “violent enough” effect upon the one under illusion—it being too easy to dismiss an overly direct approach, 44 (XIII 533).

<sup>13</sup> PV, 41 (XIII 529-30).

authorship as directed to the end of exposing Christendom “with direct and indirect polemical” works.<sup>14</sup>

This is the perspective Kierkegaard claimed for his corpus up to 1848 and it is obvious that his writing activity after 1848 only made the polemical edge of his mission to Christendom sharper. Deconstructionist attempts over the last twenty years or so, to discount or even discredit the perspective expressed in *Point of View* and undermine the sincerity of his veronymous works, though multiplying, are unconvincing.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, the

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<sup>14</sup> PV, 41 (XIII 530) and 23 (XIII 517-18), respectively. Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), criticizes Conrad Bonifazi, *Christendom Attacked: A Comparison of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche* (London: Rackliff, 1963) and John A. Gates, *Christendom Revisited: A Kierkegaardian View of the Church Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963) because they, in his estimation, “contend that [Kierkegaard’s] attack upon Christendom, . . . was the logical culmination of his work, and offers the key to understanding other aspects of his writings,” 20. Whether the attack upon Christendom represents the “logical culmination” of his authorship, there can be little doubt that the category of Christendom is crucial to Kierkegaard and must play a proportionately important role in any attempt to interpret his works as the product of a religious author. It is unnecessary to maintain that his attack upon Christendom represents the single, unifying aim of his authorship, or was clearly present in his mind when he began to write, to grant that his authorship forms an extended, subversive engagement with what he eventually labeled Christendom. It seems plausible that the various issues Kierkegaard comes to view under the heading “Christendom” functioned as occasions for his works that were chiefly concerned with how an individual can become a Christian. See also John Flrod, *Kierkegaard and Christendom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

<sup>15</sup> Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as a Religious Thinker: Passions, Virtues, and Praxis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), notes that numerous recent commentators on Kierkegaard’s corpus take “Kierkegaard’s practice of indirect communication, duplicity, irony, and his uses of multiple pseudonymous masks [to be] ample warrant for an approach that rejects a single authoritative reading of the [Kierkegaardian] literature, allowing multiple, indeed contradictory readings,” 6. Gouwens cites numerous contributions to the *Kierkegaard and Postmodernism* series edited by Mark C. Taylor, “including Louis Mackey, *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986); John Vignaux Smyth, *A Question of Eros: Irony in Sterne, Kierkegaard, and Barthes* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986); Sylviane Agacinski, *Aparté: Conceptions and Deaths of Søren Kierkegaard* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986).” Gouwens also places John Caputo *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); the more “restrained” Christopher Norris, *The Deconstructive Turn: Essays in the Rhetoric of Philosophy* (London: Methuen, 1983), on this list. Although not a deconstructionist product, Henning Fenger, *Kierkegaard: The Myths and Their Origins: Studies in the Kierkegaardian Papers and Letters*, trans. George C. Schoolfield (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) also “calls into question Kierkegaard’s stated religious intent” in PV, Gouwens, *Religious Thinker*, 7. Josiah Thompson, “The Master of Irony,” in *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York: Anchor Books, 1972) might also belong to this category. We should add Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain, “Introduction,” in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), who argue in favor of recasting Kierkegaard as something like a proto-postmodernist philosopher and cast suspicion on Kierkegaard’s sincerity in PV. Rée and Chamberlain downplay Kierkegaard’s veronymous works and suggest that Kierkegaard’s reputation as a religious writer deeply concerned with the problem of how to become a

secondary literature also manifests a renewed appreciation for the fruitfulness of taking seriously Kierkegaard's claim that he is a religious writer occupied with the problem of how one becomes a Christian and lives Christianly in the context of Christendom.<sup>16</sup> One especially encouraging development in Kierkegaard studies is the increased attention paid to his veronymous and Anti-Climacian works, which he counted indispensable to the whole authorship, lamenting the neglect of the former from the very beginning of his public writing career.<sup>17</sup> This dissertation adopts Kierkegaard's own mature perspective on his

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Christian and live Christianly originates in superficial early impressions and misinterpretations of Kierkegaard's authorship within the anglo-sphere. Joakim Garff, "The Eyes of Argus: The Point of View and Points of View on Kierkegaard's Work as an Author," in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, eds. Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 75-102 and *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. by Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 550-565, also belongs to the class of deconstructionist readings. Garff argues that PV is a work of duplicity, filled with "self-contradictions" in which Kierkegaard ultimately loses himself or becomes, as it were, his own pseudonym and ends up writing nothing more than "fictions and dubious ploys," 553-554. According to Garff, Kierkegaard eventually gives up trying to argue his case and entrusts himself to "the uncritical earnestness Kierkegaard presupposes in his readers," 554, while simultaneously appealing to divine governance, which Garff explains away as a misinterpretation on Kierkegaard's part of a phenomenon inherent to language itself ("which of course always extends beyond the person who writes it") and the writing process (which "can activate unconscious forces in the person doing the writing"), 557.

<sup>16</sup> Major works that adopt this position include, most notably, Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript*; Evans, *Søren Kierkegaard's Christian Psychology: Insight for Counseling and Pastoral Care* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990); Sylvia Walsh, *Living Christianly*; David Gouwens, *Religious Thinker*; Arnold Come, *Kierkegaard as a Theologian: Recovering My Self* (Montreal: McGill-Queens's University Press, 1997); and Bruce H. Kirmmse, *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). Earlier noteworthy works include Niels Thulstrup and Marie Mikulová Thulstrup, eds., *Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana*, vol. 1, *Kierkegaard's View of Christianity* (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Boghandel, 1978), especially Per Lønning, "Kierkegaard as a Christian Thinker"; Bradley R. Dewey, *The New Obedience: Kierkegaard on Imitating Christ* (Washington D.C.: Corpus Books, 1968); John Elrod, *Kierkegaard and Christendom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); and Wernard Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship: A New Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

<sup>17</sup> Among those just cited (see n. 16) Come, Dewey, Eller, Elrod, Gouwens, Kirmmse, and Walsh emphasize the significance of Kierkegaard's religious and explicitly Christian writings, which includes the pseudonymous SUD and PC. Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship*, however, rightly affirms that Kierkegaard is "fundamentally a religious author who is concerned with theological and philosophical ideas" but wrongly maintains "that the pseudonymous authorship forms the most important part of his corpus," 18 and 19, respectively. After considering an argument for the priority of Kierkegaard's veronymous authorship built around the clearly false premise that the pseudonymous authorship "represents non-religious interests," Taylor writes this: "It is our conclusion, then, that many problems encountered by Kierkegaard interpretation can be overcome by centering our attention on the pseudonymous works. His other kinds of writing are helpful in understanding his pseudonymous authorship, but they should not be regarded as the

authorship—that he is a religious author primarily concerned with what is required in order to become a Christian and live Christianly. It also belongs to the growing body of contemporary Kierkegaardian scholarship interested in his later veronymous and Anti-Climacian literature—not to the neglect of his pseudonymous authorship but as a vital complement to the themes at play in those works.

To take Kierkegaard's expressed intent seriously, however, is not to suppose that he was merely executing a preconceived plan or that his understanding of his authorship never underwent any change or development. Although Malantschuk attempts to demonstrate that his authorship was essentially the execution of a preconceived plan whose thematic content and methodological program was firmly in place no later than 1843,<sup>18</sup> Kierkegaard appeals to divine providence for shaping and ordering his authorship into a single, coherent corpus around this unifying theme. The master plan and totalizing perspective presented in *Point of View* and later works may very well have been hidden from Kierkegaard at first and only gradually discovered through the process of writing, through which he claimed to have

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central part of his corpus," 21. But Taylor fails to consider the much stronger argument for the priority of the veronymous works adopted in this dissertation. Kierkegaard asserts that "The religious is present from the very first instant and has a decisive predominance, but for a while it waits patiently to give the poet leave to talk himself out" and that this talking himself out—which is the substance of the pseudonymous works—is the "process" through which "a poetic and philosophic nature is put aside in order to become a Christian." If Kierkegaard is sincere then it seems very plausible that Taylor has the order of priority and dependence exactly reversed when he concludes that the explicitly Christian literature functions as merely an informative background for the pseudonymous authorship. It seems far more consistent with Kierkegaard's own perspective to maintain that the pseudonymous authorship's primary purpose is to clear the way for his presentation of Christian faith. The pseudonymous writings play the role of John the Baptist in relation to the explicitly Christian literature, which plays the role of Christ. Gregor Malantschuk's *Kierkegaard's Thought*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), observes that "When Kierkegaard wrote [PV], he was already working with the rough draft and ideas of his two last great works: *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity*. It can therefore be said that the notion of a 'comprehensive plan' applies in a way to the whole of Kierkegaard's authorship proper, stretching from *Either/Or* to *Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* (August 7, 1851)," 5.

<sup>18</sup> Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Thought*, 7-8.

been consciously “brought up” by God.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps he gradually came to understand that he was, from the beginning, a religious author centrally occupied with the problem of how to become and live as a Christian. Clearly his perspective on his authorship gained greater clarity and underwent some development as he executed his authorial intention via the pseudonymous authorship. We know, for example, that he continued to wrestle with his authorship throughout his career;<sup>20</sup> he also claimed that “it is [divine] Governance that has educated me, and the education is reflected in the process of the productivity.”<sup>21</sup> Yet he simultaneously insisted that those who understand his aesthetic work perfectly “will nevertheless totally misunderstand me, inasmuch as he does not understand the religious totality in my whole work as an author.”<sup>22</sup> Denying that there is any decisive change or dramatic break to be found anywhere in his authorship, he points to the steady stream of veronymous discourses as proof that he was a religious writer from the beginning. “The

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<sup>19</sup> PV, 90 (XIII 575). See PV, 71-90 (XIII 556-75) for his lengthy discussion of the role of divine providence in crafting his authorship. It is important to note that Kierkegaard does not claim divine inspiration such as some ascribe to Scripture—though he does stress the intimacy and joy he has in his “love-affair” or “God-relationship” as a source of inspiration in the much weaker and more common sense of the term. What he does claim in PV is that God, in his ordaining of all things, has so worked it out that the final form of his then still emerging corpus functions as a single unit that “revolves around: becoming a Christian in Christendom,” 90 (575).

<sup>20</sup> Kierkegaard’s *Journals* testify to his sometimes intense struggles with how to proceed in his project. Hong and Hong have provided insight into many of these struggles in their historical introductions in each volume of the Princeton edition of Kierkegaard’s works. For a relatively early discussion in English see Niels Thulstrup, “Introduction” and “Commentary,” in *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), lxxxv-lxxxvii and 146-152.

<sup>21</sup> PV, 77 (XIII 562). This quote is taken from Lowrie’s translation, 73.

<sup>22</sup> PV, 23 (XIII 517). Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Thought*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), observes that “When Kierkegaard wrote this book [i.e. PV], he was already working with the rough draft and ideas of his two last great works: *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity*. It can therefore be said that the notion of a ‘comprehensive plan’ applies in a way to the whole of Kierkegaard’s authorship proper, stretching from *Either/Or* to *Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* (August 7, 1851),” 5.

religious,” he claims, “is present from the very first instant and has a decisive predominance.”<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps the most fitting, charitable approach to Kierkegaard’s authorship in its totality is to grant that he was self-consciously involved in a large, complex, religious project that revolved around the central problem of how to become a Christian and live Christianly in Christendom. This project begins with *Either/Or* and *Two Edifying Discourses* in 1843, extends through his Anti-Climacian works *Sickness Unto Death* (1849) and *Practice in Christianity* (1850), and at least as far as *For Self-Examination, Judge For Yourself*, and *Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*, all written in 1851. Although the project underwent some organic development, it blossomed in its fully mature form in his, explicitly Christian and almost entirely veronymous authorship between 1847 and 1851. What is now commonly referred to as Kierkegaard’s ‘second authorship’ is rightly prioritized within the totality of his corpus because he claimed it as his own work—that is, published it under his own name (except the two Anti-Climacian volumes)—and because it represents the thematic and programmatic culmination of his work. In this way Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous literature, which has by far dominated Kierkegaard scholarship, is preparatory and incomplete apart from his veronymous literature and especially, given the totality of his authorship, from his explicitly Christian works written 1847-51. This, of course, is consistent with Kierkegaard’s own estimation that his edifying work was in many ways the most important.

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<sup>23</sup> PV, 77 (XIII 562). This quote is taken from Lowrie’s translation, 73-74.

Whatever position one adopts regarding his pseudonymous works prior to 1848, the perspective expressed by Kierkegaard in *Point of View* is his own perspective at least as early as 1847. It is therefore the proper perspective to adopt for understanding his second authorship, including Anti-Climacus's *Sickness Unto Death* (1849) and Kierkegaard's *For Self-Examination* (1851)—the most central works to the present study. The first discourse in *For Self-Examination* is entitled “What Is Required in Order to Look at Oneself with True Blessing in the Mirror of the Word?”<sup>24</sup> Set within the context of his mission of “introducing Christianity into Christendom,” the works of his second authorship express his own interpretation of Christianity most clearly and directly. By taking the veronymous “What Is Required” as our starting point we also place ourselves in a superior position for evaluating the themes related to biblical exegesis introduced within the pseudonymous literature on the principle that whatever Kierkegaard affirms, claims as his own, or clearly presupposes within his veronymous authorship is properly ascribed to him even if it is articulated under his various pseudonyms.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, “What Is Required in Order to Look at Oneself with True Blessing in the Mirror of the Word?” in *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 7-51. Hong and Hong adopt “What Is Required” as the abbreviated title which will be used throughout the rest of this dissertation.

<sup>25</sup> Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript*, offers this reasonable principle as a method for discerning and demonstrating what actually belongs to Kierkegaard's own thought within the pseudonymous literature, over against those who, on one hand, simply equate every view and opinion expressed within his corpus to Kierkegaard or, on the other hand, disallow anything expressed in the pseudonymous literature to be ascribed to Kierkegaard, 7-8. Of course a similar relation holds for Kierkegaard's *Journal and Papers*, though here one must proceed cautiously since at times he appears to summarize other's arguments without clearly indicating whether the views being expressed belong to him. Due consideration is also in order given that he did not publicly affirm the opinions expressed or entertained in his *Journal and Papers* and therefore may not have held them with the same degree of firmness as those appearing in his signed authorship. There may be very good reasons why some statements and thoughts reflected in his unpublished works never found their way into print in his lifetime.

In his position as missionary to Christendom, Kierkegaard found it necessary to turn his attention to the nature, function, and reading of Christian Scripture. For Kierkegaard, God's word is central to Christianity and Christian Scripture is God's written word. Kierkegaard was not ashamed or embarrassed about this—for him, to listen to Scripture is to hear God speak. Yet Kierkegaard was convinced that the Bible, despite all of the attention it was receiving in academic studies, was almost entirely lost within Christendom. How this could be so and what view of Scripture and manner of reading it Kierkegaard believed was required in order to become a Christian and live Christianly will be explored at length in this dissertation. It is my contention that Kierkegaard's critique of the sort of Bible reading taking place within Christendom is an important component of his interpretation of Christianity and remains remarkably relevant on the contemporary scene.

## ***1.2 Thesis***

This dissertation seeks to demonstrate that Kierkegaard's critique of methods and practices of biblical exegesis offers an interesting and relevant contribution to the current debate on exegetical methods and practices taking place within the contemporary theological turn in biblical interpretation.<sup>26</sup> Located primarily in his discourse "What Is Required,"

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<sup>26</sup> Though noted by numerous observers of and contributors to current developments within biblical interpretation, the metaphor of a "theological turn" in biblical interpretation is employed by Craig Bartholomew (see *Behind the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Craig Bartholomew, C. Stephen Evans, Mary Healy, & Murray Rae, [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003], 10-12) to refer to a collection of critiques and proposals offered within biblical studies since Karl Barth that attempt to move beyond biblical criticism to the actual reading and theological explanation of Scripture. Perhaps the most defining characteristic of theological exegesis is the intentional manner in which theology and exegesis are reconnected as opposed to the long-standing modern, critical-era practice of bracketing theology in order to exegete Scripture objectively. In theological exegesis one frequently encounters proposals that emphasize the Bible's canonical status or the claim that it is God's word in theological exegesis, as well as renewed appreciation for the pre-critical exegetical tradition and the viability of pre-critical exegetical principles such as the analogies of faith and Scripture. Noteworthy contributors to this "theological turn" in biblical interpretation include Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the*



Kierkegaard's critique and corresponding proposal is especially applicable to the family of critical methods (such as textual, form, redaction, literary, rhetorical, and sociological criticisms) as construed and practiced in modern, critical-era biblical studies. His critique is radical, however, and its application extends far beyond the kind of exegetical methods and practices that tended to dominate critical-era biblical exegesis.

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*Romans*. trans. Edwin C. Hoskins, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1933); Brevard Childs, "Prophecy and Fulfillment: A Study of Contemporary Hermeneutics," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 12/3 (1958): 260-271; Childs, "Interpretation in Faith: The Theological Responsibility of an Old Testament Commentary," *Interpretation* 18 (1964): 432-449; Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970); Childs, "Search for Biblical Authority Today," *Andover Newton Quarterly* 16 (1976): 199-206; Childs, "Sensus Literalis of Scripture: an Ancient and Modern Problem," in *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Theologie: Festschrift für Walther Zimmerli zum 70 Geburtstag* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1977), 80-93; Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979); Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: an Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (London: SCM Press, 1992); Childs, "On Reclaiming the Bible for Christian Theology," in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 1-17; Childs, "Toward Recovering Theological Exegesis," *Pro Ecclesia* 6 (1997): 16-26; Childs, "The Nature of the Christian Bible: One Book, Two Testaments," in *Rule of Faith* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishers, 1998), 115-25; Childs, "Critique of Recent Intertextual Canonical Interpretation," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 115/2 (2003): 173-184; Childs, "Speech-act Theory and Biblical Interpretation," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58/4 (2005): 375-392; Childs, "The Canon in Recent Biblical Studies: Reflections on an Era," in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, eds. Craig Bartholomew, Scott Hahn, Robin Parry, Christopher Seitz, and Al Wolters (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2006), 33-57; Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); Watson, "The Old Testament as Christian Scripture: A Response to Professor Seitz," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52 (1999): 227-32; Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004); Stephen Fowl (ed.), *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); Craig Bartholomew, et al., (eds.), vols 1-7, *Scripture and Hermeneutics Series* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000-2006); Christopher Seitz, *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); Seitz, *Word Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2004); Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight (eds.), *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998); Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002); Vanhoozer, et al (eds.) *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2005); Werner Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (New York: Crossroad, 1991); A. K. M. Adam, Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Francis Watson, *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2006), among numerous others. David Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," *Theology Today*, 37 (1980): 27-38; Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson, "The Significance of Precritical Exegesis: Retrospect and Prospect," in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation*, eds. Muller and Thompson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 335-45; Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and Alvin Plantinga, "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship," in *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 374-421; abridged and reprinted with responses in *'Behind' the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation*, also merit mention.

To demonstrate the contemporary relevance of Kierkegaard's critique of and corresponding proposal on biblical exegesis, the present dissertation will engage two contemporary figures at some length. Timothy Houston Polk represents the family of post-liberal exegetical approaches loosely but commonly associated with Yale. Polk has written the most significant work to date on Kierkegaard's approach to biblical exegesis.<sup>27</sup> This proposal is richly informed by David Kelsey's work<sup>28</sup> and also draws liberally upon the thought of Hans Frei,<sup>29</sup> George Lindbeck,<sup>30</sup> and other post-liberal and narrative theology luminaries.<sup>31</sup> Supplementing his decidedly post-liberal perspective, Polk also leans heavily upon the work of Stanley Fish.<sup>32</sup> For Polk the Bible becomes the authoritative word of God for the exegetical community that so construes it. He reads Kierkegaard as advocating an identical approach to Scripture and biblical exegesis.

Kevin Vanhoozer is a leading contributor to the theological turn in contemporary biblical exegesis and a staunch apologist for a form of 'hermeneutic realism' in which textual

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<sup>27</sup> Timothy Polk, *The Biblical Kierkegaard: Reading by the Rule of Faith* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997).

<sup>28</sup> David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) and "The Bible in Christian Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 48 (1980): 390-93.

<sup>29</sup> Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

<sup>30</sup> George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Doctrine in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

<sup>31</sup> Including, but not limited to, David F. Ford and Daniel Hardy, *Praising God and Knowing God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985); Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), and (ed.) *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); Ronald Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985); and Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). Polk also distances himself from Brevard Childs who does not comfortably fit within the post-liberal camp.

<sup>32</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980) is a seminal work for both Polk and Vanhoozer, though with very different effects.

meaning is identical with the intended illocutionary act the author performed.<sup>33</sup> He is troubled by “what amounts to an emerging consensus that sees meaning as relative to the encounter of text and reader” rather than as something determined by authors and recovered by readers.<sup>34</sup> This places Polk and Vanhoozer in opposing corners within the ring of contemporary theological exegesis. They are not at odds over every relevant issue but what Polk advocates Vanhoozer opposes and what Polk dismisses Vanhoozer defends. This dissertation will not create a conversation between them but will instead engage each with Kierkegaard’s thinking on the nature, function, and exegesis of Scripture. The conclusion will be that Kierkegaard’s thought on biblical exegesis (1) is a kind of theological exegesis, (2) engages many of the issues and concerns at play in the contemporary debate on theological exegesis, and (3) represents a distinct contribution that calls contemporary exegetes to recognize that biblical exegesis is an inescapably spiritual exercise that can only be fulfilled through faith.

A potential pitfall of any comparison between figures or ideas from different generations is the problem of anachronism. Although terms, distinctions, and categories drawn from developments that postdate Kierkegaard are sometimes used, care is taken to not allow these explanatory aids to skew the interpretation of his thought on exegetical method and practice. The use of contemporary terms, distinctions, and categories in explicating Kierkegaard’s thought is limited to those places where they prove helpful in

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<sup>33</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998). See also Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002) and *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

<sup>34</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 10.

clarifying and explaining the relevance of his critique and proposal to the contemporary scene. Avoiding the problem of anachronism is one reason why the second chapter is focused on setting Kierkegaard's concept of Scripture against its proper historical backdrop before turning to contemporary interpretations of Kierkegaard and contributions to theological exegesis in chapters three, four, and five. It is also why Kierkegaard will not be considered an *anticipator* of any subsequent development or movement in theology or philosophy in this dissertation.

### ***1.3 Statement of the Problem***

Despite significant advances in understanding Kierkegaard as an explicitly Christian thinker there remains a notable gap within the scholarship related to his thought on biblical exegesis that, although noted for decades, has only very recently attracted significant attention. Likewise, despite common concerns between Kierkegaard and at least some contributors to the theological turn in biblical interpretation, his critique of and proposal on biblical exegesis remains largely neglected. This is all the more surprising given his much discussed influence on Karl Barth, whom many contributors to the contemporary debate on theological exegesis identify as a founding father of the movement. This dissertation attempts to address both gaps by exploring the intersection between Kierkegaard's critique and proposal on biblical exegesis with the current debate within the contemporary theological turn in biblical interpretation.

In regard to Kierkegaardian studies,<sup>35</sup> Paul Minear and Paul S. Morimoto observed, in 1953, a general lack of academic attention to Kierkegaard as a biblical exegete. They then

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<sup>35</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship*, 26-36, outlines three major interpretive approaches to Kierkegaard within the secondary literature: (1) biographical-psychological, which attempts to account for Kierkegaard's writings in terms of his personality and experiences; (2) historical-comparative, which seeks to understand Kierkegaard in terms of his place within the flow of history via comparison with other relevant figures or movements within that history (Hegel, Existentialism, Neo-orthodoxy, and now Postmodernism being prevalent examples); and (3) descriptive-thematic, which attempts to account for Kierkegaard's thought in its own terms, either via description or by tracing out themes through his corpus. See also David Gouwens, *Religious Thinker*, 3-12, who employs a nearly identical typology; and Aage Henriksen, *Methods and Results of Kierkegaard Studies in Scandinavia: A Historical and Critical Study* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1951), 10-12, who outlines three similar though not identical approaches prominent within Scandinavian scholarship prior to 1951. Although there is no reason to suppose that these three approaches are mutually exclusive or the only three options available it is worth noting that this dissertation fits best under the third approach as a description or exegesis of Kierkegaard's thoughts presented in "What Is Required" in terms of the themes developed throughout his corpus which are brought to bear on the topic of this text. Historical considerations are crucial to any attempt to exegete Kierkegaard arguments, yet this dissertation is not primarily an historical project. My primary focus is on relating Kierkegaard's thoughts on biblical exegesis to the contemporary scene within biblical interpretation as represented primarily by Polk and Vanhoozer. But this ought not to be misunderstood as an attempt to account for Kierkegaard's writings in terms of subsequent philosophical or theological discussions or an attempt to place him within any particular stream of the history of ideas that arises after him. As Taylor concludes, "the two major trends of thought to which Kierkegaard gave rise—Neo-Orthodoxy and Existentialism—have more often than not inhibited rather than advanced an adequate understanding of Kierkegaard's own ideas," 18. I believe Taylor is correct in this assessment; much damage has been done by attempts to read Kierkegaard as a prototype or anticipator of subsequent trends in the history of ideas, whether those trends be Neo-Orthodoxy, Existentialism, or Postmodernism.

On the other hand, the kind of descriptive-thematic approach adopted here presupposes that Kierkegaard's writings are expressive of a definite thematic content that is at least roughly coherent. Following Taylor's lead (cf. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship*, 21-23), David R. Law, *Kierkegaard as Negative Theologian*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 5-8, attempts to sketch a threefold typology of positions assumed by Kierkegaard scholars on the issue of systematic coherence. (1) Some, Law contends, argue "that Kierkegaard is intentionally unsystematic and that it is therefore an error to attempt to draw out the philosophical principles that underlie his thought," 5-6. Taylor cites Torsten Bohlin's *Kierkegaards Dogmatiska Afskaadning i dess Historiska Sammanhang* (Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelsen, 1925) as a prime example, 22. Law adds Josiah Thompson's "The Master of Irony," in *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York: Anchor Books, 1972). Earlier, however, Thompson clearly argued that an examination of Kierkegaard's works yields "the rather startling observation that all of Kierkegaard's value categories line up along the axis of continuity/discontinuity," *The Lonely Labyrinth: Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Works* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 21. (2) Others "argue that Kierkegaard confronts us not with a system but with a method or procedure." Here Law cites Hermann Diem, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Existence*, trans. by H. Knight (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1959); Regis Jolivet, *Introduction to Kierkegaard*, trans. by W. H. Barber (New York: Dutton, 1952); and Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Thought*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971). Law also includes Louis Pojman's *The Logic of Subjectivity: Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1984), and Wilhelm Anz, *Kierkegaard und der deutsche Idealismus* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1956). (3) Still others, Law argues, contend that a "degree of systemization" or "coherence" of content is displayed in his writings. Taylor points us to Valter Lindstöm, *Stadiernas Teologi, en Kierkegaard Studie* (Lund: Haaken Ohlssons, 1943); and George Price, *The Narrow Pass: A Study of Kierkegaard's Concept of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963). Often these scholars identify a central theme or concern such as "genuine existence" (see Johannes Sløk, *Die Anthropologie Kierkegaards* [Copenhagen: Rosenkilde und Bagger, 1954]) or "authentic selfhood" (see Paul Sponheim,

predicted that future generations of Kierkegaard scholars would count him as first and foremost a biblical exegete rather than, for example, a philosopher or theologian.<sup>36</sup> Such a prediction was not without some warrant given the centrality of Scripture to the scope of his thought and literary corpus. Kierkegaard's authorship is more profoundly exegetical in structure and content than has generally been appreciated, intended to mirror the function, purpose, and content of Scripture in many ways. Unfortunately, beside a handful of notable exceptions briefly commented upon below, academic attention to Kierkegaard seems nearly as neglectful of his exegetical work since 1953 as prior to 1953. This has led Jolita Pons to comment as recently as 2004 that despite his influence upon the development of hermeneutics as a discipline and the importance of the Bible for him, "Kierkegaard scholarship has suffered from underestimating the role of the Bible in his" corpus.<sup>37</sup>

This neglect within Kierkegaardian scholarship likely contributes to the lack of attention paid to his thought on biblical exegesis within the contemporary debate on

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*Kierkegaard on Christ and Christian Coherence* [New York: Harper and Row, 1968]) to serve as a central, unifying axis through which to relate all other themes. Stephen N. Dunning, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Inwardness: A Structural Analysis of the Theory of Stages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), for example, maintains that "the concept of inwardness as such [is] the central theme in [Kierkegaard's] thought" and thus "it is the inner/outer relation that . . . enable[s] the interpreter to find a coherent statement" throughout Kierkegaard's corpus, 3. Law, again following Taylor's lead, (cf. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship*, 22-26), identifies himself with a weak form of the latter position, maintaining that Kierkegaard's corpus displays coherence but falls short of being "systematic," 6-8.

Gregor Malantschuk, it seems to me, goes beyond a merely methodological or procedural unity. He stresses Kierkegaard's dialectical method but also, in Howard and Edna Hong's words, "uses Kierkegaard to interpret Kierkegaard" and "continually" presents his readers "with the rich, insightful substance of Kierkegaard's thought in all its movement and interrelations," inviting them "to read Kierkegaard organically and collaterally, not linearly or atomistically as some hapless writers . . . have suggested," vii. Malantschuk "concentrates on the thought [of Kierkegaard] in its interconnectedness and wholeness and on its relation to personal, human existence," viii. This apparently assumes a systematic coherence of content to the thought that finds expression in his variegated authorship. Law's threefold typology ought not to be taken too rigidly.

<sup>36</sup> Paul S. Minear and Paul S. Morimoto, "Kierkegaard and the Bible: An Index" *Princeton Pamphlets—No. 9* (Princeton: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1953), 8.

<sup>37</sup> Jolita Pons, *Stealing a Gift: Kierkegaard's Pseudonyms and the Bible*, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy 39, (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2004), xii.

exegetical methods and practices. This lack of interest in Kierkegaard's thought on the matter largely persists despite common concerns and interests between him and at least some of the major players on the contemporary scene. Despite these common concerns and interests, Kierkegaard writes from a rather distinct perspective on what it is to read the Bible as God's word. This distinct perspective is the foundation for his critique of exegetical methods and practices presented in "What Is Required." This critique is especially applicable to certain fundamental and increasingly debated assumptions underlying the family of critical exegetical methods as construed and practiced within modern, critical-era biblical exegesis. Thus, Kierkegaard's critique, although generally neglected, is certainly interesting enough on several counts to merit further consideration regarding its potential contribution to the current debate.

#### ***1.4 Present Status of the Problem***

There have been at least three noteworthy monographs published since 1953 related to the project of this dissertation: Joseph Rosas's *Scripture in the Thought of Søren Kierkegaard*,<sup>38</sup> Timothy Polk's *The Biblical Kierkegaard: Reading by the Rule of Faith*, and Jolita Pons's *Stealing a Gift: Kierkegaard's Pseudonyms and the Bible*.

Rosas's work is a relatively brief attempt to account for Kierkegaard's use of Scripture in the whole sweep of his corpus. Rosas argues that Kierkegaard's use of Scripture varies depending on which sphere of existence he inhabits (via personal development or pseudonymity) in any given piece—whether the aesthetic, ethical, or religiousness A or B.

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<sup>38</sup> L. Joseph Rosas III, *Scripture in the Thought of Søren Kierkegaard* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994).

Much of Rosas's work is spent rehearsing the sort of general information about Kierkegaard's peculiar life and work that can and will be safely assumed in this dissertation, there being several biographies of Kierkegaard available to contemporary readers.<sup>39</sup> Rosas's sweeping survey of Kierkegaard's corpus results in a rather superficial and at times confused—or at least confusing—treatment of a central issue of this dissertation: Kierkegaard's critique of the exegetical methods and practices that were either emerging or already current in his context. Rosas, for example, offers conflicting summaries of Kierkegaard's relationship to historical criticism, stating in one place that Kierkegaard “was an early critic of the emerging ‘scientific’ study of the Bible”—of which historical criticism was the epitome—and in another place that “although he was aware of the emerging science of higher-critical studies in his day, Kierkegaard was, on the whole, indifferent to this line of inquiry.”<sup>40</sup>

We have already encountered Polk's take on Kierkegaard and noted that his work will be engaged throughout this dissertation. Actually, Polk's work will be engaged at two levels in this dissertation: as an example of contemporary post-liberal thinking on biblical exegesis and as the most substantial study on Kierkegaard's thought on biblical exegesis to date.

Polk reads Kierkegaard as an anticipator of post-liberalism. As already observed, David Kelsey's work relating biblical authority to various imaginative construals of Scripture is especially important to Polk's interpretation of Kierkegaard. Polk's post-liberal read of

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<sup>39</sup> Two recent major biographies are Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Joakim Garff, *Soren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>40</sup> Rosas, *Scripture in the Thought of Soren Kierkegaard*, 57 and 144, respectively.



Kierkegaard ultimately hangs upon an allegorical interpretation—he admits as much—of a single paragraph taken out of Kierkegaard’s chapter “Love Hides the Multiplicity of Sins” in the second part of *Works of Love*. Here Polk observes a “combination of key terms—‘imagination,’ ‘interpretation,’ and ‘love’—that commends the passage as a prime entry point for discussing Kierkegaard’s use of the Rule of faith,” despite the fact that the passage has nothing to do with Scripture, the rule of faith, or biblical exegesis. Undaunted, Polk makes it clear that he reads this paragraph as a paradigmatic text for understanding Kierkegaard’s biblical hermeneutic.<sup>41</sup>

To justify his allegorical interpretation of this passage, Polk turns his attention to “What Is Required” and constructs an argument, based on a supposed analogy between love’s way with the sinner and Kierkegaard’s way with Scripture, contending that Kierkegaard approaches Scripture as though it were a “guilty person.” By doing so, Polk claims that Kierkegaard is able to “help Christians read the Bible as scripture in the face of its manifold shortcomings: its patriarchalism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, sectarian anxieties, and other barbarisms that give us offense.”<sup>42</sup> There are thematic similarities between love’s way with the sinner and the way Kierkegaard advocates we should approach Scripture that suggest, on the face of it, something like the analogy Polk seeks to establish. There are, however, several critical problems with Polk’s methodology and interpretation of Kierkegaard that lead him to affirm exactly the sort of “explaining away” of textual meaning

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<sup>41</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 50.

<sup>42</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 91.

that is a primary target of Kierkegaard's critique of exegetical methods and practices in "What Is Required."<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, Polk's volume represents the most substantial work to date on Kierkegaard's thought on biblical exegesis and merits serious attention and sober criticism. It is an engaging and sophisticated treatment of the subject that offers many useful and provocative insights. Although I disagree sharply with Polk on several counts, I appreciate several of Polk's expressed interests. I share his interest in Kierkegaard's critique of then-prevailing exegetical methods and practices and his proposed alternative exegetical paradigm. Polk and I also share a willingness to take Kierkegaard's veronymous literature seriously and read him as an author occupied with explicitly Christian concerns. I agree that Kierkegaard's alternative exegetical paradigm has more in common with certain precritical exegetical methods and practices, such as reading by the rule of faith and conceiving of exegesis as an act of faith, than most of the methods and approaches advocated within the modern, critical-era of biblical scholarship. Finally, I share Polk's desire to bring Kierkegaard's voice into the current debate on exegetical method and practice. Like Polk, I too aim at making Kierkegaard's thoughts on exegesis serviceable to contemporary theological exegetes. I will argue in this dissertation that the kind of post-liberal approach to biblical exegesis represented by Polk is a welcome but not entirely satisfying contribution to the current debate.

Jolita Pons's work likewise considers Kierkegaard's use of Scripture. Unlike Polk, she restricts herself primarily to the use Kierkegaard makes of biblical quotations within his

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<sup>43</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 52.

pseudonymous authorship. She argues that “Kierkegaard’s use of the Bible is an essential part of his indirect communication.”<sup>44</sup> She also speaks of the “presence” of Scripture within Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authorship and finds it to be “a kind of invisible omnipresence . . . that . . . becomes impossible [for the reader] to ignore.”<sup>45</sup> On this basis she argues for a revised understanding of the relationship between Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous and “veronymous” authorship that calls into question the strong, dichotomous construals frequently encountered in the secondary literature.<sup>46</sup>

Pons’s work is helpful but distinct from the central project of this dissertation. Pons elaborates, for example, certain themes within Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authorship such as repetition and contemporaneity that are important background concepts for understanding his approach to exegesis and his thinking in “What Is Required.”<sup>47</sup> Yet both in scope (an analysis of Scripture citations and allusions within the pseudonymous authorship) and purpose (to show how Kierkegaard “writes the religious in the philosophical”<sup>48</sup>) Pons’s project is distinct and somewhat remote from the project undertaken in this dissertation.

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<sup>44</sup> Pons, *Stealing a Gift*, xiv.

<sup>45</sup> Pons, *Stealing a Gift*, xiv-xv.

<sup>46</sup> “Veronymous” is Pons’ useful term for Kierkegaard’s non-pseudonymous writings, *Stealing a Gift*, xiii. I have adopted this term and use it throughout the dissertation.

<sup>47</sup> Pons’s insightful and very helpful work is vulnerable to the criticism that she fails to adequately appreciate the distinctions between the various pseudonyms Kierkegaard employs and too quickly identifies the views of any given pseudonym with Kierkegaard. Pons addresses this issue in her introduction (see xviii-xix) but her comments there only confirm the criticism.

<sup>48</sup> Pons, *Stealing a Gift*, xiv.

Beyond book-length treatments, Norman Lillegard has written a chapter<sup>49</sup> arguing that Kierkegaard comes “very close to” holding “a view like Wolterstorff’s” authorial-discourse interpretation.<sup>50</sup> Lillegard suggests that Wolterstorff is concerned about and assumes positions on some issues that are very much like Kierkegaard’s own concerns and positions with respect to the interpretation of Scripture. The similarity between Wolterstorff and Kierkegaard is certainly interesting and one that will be explored some in this dissertation—mostly in the margins. Though I believe that Lillegard’s point is very insightful, Wolterstorff’s writings also reveal real and substantial differences between Kierkegaard and himself on several important points that Lillegard does not explore. It is important, for example, to consider whether Wolterstorff’s brief critique of behaviorist (and expressionist) theories of textual meaning applies to Kierkegaard given his emphasis on the significance for meaning of what we now generally call perlocutionary intentions and effects. Much remains to be done on this point and many others in the neighborhood of Lillegard’s richly suggestive essay.

Other noteworthy articles can be divided into several types. Some focus on the hermeneutic or exegetical significance of selected works or passages within Kierkegaard’s corpus. Perhaps most directly relevant to the present dissertation is Elaine Peterson’s (formerly Elaine Katherine Schmitz) thesis, “Søren Kierkegaard’s Uses of Scripture in *Fear*

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<sup>49</sup> Norman Lillegard, “(Revelation, Interpretation) Authority: Kierkegaard’s *Book on Adler*,” in *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer, James K. A. Smith, and Bruce Ellis Benson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 225-39.

<sup>50</sup> Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

and *Trembling* and *Three Edifying Discourses*,”<sup>51</sup> and her subsequent article: “Kierkegaard’s Exegetical Methodology.”<sup>52</sup> David Gouwens, “Kierkegaard’s Hermeneutics of Discipleship: Communal and Critical Uses of Scripture in the 1854-55 Attack”<sup>53</sup> and J. Leslie Dunstan, “The Bible in *Either/Or*”<sup>54</sup> also fall into this category.

There are four noteworthy chapters in volume twenty-one of the *International Kierkegaard Commentary* that belong to this category and address themes dealt with in this dissertation. John Whittaker argues that, according to Kierkegaard, biblical authority is inherent in God’s word and consists in the transforming power of Jesus Christ to conform the lives of believers to his likeness through the biblical witness to himself.<sup>55</sup> Though the account of Kierkegaard’s view of Scripture offered below differs from the account offered by Whittaker his emphasis on the inherent authority of God’s word and the priority of personal appropriation through faith is correct and a central concern in this dissertation, too. Julia Watkin argues that Kierkegaard’s approach to Scripture is problematic on at least three counts: (1) Kierkegaard misrepresents biblical criticism, and he fails to provide satisfactory

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<sup>51</sup> Elaine Katherine Schmitz, “Søren Kierkegaard’s Uses of Scripture in *Fear and Trembling* and *Three Edifying Discourses*” (M.C.S. thesis, Regent College, 1977).

<sup>52</sup> Peterson, “Kierkegaard’s Exegetical Methodology” *Studies in Religion* 19 (1990), 351-59.

<sup>53</sup> David J. Gouwens’ “Kierkegaard’s Hermeneutics of Discipleship: Communal and Critical Uses of Scripture in the 1854-55 Attack,” in *Søren Kierkegaard and the Word(s): Essays on Hermeneutics and Communication*. ed. Houe, Poul and Gordon D. Marino (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel, 2003), 81-92.

<sup>54</sup> J. Leslie Dunstan, “The Bible in *Either/Or*,” *Interpretation* (1952), 310-20.

<sup>55</sup> John Whittaker, “Whence the Authority of God’s Word,” in *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself!* *International Kierkegaard Commentary* 21, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2002), 259-86.

accounts of (2) what it is to believe and (3) what constitutes the occasion of faith.<sup>56</sup> Her criticism of Kierkegaard focuses on his love-letter analogy presented in “What Is Required” and largely revolves around the inadequacy of his views given the supposedly changed situation of our world brought about by the flowering of historical-critical studies, religious pluralism, and multiculturalism. I will engage her criticisms and challenge her conclusion that Kierkegaard’s approach to Scripture is largely irrelevant to us. David Cain notes the centrality of the biblically derived law-gospel dialectic to Kierkegaard’s concept of the Christian life.<sup>57</sup> The exegetical significance of this law-gospel dialectic, unexplored by Cain, will be explored at length in this dissertation. Finally, Martin Andic compares Kierkegaard’s approach to Scripture proposed in “What Is Required” with “the tradition of holy reading” drawn from precritical exegetical methodology and argues that Kierkegaard’s mirror metaphor suggests much greater similarity to the Socratic concept of self-knowledge than one might first suspect, given works such as *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.<sup>58</sup> Although I am not concerned here with Socrates, Kierkegaard’s relation to the precritical exegetical tradition is of some interest.

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<sup>56</sup>Julia Watkin, “Letter from the Lover: Kierkegaard on the Bible and Belief,” in *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself!* International Kierkegaard Commentary 21, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2002), 287-313.

<sup>57</sup>David Cain, “A Star in the Cross: Getting the Dialectic Right,” in *For Self-examination and Judge for Yourself!* International Kierkegaard Commentary 21, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2002), 315-34.

<sup>58</sup>Martin Andic, “The Mirror,” in *For Self-examination and Judge for Yourself!* International Kierkegaard Commentary 21, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2002), 335-62.

Among the diversity of other approaches, one unique article is the study of Kierkegaard's marginalia in his New Testament conducted by Bradley Rau Dewey.<sup>59</sup> Hugh S. Pyper<sup>60</sup> and Patrick Alan Stokes<sup>61</sup> focus on Kierkegaard's use of the mirror metaphor which plays a central role in Kierkegaard's exegetically-significant concept of the function of Scripture in "What Is Required." Perhaps the largest category of articles that touch upon topics and themes at play in this dissertation are those that try to relate some thematic aspect of Kierkegaard's thought to topics of contemporary interest to philosophical or theological hermeneutics.<sup>62</sup> Although these articles, and others even more remote, have points of contact with the present dissertation none includes anything like an extended treatment of Kierkegaard's critique of exegetical methods and practices that is the central interest of the project undertaken here. It is not surprising, then, that at present there is little more than passing attention paid to Kierkegaard within the current debate on exegetical methods and practices.

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<sup>59</sup> Bradley Rau Dewey, "Kierkegaard and the Blue Testament" *Harvard Theological Review* 60 (1967): 391-409.

<sup>60</sup> Pyper, "The Apostle, the Genius and the Monkey: Reflections on Kierkegaard's 'The Mirror of the Word,'" in *Kierkegaard on Art and Communication*, George Pattison, ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 125-36.

<sup>61</sup> Stokes, "The Concept of Interest in Kierkegaard's Moral Psychology" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Melbourne, 2006), 187-227.

<sup>62</sup> Some of the most directly relevant articles under this broad category include Minear and Morimoto, "Kierkegaard and the Bible;" Endel Kallas, "Kierkegaard's Understanding of the Bible with Respect to His 'Age'" *Dialogue* 26 (1987): 30-34; Paul Plass, "Antinomy and Exegesis in Kierkegaard" *Theologische Zeitschrift* 42 (1986): 26-39; Ronald Hustwit, "Some Notes on What Kierkegaard Calls 'An Ideal Interpretation'" *Ohio Journal of Religious Studies* 3 (1975): 55-60; and "More Notes on Kierkegaard's 'Ideal Interpretation'" *Ohio Journal of Religious Studies* 8 (1980): 12-18; Roy Martinez, "Speech-Acts, Kierkegaard, and Postmodern Thought," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 37 (1997): 149-59; and Patrick Bigelow, "Kierkegaard and the Hermeneutical Circle" *Man and World* 15 (1982): 67-82.

One attempt to offer a Kierkegaardian contribution to the current debate is Walter Sundberg's short piece, "The Conflict of Tradition and History."<sup>63</sup> Sundberg, a historian, argues that Kierkegaard accepts the problem of the eternal significance of historical accidents, Lessing's ditch, and proposes his famous leap of faith as the price that must be paid, whether those accidents are mediated by tradition or Scripture. Most relevant to Kierkegaard's critique of exegetical method and practice is Sundberg's observation that, for Kierkegaard, a major problem involved in critical biblical exegesis is the historical objectification of the text. This is an important aspect to Kierkegaard's critique as presented in "What Is Required," a text Sundberg cites several times. There are many ways to objectify Scripture, none of which are consistent with the actual reading of Scripture, according to Kierkegaard, and all arise as strategies of self-defense.<sup>64</sup>

Richard Bauckham also explores the contemporary significance of Kierkegaard's thought on biblical exegesis in his study of James, perhaps Kierkegaard's favorite biblical book.<sup>65</sup> Bauckham demonstrates the relevance of the content of Kierkegaard's exegesis of James by engaging him under his discussion of the "modern and contemporary" significance of the epistle's meaning.<sup>66</sup> But Bauckham's engagement with Kierkegaard also includes a brief but engaging discussion of Kierkegaard's critique of biblical scholarship in "What Is

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<sup>63</sup> Walter Sundberg, "The Conflict of Tradition and History," in *Behind the Text*, 303-317. His reflections on Kierkegaard appear from 311-317. This is very similar to a previous reflection in Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs*, 2d edition, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 169-174.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, 170: "History is not in itself an impediment to the knowledge of true Christianity. The real problem is moral."

<sup>65</sup> Bauckham, *James: Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>66</sup> Bauckham, *James*, 158-74.



Required.”<sup>67</sup> Bauckham is one of the few contemporary, academic exegetes who engage Kierkegaard at the level of either method or content.

Kevin Vanhoozer, a systematician, also engages “What Is Required.” Although Vanhoozer does not engage in a lengthy consideration of Kierkegaard’s critique he does use “What Is Required” to frame the central question of his project in *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*: “Is there something in the text that reflects a reality independent of the reader’s interpretive activity, or does the text only reflect the reality of the reader?”<sup>68</sup> Vanhoozer contends that the first option, what he terms “hermeneutic realism”—the family of positions that affirm that the text “reflects a reality independent of the reader’s interpretive activity”—approaches interpretation as a project of recovery whereas the second option, “hermeneutic non-realism,” approaches interpretation as a project of invention.<sup>69</sup> I hope to demonstrate, contrary to Vanhoozer on one hand and those who confuse Kierkegaard’s concern for subjectivity with subjectivism on the other, that Kierkegaard clearly affirms a reality in the text “independent of the reader’s activity” even though he also rejects historicized conceptions of the “recovery” model for understanding what it is to actually read God’s word. Thus, while bringing Kierkegaard to the attention of those interested in the current debate on exegetical methods and practices, Vanhoozer’s use of “What Is Required” tends to obscure a central point in Kierkegaard’s critique through his analysis of hermeneutic realism as recovery and strong dichotomy between hermeneutic realism and non-realism.

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<sup>67</sup> Bauckham, *James*, 1-10.

<sup>68</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 15.

<sup>69</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 431.

Although some notice has been paid in the secondary literature to Kierkegaard's thoughts on biblical exegesis and to his discourse "What Is Required," a careful, extended development of his critique and proposal on biblical exegetical methods and practices, especially one developed in terms of his analysis of despair in *Sickness Unto Death* offered in this dissertation, has apparently not been attempted elsewhere.

### ***1.5 Preview of Things to Come***

This dissertation is offered as a single, continuous argument that seeks to clarify the distinct contribution Kierkegaard's thinking on biblical exegesis, both critical and constructive, offers to the contemporary debate on theological exegesis. This distinctive contribution rests upon a particular concept of the nature and function of Scripture, of writing, reading, and explaining meaning, and of living *coram Deo* that draws upon sources as varied as the church fathers, Lutheran orthodoxy, early modern philosophy, and Kierkegaard's own peculiar brand of depth psychology, among others. Above all other sources, however, Kierkegaard understands himself to be explaining the requirements of Scripture for becoming a true reader of God's word.

Kierkegaard calls contemporary exegetes to break from the then-emerging and now long-dominant, critical-era insistence upon a sterile, spiritless, and faithless science of exegesis and embrace instead a paradigm of biblical exegesis as a deeply and inescapably spiritual discipline or exercise of faith. Obviously there are many interesting and worthwhile tangents that must be left unexplored in order to accomplish the central task of this project in the space allotted. There are likewise several necessary stages to this argument that fall roughly to each of the following chapters.

First we will consider Kierkegaard's concept of Scripture in its historical context, establishing the vital starting point for any account of Kierkegaard's thoughts on biblical exegesis. Chapter two, "Kierkegaard's Concept of Scripture," is offered as a demonstration that Kierkegaard held a rather traditional, orthodox Lutheran concept of Scripture as God's written word. This is perhaps surprising given the critical climate of the age and the increasing abandonment of the traditional Protestant concept of Scripture on the European continent.

There are, however, a great variety of ways of conceiving of Scripture as God's word. Some alternatives are explored in chapter two. Chapter three, "Scripture as God's Word," takes up a contemporary proposal that recognizes and accommodates this diversity. Here we engage Polk's post-liberal concept of Scripture. The reason why this particular alternative occupies the bulk of a chapter is because Polk reads Kierkegaard as advocating a post-liberal concept of and corresponding exegetical approach to Scripture. Chapter three is offered as a demonstration, contra Polk, that Kierkegaard does not hold or advocate anything like a post-liberal concept of or exegetical approach to Scripture. In this chapter we will also explore the significance of Climacus's rejection of "the Bible theory" and "the Church theory" in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

The ultimate aim of chapter three is to further clarify Kierkegaard's concept of Scripture as the word of God. Chapter four, "Authority, Intention, and Efficacy," continues this task and focuses on the intersection between the Lutheran orthodox concept of the nature and function of Scripture, especially its efficacy, and contemporary issues within the philosophy of language, especially in the theological appropriation of speech-act theory as represented by Vanhoozer. The contours explored here include the nature of biblical

authority, the significance of authorial intentions for meaning, and the efficacy of God's word. Along the way we pick up a crucial distinction Kierkegaard makes "between reading and reading"—that is, between true reading and counterfeit reading. I seek to demonstrate in this chapter that Kierkegaard's distinctive contribution to theological exegesis is deeply informed by the orthodox Lutheran concept of biblical efficacy. In many ways the distinctiveness of Kierkegaard's contribution to the contemporary debate comes into focus in this chapter.

Chapter five, "Exegetical Despair," is in many ways the heart of this dissertation. This chapter begins by exploring the implications of biblical efficacy for meaning and the exegetical task. Here we arrive at a fuller appreciation of Kierkegaard's central analogy for Scripture as God's word, which he draws out of James 1:22-25: a mirror. Understanding the mirror-like function of Scripture is crucial to understanding his critique of exegetical methods and practices and proposal of an alternative exegetical paradigm. This chapter is offered as a demonstration that the dynamic of despair analyzed by Anti-Climacus in *Sickness Unto Death* is fully operative in the exegetical task *coram Scriptura*. This chapter will explore Kierkegaard's psychology, clarify the nature of the offensiveness of Scripture, and demonstrate the necessity of faith for exegesis.

Chapter six, "Toward an Alternative Exegetical Paradigm," concludes the dissertation by summarizing Kierkegaard's exegetical proposal, that biblical exegesis is a spiritual discipline of faith, and considering whether it has been discredited on the contemporary scene. Chapter six, then, is offered as a demonstration that Kierkegaard's proposal, though perhaps incomplete and not fully satisfying in every regard, offers a compelling contribution to the contemporary debate on theological exegesis.

## CHAPTER 2

### KIERKEGAARD'S CONCEPT OF SCRIPTURE

#### *2.1 Introduction to "What Is Required"*

In this chapter we will consider Kierkegaard's concept of Scripture in its historical context, the starting point for any account of Kierkegaard's thought on biblical exegesis. This chapter is offered as a demonstration that Kierkegaard held a rather traditional, orthodox Lutheran concept of Scripture as God's written word. There are, however, many ways to conceive of Scripture as God's word. Here Kierkegaard's concept of Scripture as God's word is set against the backdrop of several alternatives available to him. It may surprise some readers that Kierkegaard held a rather traditional Lutheran concept of Scripture given the critical climate of his age, the increasing abandonment of the traditional Protestant position on the Continent and within Denmark during his lifetime, and his reputation as an untraditional or innovative thinker. Setting Kierkegaard's concept of Scripture in its historical context will help us appreciate its rather traditional contours. These contours are clearly evident in "What Is Required."

James 1:22-27 was the text for the fifth Sunday after Easter, May 25, 1851. Kierkegaard presents the text, a prayer, and the sermon "What Is Required in Order to Look at Oneself with True Blessing in the Mirror of the Word?" It is the first of the three discourses that make up *For Self-Examination*. He prefers to call his sermons "discourses" in

part because he was “without authority”<sup>1</sup>—meaning at least that he lacked the authorization of the state-church bureaucracy inherent in ordination.<sup>2</sup> Yet in nearly every other way these three discourses are sermon manuscripts, a point reinforced by Kierkegaard’s comments on preaching and the function and purpose of sermons in the introduction, and by his adherence to the church calendar.<sup>3</sup> Coupled with his request that readers read aloud, the ironic, subversive effect is that readers preach Kierkegaard’s sermons to themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Preachers must preach out of their existence because to preach “is essentially . . . neither to describe faith in books nor as a speaker” but “to have faith and to ‘witness’ to the faith” that “should be recognizable in [the preacher’s] life.”<sup>5</sup> To have faith is to be a witness; and to be a witness is far more than simply having certain life-experiences—it is to be a martyr.<sup>6</sup> To be a martyr in this sense is to have one’s life decisively shaped—and thus to die

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, FSE, 17 (XII 308).

<sup>2</sup> In the “Preface” to Kierkegaard’s first veronymous publication he explains that “this little book . . . is called ‘discourses,’ not sermons, because its author does not have authority to preach,” (See “Preface to Two Upbuilding Discourses” (1843) in WA, 5 (III 11).

<sup>3</sup> FSE, 10-11 (XII 302-3). See also John Whittaker, “Whence the Authority of God’s Word?” in *For Self-Examination and Judge For Yourself*, vol. 21, *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2002), 259.

<sup>4</sup> FSE, 3 (XII 295). This is the effect even if Kierkegaard had a variety of reasons for urging his readers to read aloud.

<sup>5</sup> FSE, 18-19 (XII 309-310).

<sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard makes this point about James at the outset of “What Is Required,” FSE, 25 (XII 315), but is most explicit in his exchange with bishop, theologian, and former Kierkegaard tutor H. L. Martensen in a series of newspaper articles published in the *Fædrelandet* between 1854-55 and subsequently gathered into the popular *Attack Upon Christendom*. See, *The Moment and Late Writings*, 3-85 (XIV 5-100). See also the second of his *Two Ethical-Religious Essays* entitled “The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle,” in WA, 91-108 (XI 93-109), and the explanatory footnote on the distinction between the two in “The Accounting,” in PV, 6 (XIII 495).

to every other alternative—by the reality to which one testifies. This is a necessary condition of a true Christian witness and why Kierkegaard insists a preacher must “have faith.” The preacher must *be* a witness in this robust, subjective sense in order to *bear* credible and effective testimony: the preacher “ought to live in the Christian thoughts and ideas; they ought to be his daily life. If so—this is the view of Christianity—then you, too, will have eloquence enough and precisely that which is needed when you speak.”<sup>7</sup> Kierkegaard is pointing to an authority no bureaucracy can confer and no civil servant, be he a minister in the church or a professor in the academy, can possess just by holding an office; he is pointing to a peculiar kind of moral authority—the kind of moral authority one acquires or possesses by having assumed the particular Christian form of life. Out of this form of life one is able to testify, authoritatively, to the realities that decisively shape it.

It may be that one acquires moral authority in other ways, too. One might, for example, acquire a kind of moral authority simply by possessing a reputation of being trustworthy. But simply being trustworthy, however necessary, is not enough to qualify one to be a true Christian witness in Kierkegaard’s robust sense of the term. To be a witness one must not merely be an eyewitness to the reality that a man named Jesus Christ lived and did this and that and taught and claimed such and such; to be a true Christian witness one must enter into or assume the particular form of life that the reality of Jesus Christ the God-man demands, dying to self and all other possible forms of life that this one form of life excludes. This is to become a martyr—to suffer the martyrdom of faith.

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<sup>7</sup> FSE, 10 (XII 302).

This kind of authority is something one either has or lacks: one either is or is not living Christianly. Yet one can have more or less of it. Jesus, as the prototype of and for Christian existence, is supremely authoritative in this sense; the apostles and martyrs also have a high degree of this authority, having demonstrated how far their form of life was conformed to the reality of Christ. This includes, Kierkegaard notes, James the author of the text Kierkegaard is expounding. Preachers, Kierkegaard insists, are called to be witnesses. As witnesses they may have more or less of this kind of moral authority corresponding to how fully they realize the ideal of Christian existence perfectly exemplified in Christ. Any preacher entirely lacking the authority of a true witness, however, is engaged in a hypocrisy or lying—a “false eloquence.”<sup>8</sup> What is true of preachers is also true of exegetes of God’s word, who dare to explain its meaning to themselves or others.

Kierkegaard’s relationship to this kind of authority is more complex than his relationship to official authority, which he simply lacked. There are times when he feels compelled to deny that he has authority in this sense, too. Such a denial is clearly involved in his decision to publish *Sickness Unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity* under the strong Christian pseudonym Anti-Climacus, for example.<sup>9</sup> Yet it would be a mistake to allow such

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<sup>8</sup> FSE, 10 (XII 302).

<sup>9</sup> Kierkegaard’s explanation for his decision to publish these two works under a pseudonym when he had long considered publishing them as signed works is that “the demands of ideality” in them are “presented at their maximum,” and in such cases it is necessary that he “must take extreme care not to be confused with them himself, as if he himself were the ideal,” JP VI 6446 (Pap. X<sup>1</sup> A 548). In other words, Kierkegaard does not see himself as so perfected in faith as to fully realize the kind of existence described in these works. Thus Kierkegaard offers them under a pseudonym in part as a confession of his falling short of this ideal. At the same time, Kierkegaard speaks of Anti-Climacus as a higher pseudonym and all the others and lower pseudonyms, see PV, 6 (XIII 495).



denials to undermine the earnest sincerity of Kierkegaard's veronymous works as though his whole authorship was a mere jest or something like conscious hypocrisy.<sup>10</sup>

Such interpretations miss a crucial point: Kierkegaard is compelled to deny having the authority of a true witness *due* to his earnest sincerity. Ironically, his denial of having this kind of authority sets him apart from presumptuous pretenders to such authority who hide behind the mask of mere bureaucratic authority. Under the conditions of Christendom, where this kind of moral authority is confused with a kind of culturally conferred authority, it would be almost impossible to claim to have the authority of a true witness and actually possess such authority. In order to effectively expose the errors of the age he must distance himself from its culture of ecclesial, bureaucratic authority by denying that he is anything more than an author without authority. Yet in this denial he demonstrates a degree of earnestness before God and others that paradoxically wins for him precisely this kind of moral authority. The authority of a witness can only be possessed by those who live in light of the ideality of Christianity. It cannot be possessed or transmitted in any other way. By denying himself any claim to authority he ironically assumes the role of a lowly servant and in that he acquires the moral authority of a true disciple of and witness to Jesus Christ.

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<sup>10</sup> Although not grounding his suspicion on Kierkegaard's claim to be "without authority," Joakim Garff certainly represents this kind of reading of Kierkegaard's *Point of View*, throwing doubt on the integrity of his whole corpus. See, for example, Joakim Garff, "The Eyes of Argus: *The Point of View* and Points of View on Kierkegaard's Work as an Author," in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, ed. Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 75-102; his reply to Sylvia Walsh's critique entitled "Rereading Oneself," in *Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter* 38 (July 1999), 9-14; and his massive *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton university Press, 2000), especially 552-62.

This can be seen as an application of the *sub contrario* dialectic in Christian theology that is especially prominent in Lutheran orthodoxy. Other applications of this dialectic include God's manner of working in which he performs his alien work of condemning by means of the law as a necessary first moment in his proper work of justifying by means of the gospel. Consider, for example, the parable of the Pharisee and tax-collector (Luke 18:9-14). Here the self-righteous Pharisee turns out to be unrighteous even as the tax-collector who denies being righteous goes home justified before God. The *sub contrario* dialectic is not located, strictly speaking, in the imputation of righteousness to the tax-collector but in God's manner of bringing sinners to justification through the condemnation of the law. The only path to justification runs through the ministry of condemnation that leads sinners to confess their unrighteousness *coram Deo*. One must deny that one is righteous *coram Deo* to become righteous (via imputation) *coram Deo*. The justification of the sinner is the end of a dialectical process in which God acts to justify (his proper work) under the opposite form of condemning (his alien work). Not to be overlooked, the result of justification is also capable of a *sub contrario* description in that the justified subject is simultaneously both saint and sinner. Kierkegaard's denial that he has authority can be read as a similar *sub contrario* confession that belongs to the only path for acquiring and possessing true authority *coram Deo* to speak as a witness to Christ. Through his denial he actually comes to possess the authority he denies having and is simultaneously with and without authority.

Another prominent application of the *sub contrario* dialectic in Lutheran theology includes God's paradoxical revelation of himself, especially in and through the incarnation of the Son. God is paradoxically both *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatos*. This revelation of the

hidden God who transcends reason is through a *sub contrario* dialectic that is, by God's own design, intended to frustrate the pride of sinners (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18-2:16): God's majesty is revealed in the lowliness of Jesus; his glory in the Son's extreme humiliation; his power in Christ's crucifixion; and so on. The *sub contrario* dialectic of Lutheran orthodoxy richly and profoundly informs Kierkegaard's authorship both in form and in content, including his understanding of Scripture and biblical exegesis.

Importantly, Kierkegaard's relationship to his authorship is helpfully conceived as an extension of his relationship to the authority of a true Christian witness. Only the one who has faith, whose existence is decisively shaped by the ideality of Christianity, possesses the authority of a true witness. In the cultural context of Christendom where everyone is presumed to be Christian one must first deny that one is a Christian in order to become a true Christian. Kierkegaard's denial of being a Christian and of having the authority of a true witness is actually a confession not of unbelief but of faith admitting one's failure to live out the ideality of Christianity. This, in a parallel *sub contrario* manner consistent with the law-gospel dialectic, is the mark of a true Christian, the dividing line between the religion of Christendom and New Testament Christianity. It is a prerequisite for anyone who would become a Christian.

When Kierkegaard offers the discourses that make up *For Self-Examination* as one "without authority" he is clearly offering sermons without bureaucratic authority and without claiming the authority of a true witness. This is done as a counterpoint to the sermons with bureaucratic authority and the pretense of moral authority his readers would be hearing in the established state-churches. There is, then, an implicit yet unmistakable

critique of Christendom in the genre of *For Self-Examination*. This critique is pressed further in the content of the three discourses, leading Hong to pronounce *Practice in Christianity* and *For Self-Examination* the beginning of Kierkegaard's attack upon Christendom.<sup>11</sup> The fifth Sunday after Easter is devoted to Scripture, Ascension Day to Christ, and Pentecost to the Spirit—each discourse treating a pillar of Protestant orthodoxy while drawing a sharp contrast between Christian existence and the familiar, bureaucratic religion of Christendom.<sup>12</sup> Just as one must first die in order to live,<sup>13</sup> so also one must be disabused of the religion of Christendom in order to become a Christian.

This dialectic applies directly to biblical exegesis, as well. In “What Is Required,” an exegetical treatise on biblical exegesis, Kierkegaard focuses his readers' attention on the vital question of the nature and function of Scripture, which is the source and norm of Protestantism—both its doctrine and practice. The broader critique of Christendom is here applied to conventional biblical exegesis: one must be disabused of reading the Bible as it is read within Christendom in order to read it Christianly. Because the Bible is basic for Christianity, if one is not reading the Bible rightly one will not get Christianity right either.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Hong, “Historical Introduction,” in PC, xiv.

<sup>12</sup> FSF, 89 (XII 373). *Judge for Yourself*, the companion volume to *For Self-Examination* whose publication was much delayed perhaps due to the directness of his increasingly intensified criticism of the state-church establishment (So suggests Hong, “Historical Introduction,” in FSF, xii), follows a very similar pattern and is subtitled *For Self-Examination Recommended to the Present Age: Second Series*.

<sup>13</sup> FSF, 76-81 (XII 360-64).

<sup>14</sup> Kierkegaard laments that “erroneous exegesis” has “confused the essentially Christian” such that the “sphere of the paradoxical-religious [i.e. that which is essentially Christian] is now abolished or is explained back into the esthetic, an apostle becomes neither more nor less than a genius, and then good night to Christianity.” In other words, the radical nature of the gospel is lost in such explanations. WA, 93 (XI 95).

Kierkegaard's starting point in "What Is Required" is that Scripture is God's word and as such confronts all would be readers with the absolute ideality of Christianity. The remainder of this chapter will consider Kierkegaard's concept of Scripture in view of the role this concept plays in his critique of exegetical method and practice in "What Is Required." This chapter establishes the starting point for the account of Kierkegaard's critique of exegetical methods and practices and distinguishes Kierkegaard's view of Scripture from those current on the post-Enlightenment scene.

## ***2.2 Kierkegaard on Scripture***

Although he frequently employs unconventional categories and terms, Kierkegaard holds a rather traditional Protestant view of Scripture: Scripture is the word of God possessing both divine integrity and authority. This should not be surprising for someone who could write "Lutheran doctrine is excellent, is the truth" despite his sometimes scathing criticisms of its use within mid-nineteenth century Denmark.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Kierkegaard's view of Scripture falls within the parameters established in the era of Lutheran orthodoxy and seems to parallel Luther's own view in content, force, language, and even presentation.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> FSE, 24 (XII 314). Kierkegaard goes on to state that he has "but one misgiving. It does not concern Lutheran doctrine—no, it concerns myself: I have become convinced that I am not an honest soul but a cunning fellow." Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), correctly observe that even though "Kierkegaard called into question the legitimacy of the Lutheran state church, he did not break his ties with the Lutheran theological tradition," (171) They maintain that there remains "a deep affinity between Kierkegaard and Luther" and rightly note that Kierkegaard "wages his attack upon Christendom" from within "the context of . . . the Lutheran confessional tradition," (172).

<sup>16</sup> For Luther's view of Scripture see, among many others, J. Theodore Mueller, "Luther and the Bible," in *Inspiration and Interpretation*, ed. John Walvoord (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 87-114; David W.

Unfortunately, Kierkegaard's concept of Scripture is presented as fragmentary as Luther's and like Luther's is never explicitly set into a larger theological framework. This gives the superficial impression that his thoughts on Scripture are perhaps *ad hoc* and even disparate. Still, what Richard A. Muller writes regarding the interpretation of Luther's view of Scripture applies fully to the interpretation of Kierkegaard's:

The great difficulty in assessing Luther's theology lies not so much in the analysis of what he says on a topic as in what he leaves unsaid. . . . The wrong approach to [any] seeming paradox or contradiction—an approach followed by far too many contemporary writers—is to select one of these approaches to Scripture as the “true Luther” and to explain the other away. Rather we must take both sides of the paradox as equally genuine and then proceed to ask just how these rather opposite perspectives that seem mutually exclusive in our own time can in fact belong to the teaching of one theologian in another time. The fact is that Luther . . . [is] not easily wedged into the exegetical, hermeneutical, and doctrinal patterns of [later] centuries.<sup>17</sup>

The position taken in this dissertation is that Kierkegaard's view of Scripture is coherent and involves no fatal flaw that might prevent us from constructing an accurate image of his concept from his positive affirmations and clear presuppositions.

Muller's summary of Luther's view of Scripture applies to Kierkegaard as well:

Luther's teaching concerning Scripture was multifaceted. . . . On the one hand, Luther's teaching manifests a dynamic, existential encounter with “Word” that defies dogmatic codification and, in addition, an emphasis on the preaching of Christ at the heart of Scripture that gave to Luther a high degree of freedom on such issues as the seeming contradictions in the text of

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Lotz, “Sola Scriptura: Luther on Authority,” *Interpretation*, 35 (1981): 258-73; Robert D. Preus, “Luther and Biblical Infallibility,” in *Inerrancy and the Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984) 99-142; Preus, “Luther: Word, Doctrine, and Confession,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 60.3 (1996): 175-228; and Michael Reu, *Luther and the Scriptures* (Columbus: Wartburg Press, 1944).

<sup>17</sup> Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 2, *Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 65. Hereafter cited as PRRD.

Scripture and the identification of the canonical books. . . . On the other hand, Luther clearly identifies Scripture itself, in the words of the text, as the authoritative Word of God, making no distinction like that found in the neoorthodox writers . . . between Christ alone as Word and Scripture as derived Word or witness to the Word.<sup>18</sup>

This summary fits Kierkegaard extremely well, who has suffered from similar mishandling. Kierkegaard's view of Scripture is also multifaceted and "manifests a dynamic, existential encounter with 'Word' that defies dogmatic codification." Likewise, he places great emphasis on what is helpfully regarded as "the preaching of Christ at the heart of Scripture," which gives him "a high degree of freedom on such issues as the seeming contradictions in the text of Scripture and the identification of the canonical books."<sup>19</sup> Thus, the heart of Scripture is its preaching of or witness to Christ. Yet, as Muller points out in relation to Luther, this view of the center and scope of Scripture ought not to be confused with a view of Scripture as merely a witness to God's word or occasion for *Deus loquens*. For Kierkegaard, Scripture is God's word not in any derivative or conferred sense, but objectively so in and of itself. Luther asserted that "when you read the words of Holy Scripture, you must realize that God is speaking in them" and that "You are so to deal with the Scriptures that you bear in mind that God Himself is saying this."<sup>20</sup> Kierkegaard echoes this point in "What Is Required."

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<sup>18</sup> Muller, PRRD, 66.

<sup>19</sup> This freedom on the canon that allowed Luther to mildly "speak against" antilegomenal James is evident in Kierkegaard in very different ways.

<sup>20</sup> *Dr. Martin Luthers Sämmtliche Schriften* (St. Louis edition), III:21; cited in various places including Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I.4 and I.216, respectively; and Robert D. Preuss "Luther: Word, Doctrine, and Confession," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 60:3 (July, 1996): 175.

Admitting that the Bible is not equally clear in all places,<sup>21</sup> Kierkegaard contends that it is sufficiently clear on matters vital to saving faith or Christian existence. Indeed, a fundamental exegetical problem is that the Bible is all too clear on precisely those matters readers find deeply unsettling or scandalous.<sup>22</sup> The lack of clarity ascribed to Scripture is often, on his analysis, a subversive act of will on the part of readers who refuse to submit to God's authority, what Luther refers to as "cursed unbelief and odious flesh."<sup>23</sup>

For Kierkegaard, the present, subjective conformity of the reader's will to the claims and demands of God in Scripture is exegetically significant.<sup>24</sup> On this point, as on numerous other points, he stands in a tradition well-represented within precritical exegesis but widely rejected throughout the modern, critical era. For him, as for many precritical exegetes before him, the spiritual disposition of the reader plays a crucial role in how the message is received and understood and consequently explained. This is one reason why his critique and proposal extends beyond method to exegetical practices—practices disclose disposition.

<sup>21</sup> Kierkegaard is convinced that many exegetical problems arise out of a lack of exegetical earnestness rather than a lack of biblical perspicuity. Still, he grants there are obscure passages, FSE, 29-30 (XII 318-19).

<sup>22</sup> FSE, 34-35 (XII 323): "It is only all too easy to understand the requirement contained in God's Word. . . . The most limited poor creature cannot truthfully deny being able to understand the requirement—but it is tough for flesh and blood to will to understand it and have to act accordingly. In my view, it is human for a person to shrink from letting the Word really gain power over him."

<sup>23</sup> *Dr. Martin Luther's Sämtliche Schriften* (St. Louis edition), IX:1800; cited by Preus, "Luther: Word, Doctrine, and Confession," 176.

<sup>24</sup> FSE, 34 (XII 323): "All this interpreting and interpreting and scholarly research and new scholarly research that is produced on the solemn and serious principle that it is in order to understand God's Word properly—look more closely and you will see that it is in order to defend oneself against God's Word." FSE, 29 (XII 318, 319): In reply to the objection of obscurity Kierkegaard writes, "Before I have anything to do with this objection, it must be made by someone whose life manifests that he has scrupulously complied with all the passages that are easy to understand." And again, "If you do not read God's Word in such a way that you consider that the least little bit you do understand instantly binds you to do accordingly, then you are not reading God's Word," and such a person can surely not expect to understand what he is not in earnest reading.



According to Kierkegaard, the Bible, as God's word, is also sufficient to accomplish all that God intends; it is his means of saving sinners by first putting them to death and then giving them eternal life.<sup>25</sup> Scripture is God's word and exists as a means to accomplish in us those things necessary for our salvation and is efficacious to that end when read rightly.

Although Kierkegaard clearly holds to such a view of Scripture, he never offers an account of the historical process or nature of the divine inspiration of Scripture that would explain how these particular texts come to count as God's word. One reason is that the historical process is at best a secondary concern for him "because inspiration is an object only of faith"<sup>26</sup> and not a matter of historical or rational inquiry. Historical or rational inquiry frequently represents a falling away from faith in Kierkegaard's view—and is often used as a diversion from Scripture and mask hiding unbelief. This element of Kierkegaard's thought is of particular interest in this dissertation.

Of course not just any theory of divine inspiration or of how the Bible counts as God's authoritative word is sufficient to sustain Kierkegaard's concept of Scripture as the word of God. To take the issue of authority, for example, he neither accepts nor allows for a view that locates the divine authority of Scripture in the will of any human community, including the church. For him, it is not the canonical process, church tradition, or the

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<sup>25</sup> FSE, 43 (XII 331): If "you keep on reading God's Word this way for a time . . . you will read fear and trembling into your soul so that, with God's help, you will succeed in becoming a human being, a personality, rescued from being this dreadful nonentity into which we humans, created in the image of God, have been bewitched . . . You will, if you read God's Word in this way, you will (even if it will be dreadful for you, but remember that this is a condition of salvation!) succeed in doing what is required—to look at yourself in the mirror of the Word. Only in this way will you succeed." See also FSE, 76-81 (XII 360-64).

<sup>26</sup> See footnote on CUP, 25 (VII 14).

confession of a particular community that establishes Scripture as God's word; it is simply because the Bible is God's word that it has divine authority—an authority to which readers and hearers respond. Although only faith can receive and understand Scripture rightly, it is not faith that makes Scripture God's word—"Holy Scripture" simply is God's word and we respond either by receiving it as such through faith or rebelling against it in unbelief.

Neither is the claim that the Bible is God's word the conclusion of an historical or scientific inquiry. The belief that Scripture is the word of God is a matter belonging to faith alone. Kierkegaard does not deny that there is an historical process of divine inspiration that may establish this text as God's word, but neither does he delve into what that process might have been as many others have done. There is no compelling epistemological motive to engage in the sort of historical reconstruction or philosophical speculation that came to dominate the debate on Scripture in the modern era. The problem exists entirely in the present—that Scripture presents itself as the word of God to contemporary readers.

Historical criticism, rational demonstration, or any other kind of objective endeavor is helpless to provide epistemic warrant sufficient to undergird the confidence in Scripture demanded by Christian existence:

If the inquiring subject were infinitely interested in his relation to this truth [i.e. Christianity as revealed in Scripture], he would here despair at once, because nothing is easier to perceive than this, that with regard to the historical the greatest certainty is only an *approximation*, and an approximation is too little to build his happiness on and is so unlike an eternal happiness that no result can ensue.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> CUP, 23 (VII 12).

Conversely, neither does Kierkegaard shy away from embracing the much more difficult position that historical criticism, rational demonstration, or any other kind of objective endeavor is just as helpless to undermine the “power and strength of faith”<sup>28</sup> such a believer enjoys. After having Climacus imagine a scenario in which the believing Bible scholar arrives at “a successful demonstration of whatever any theological scholar in his happiest moment could ever have wished to demonstrate about the Bible,” and dismissing it as unable to bring someone “one step closer to faith,” he then turns the situation around:

So I assume the opposite, that the enemies have succeeded in demonstrating what they desire regarding the Scriptures, with a certainty surpassing the most vehement desire of the most spiteful enemy—what then? Has the enemy thereby abolished Christianity? Not at all. Has he harmed the believer? Not at all, not in the least.<sup>29</sup>

We can imagine numerous Enlightenment figures reaching the same conclusion—but on the ground that what is essentially Christian is not dependent upon the historicity of Scripture.

Whether Christianity could get along without Scripture was a matter of debate in Copenhagen during Kierkegaard’s time. Janet Forsythe Fishburn notes that Kierkegaard “finally wrote his theological examinations required for those seeking ordination” in 1840, concluding a decade of study at the University of Copenhagen.

The intellectual milieu in which he studied was one in which there was a growing sense that the church and the New Testament were under attack by those exponents of Hegel’s system who were engaged in biblical scholarship. The quest for the historical Jesus had been intensified with the publication in 1835 of Strauss’s *Life of Jesus*. The faculty at the University of Copenhagen considered the threat to biblical faith to be so serious that in 1840 they

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<sup>28</sup> CUP, 29 (VII 18).

<sup>29</sup> CUP, 30 (VII 19).

offered a prize for the best “. . . philosophical inquiry . . . into the question, if and how far the Christian religion is conditioned upon the authority of the books of the New Testament and upon their historical reliability.”<sup>30</sup>

Strauss’s *Life of Jesus* was not the origin of this controversy, however much his work intensified the debate in Copenhagen and elsewhere. Henrik Nicolai Clausen (1793-1872; appointed professor of theology at Copenhagen in 1820) defended a version of the Protestant Scripture principle in *Catholicism and Protestantism* (1825). Though Clausen argued that the church is founded on Scripture, he also insisted that the Bible must be subjected to a rationalist, historical-critical exegesis. According to Watkin, “Clausen introduced modern historical-critical Bible exegesis into Denmark.”<sup>31</sup> Nikolai F. S. Grundtvig (1783-1872), an influential figure in Scandinavian education and on Denmark’s ecclesial, academic, and political scene, countered Clausen’s views in *The Church’s Retort*. Grundtvig criticized Clausen’s specialist-empowering insistence upon rationalist, historical-critical exegesis and his defense of the Scripture principle. In Grundtvig’s view Clausen’s proposal “makes the written word everything” and turns the church into a gathering of “bookworms.”<sup>32</sup> He proceeds to offer the “matchless discovery” of “the Church view.” As we will explore in chapter three, Kierkegaard rejects both the historical-critical version of “the Bible theory” and Grundtvig’s “matchless discovery” of “the Church theory” in the opening pages of the *Postscript*. Kierkegaard was well aware of the controversies surrounding the Bible and its

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<sup>30</sup> Fishburn, “Søren Kierkegaard, Exegete,” *Interpretation* (July 1985): 231. See also Herbert C. Wolf, *Kierkegaard and Bultmann: The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965), 20.

<sup>31</sup> Julia Watkin, *Kierkegaard* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2001), 14.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 40.

exegesis in Copenhagen and beyond, including arguments to the effect that Christianity is not dependent upon Scripture or its reliability.

In the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard has Climacus argue that the enemy, after demonstrating everything he hoped to prove, is not even excused from believing the biblical report:

Has he won the right to exempt himself from the responsibility for not being a believer? Not at all. That is, because these books are not by these authors, are not authentic, are not *integri*, are not inspired (this cannot be disproved, since it is an object of faith), it does not follow that these authors never existed and, above all, that Christ has not existed.<sup>33</sup>

As C. Stephen Evans suggests, the idea here appears to be that even if John did not write the Gospel associated with him, it still remains that someone has and that we must deal with that person's testimony about Jesus Christ. Indeed, according to Climacus, however successful the enemy's demonstration of the unreliability of the Bible it remains "at its *maximum* only an approximation."<sup>34</sup> Objective, historical or scientific demonstrations are insufficient to upend the believer's conviction in the divine inspiration or authority of the canonical writings, much less the veracity of the testimony they report, because such demonstrations remain mere approximations (though the enemy fails to recognize this, being deceived).

Climacus does not accept the claim that historical-criticism is capable of establishing or undermining biblically-grounded Christian faith—including the conviction that Scripture is inspired. This is because the historical critic, in Kierkegaard's view, is committing a kind of categorical mistake—thinking a merely objective approach will be subjectively decisive for

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<sup>33</sup> CUP, 30 (VII 19).

<sup>34</sup> See footnote at CUP, 25 (VII 14).

faith. He concludes that the whole historical-critical enterprise is properly understood as a futile attempt to mask shame and serve the cause of unbelief:

Here lies the difficulty . . . For whose sake is the demonstration conducted? Faith does not need it, indeed, must even consider it its enemy. When faith, however, begins to feel ashamed of itself, . . . that is, when faith begins to cease to be faith, then the demonstration is made necessary in order to enjoy general esteem from unbelief. . . . Faith taken in vain . . . will not and cannot, of course, bear the martyrdom of faith.<sup>35</sup>

And again,

The demonstration of Christianity really lies in *imitation*. This was taken away. Then the need for “reasons” was felt, but these reasons, or that there are reasons, are already a kind of doubt—and thus doubt arose and lived on reasons. It was not observed that the more reasons one advances, the more one nourishes doubt and the stronger it becomes, that offering doubt reasons in order to kill it is just like offering the tasty food it likes best of all to a hungry monster one wishes to eliminate. No, one must not offer reasons to doubt—at least not if one’s intention is to kill it.<sup>36</sup>

Kierkegaard apparently sees no honest epistemological motive to attempt an historical reconstruction of or engage in philosophical speculation on the divine inspiration of Scripture. To pursue reasons for believing denies the faith one supposedly seeks to establish or support. Believers must deny themselves the vanity of appearing rational to unbelief and “bear the martyrdom of faith.” To do so demonstrates Christianity in the subjectivity of one’s existence via imitation—the only kind of demonstration Christianity allows.

And yet, as I have already observed, his position in no way denies that there was an historical process of inspiration. Neither does he preclude the possibility that we might have

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<sup>35</sup> CUP, 30-31 (VII 19-20).

<sup>36</sup> FSE, 68 (XII 352).

other, non-epistemic motives for delving into the history and process of inspiration, canonization, or manuscript transmission. He would question whether we were not in fact deceiving ourselves into a doubt-feeding epistemic quest for reasons to offer unbelief. But either way, this much is clear: not just any view of Scripture is sufficient to secure the status for Scripture that Kierkegaard believes the Christian life demands.

### ***2.3 Kierkegaard and Schleiermacher on Scripture***

There were numerous accounts of inspiration available to Kierkegaard had he wanted to adopt one. One account was offered by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834).<sup>37</sup> Schleiermacher argues that the “authority of Holy Scripture cannot be the foundation of faith in Christ” since faith in Christ “must . . . be presupposed before a peculiar authority can be granted to Holy Scripture.”<sup>38</sup> He seems to break sharply from the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*, arguing that “all text-books and Confessions which put the doctrine of Scripture as the source of Christian faith in the foreground” represent a serious “misconception” of authentic Christian faith.<sup>39</sup>

Schleiermacher’s primary objection to *sola Scriptura* is that,

If faith in Jesus as the Christ or as the Son of God and the Redeemer of men is to be based on the authority of Scripture, the question arises how this authority itself is to be based; for obviously the thing must be so done as to

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<sup>37</sup> Kierkegaard had been exposed to Schleiermacher and his romantic philosophy and theology during his university studies and worked through his *Glaubenslehre* (1830) with Hans Lassen Martensen in 1833-34.

<sup>38</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. by H. R. MacKintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), 591.

<sup>39</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 591.

impress the conviction on unbelieving hearts, so that they too may by this path come to faith in the Redeemer.<sup>40</sup>

But Kierkegaard believes that the authority of Scripture is basic since it is God's word.

Schleiermacher excludes this possibility and proposes a much weaker concept of biblical authority based upon the supposed purity of the "living memory" of the human authors.

For those who identify biblical authority with divine authority it seems blasphemous to suggest that the authority of Scripture must be grounded in some other, more basic authority that turns out to be just the "clearness of consciousness" of its human authors.<sup>41</sup>

Both Kierkegaard and the Lutheran orthodox believe that Scripture in and of itself is able "to impress the conviction" of its divine authority "on unbelieving hearts" precisely because Scripture is God's word and as such *autopistos*. Granted, the orthodox, both Lutheran and Reformed, appeal to the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*<sup>42</sup> and Kierkegaard has Climacus posit the necessity of a divine teacher who gives the condition of (or for) faith.

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<sup>40</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 591.

<sup>41</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 595.

<sup>42</sup> On the Reformed side see WCF, I.iv-v. For an informed and well documented survey of the Lutheran orthodox teaching on "Holy Scripture" see Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I.193-367. Pieper summarizes the Lutheran orthodox position on the authority of the word of God like this: "Holy Scripture possesses divine authority, that is, in all it says it is entitled to the same faith and obedience that is due God" and maintains that "the divine authority of Scripture is recognized by us" with "Christian certainty (*fides divina*) . . . solely by the self-testimony of Scripture, by the Word of Scripture, through the power of the Holy Ghost operating in it . . . [which] is the so-called *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*" (I.307, 308). This Christian certainty or *fides divina*, he notes, is distinct from "natural or scientific, certainty (*fides humana*)—a distinction Kierkegaard seems to maintain without employing the terms.



But these appeals to a divine agent in no way deny the inherent, self-authenticating authority of Scripture but rather confirm it as God acts by means of his word.<sup>43</sup>

Schleiermacher does not attribute necessity to Scripture, instrumental or otherwise, and speaks only of its priority. For Schleiermacher, whatever “peculiar authority” we ascribe to Scripture is “granted” from below by us, its readers, and is only peculiar in a quantitative sense. On this view, Scripture is first in a series of Christian expressions of the “feeling of need.”<sup>44</sup> Scripture is granted normative status by and for the church due to the unrepeatability of the “purifying influence of their [i.e. the apostles’] living memory of Christ as a whole.”<sup>45</sup> Inspiration is conceived as a species of “experiential insight” sanctified by the apostles’ proximity to Christ out of which the New Testament emerges.<sup>46</sup>

For Kierkegaard, this is an entirely inadequate view of Scripture in general and of inspiration in particular. Schleiermacher’s argument is precisely the kind of approach Kierkegaard rejects in that he reasons his way around ascribing a *qualitatively* peculiar authority to Scripture while continuing to esteem Scripture by ascribing to it a *quantitative* priority as first in a series or foremost in its class. Scripture no longer stands over its readers, confronting us with the judgments of God, but is rather domesticated and subjected to our

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<sup>43</sup> Of course both the orthodox and Kierkegaard would allow that the word of God exists in other forms than as written, such as the prophetic and apostolic preaching. Claims made about the role of Scripture for us today are not to be construed as denying the efficacy of the word of God in other forms.

<sup>44</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 593.

<sup>45</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 595-96.

<sup>46</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 600. According to Schleiermacher, “the Old Testament Scriptures do not . . . share the normative dignity or the inspiration of the New,” *The Christian Faith*, 608.

judgment and discipline. “[I]t at once follows that we must reject the suggestion that in virtue of their divine inspiration the sacred books demand a hermeneutical and critical treatment different from one guided by the rules which obtain elsewhere.”<sup>47</sup> Likewise, the priority granted by the church to these “sacred books” is based upon certain historical considerations. As such, they must be subjected to “unrestricted investigation of the matter; critical inquiry must ever anew test the individual writings of Scripture with a view to decide whether they rightly keep their place in the sacred collection.”<sup>48</sup>

There are numerous similarities between Schleiermacher’s and Kierkegaard’s thoughts on Scripture. Central to these, perhaps reflecting the influence of both pietism and Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788), is a deep concern about the objectification of Christianity and a reduction of Christian faith to a kind of *scientia* or mere *doctrina*. Both reject the notion that “saving faith” can be grounded upon “demonstrative proof” or obtained “second-hand or on the authority of experts.”<sup>49</sup> Likewise, both argue that even “if such proof could be given . . . on such terms faith . . . would not be genuine, living faith at all”<sup>50</sup> because saving faith is inherently subjective and at some level relational (though Kierkegaard’s understanding of this is much nearer the orthodox concept of *fiducia* than Schleiermacher’s, given the latter’s emphasis on feeling over against volition). Furthermore,

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<sup>47</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 600.

<sup>48</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 603.

<sup>49</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 591.

<sup>50</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 592.

both insist that “the grounds of faith must be the same for us as for the first Christians”<sup>51</sup> and that in this sense faith knows no temporal, spatial, or cultural gap—what Kierkegaard refers to as contemporaneity. For Kierkegaard, this requirement regarding the grounds of faith doubles as a ground for the necessity of Scripture for disciples downstream of the eyewitnesses of the Incarnate;<sup>52</sup> for Schleiermacher, it is taken to be an argument against the necessity of Scripture. This is a crucial point: even though both agree that it is impossible to prove the divine authority or inspiration of Scripture, which must therefore be received by faith alone, they proceed to argue in opposite directions.

Kierkegaard is explicit: the Bible is God’s word and to read or hear Scripture read is to hear “the voice of God”<sup>53</sup> and fall under a peculiar authority “as if it were God himself who asked [or spoke to] me.”<sup>54</sup> Scripture possesses the *qualitatively* “peculiar authority” of being “God’s Word” and is not simply “the first member in a series [whose] members are homogeneous with the first.”<sup>55</sup> For him, the Bible is God’s word and expresses something

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<sup>51</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 592.

<sup>52</sup> Although the eyewitnesses of Christ had access to God’s word in both written and preached forms the presence of God incarnate also served as an occasion for faith for them. Because the appearance of God in the flesh is decisive for Christian faith those who live downstream of this event are dependent upon the testimony of faith—the preaching of Christ—of the eyewitnesses. This testimony is found in the New Testament, which is the occasion for faith for disciples who live downstream of the ascension.

<sup>53</sup> FSE, 39 (XII 327).

<sup>54</sup> FSE, 31 (XII 320). The counterfactual here is not to be read as though Scripture in fact does not possess divine authority or is not a form of the word of God. Rather, it should be read as though Scripture were in fact God’s oral interrogation of the reader such as Moses experienced at the burning bush or Paul on the way to Damascus. The Bible is not an oral discourse even though, as we shall see, it is very similar to this.

<sup>55</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 594.

paradoxical that stands over against every moral, rational, or feeling-expressive homogenous series. As such, Scripture must be received by faith and on the basis of its divine authority.

*Philosophical Fragments* is instructive here: it can read as an exposé on the insufficiency of the kind of assumption Schleiermacher proposes—that “we have no point of departure but ordinary reason.”<sup>56</sup> Kierkegaard maintains that such a point of departure leaves us with no certainty or *fides divina* but only a kind of insufficient *fides humana*, which is indeed all Schleiermacher seems willing to grant Scripture. For Kierkegaard, this is an argument for something like a special hermeneutic of faith, which Schleiermacher adamantly rejects; for Schleiermacher, it is a plank in his argument for the inadequacy of biblical authority as a ground of faith. Kierkegaard insists that by reading Scripture in a certain way one will be able to read into his or her soul the “fear and trembling” of faith necessary for salvation.<sup>57</sup> For Schleiermacher the Bible must be read as any other book.

So Schleiermacher, from a Kierkegaardian perspective, represents little advance over the earlier rationalism of Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), H. S. Reimarus (1694-1768), J. S. Semler (1725-1791), or G. E. Lessing (1729-1781), or the more recent moral idealism of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Neither does Schleiermacher offer a viable alternative to the absolute idealism of G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) and Hegelian-influenced thinkers such as D. F. Strauss (1808-1874) who were Kierkegaard’s contemporaries. With the possible exception of Semler, Kierkegaard was familiar, even if only at second-hand, with each of

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<sup>56</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 591.

<sup>57</sup> FSE, 43 (XII 331).

these noteworthy contributors to the rise and formation of modern, critical-era, biblical exegetical methods and practices. In order to further clarify Kierkegaard's own position I believe it is helpful to briefly contrast his view of Scripture with each of these figures in turn. Doing so will highlight how Kierkegaard very often sides with precritical Lutheran orthodoxy over against the array of rationalist and idealist positions on the use of reason and its relation to faith *coram Scriptura*.

#### ***2.4 Kierkegaard and the Rationalists on Scripture: Spinoza, Semler, and Reimarus***

Kierkegaard was not naïve in his reaction to critical exegetical methods and practices. On the contrary, he was more radically critical than the critical scholars themselves, turning their suspicion of Scripture back against its readers: the scholarly exegete, pious layperson, abstract theorist, and even himself. Kierkegaard can, for example, fully affirm Spinoza's claim that "[w]e see nearly all men parade their own ideas as God's Word, . . . while using religion as a pretext," and he agrees that "if men were really sincere in what they profess with regard to Holy Scripture, they would conduct themselves quite differently."<sup>58</sup> This latter point is in many ways the leading edge of Kierkegaard's critique of biblical exegetical methods and practices. Similarly, he is deeply sympathetic to the accusation that "the chief concern of theologians on the whole has been to extort from Holy Scripture their own arbitrarily invented ideas."<sup>59</sup> Kierkegaard will give this suspicious charge greater nuance and

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<sup>58</sup> Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, tr. Samuel Shirley (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), 141.

<sup>59</sup> Spinoza, *Tractatus*, 141.

not timidly restrict it to professional theologians. He thought all people naturally read Scripture in this manner and to this end—it is the reflex of sinners who take offense and proceed to act in suicidal self-defense. This is true of Spinoza, Kierkegaard, and everyone else *coram Scriptura*. Confessing that this is true of oneself is, *sub contrario*, a necessary condition for being a true reader of Scripture—that is, for reading Scripture Christianly.<sup>60</sup>

Yet Kierkegaard's suspicion grows out of different soil than Spinoza's. For Spinoza, Scripture "is sacred, its words divine, only as long as it moves men to devotion towards God; but if it is utterly disregarded by them, . . . it is nothing more than paper and ink, and their neglect renders it completely profane."<sup>61</sup> So neglected the Bible no longer counts as "the Word of God."<sup>62</sup> Indeed, it is only ever called "the Word of God" for three reasons:

because it teaches true religion, of which God is the eternal Author; because it relates predictions of the future as God's decrees; and lastly, because the real authors of Scripture taught for the most part not from the natural light common to all but from light peculiar to themselves, and they represented God as making these utterances.<sup>63</sup>

And these three reasons apply only to some portions of Scripture—not, for example, to the "great deal of merely historical narrative" it contains. God, it turns out, is the "Author" only of the "true religion" taught in Scripture and not of Scripture itself: "it is not because God willed to confer on men a set number of books, but because of the true religion that is

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<sup>60</sup> Spinoza, *Tractatus*, 141.

<sup>61</sup> Spinoza, *Tractatus*, 207.

<sup>62</sup> Spinoza, *Tractatus*, 207.

<sup>63</sup> Spinoza, *Tractatus*, 209.

taught therein” that God can in any “sense . . . be understood as the author of the Bible.”<sup>64</sup> This is why if men fail to esteem, use, or understand Scripture in this way it becomes “nothing more than paper and ink”—it *is* nothing more than this.

Because the “divine” element in Scripture is limited to the rational truth taught in certain portions of Scripture, exegesis is transformed into a threshing process in which the husk of historical and culturally-bound meaning is beaten off and swept away from the kernel of universal and timeless religious truth. Exegesis is reduced to a kind of historical criticism under the tyranny of a rational process limited by certain assumptions. This is precisely the kind of approach to Scripture that Kierkegaard adamantly protests. In the words of Harrisville and Sundberg, “Spinoza reduces the rationality of Scripture—that is, its truth—to what agrees with the understanding of the autonomous biblical critic free of dogmatic commitments.”<sup>65</sup> The result of this elitist empowerment, a bit ironic given Spinoza’s liberal political reputation, is that Scripture, in all its particularity, becomes irrelevant—even an obstacle to true religion. Its interpretation is taken away from the church as the community of faith and entrusted to supposedly enlightened, rational, scientific and objective historian-philosophers in an attempt to guard exegesis from the passion of faith. “Historical exegesis” as developed by Spinoza “allows [for] the public manipulation of Scripture for the purpose of enlightened culture. . . . The motivation for historical criticism of the Bible is clear,” Harrisville and Sundberg conclude, it “is a primary

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<sup>64</sup> Spinoza, *Tractatus*, 209.

<sup>65</sup> Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, 39.

means to free society from the destructive force of religious passion.”<sup>66</sup> Here, doubt in the form of rational objectivity is offered as the cure for the passion of faith. Kierkegaard maintains that it is doubt that needs the cure and the passion of Christian faith is the remedy.

The conclusions of Harrisville and Sundberg strike two notes in the chord of Kierkegaard’s critique of biblical exegetical method and practice. There is an escapist element at work both in Spinoza’s proposal and in the rise of critical-era biblical study in general, though the evil and proposed escape route changes somewhat from author to author. The threat is generally thought to dwell somewhere in the region of passion, faith, authority, or dogma—each of which must be bracketed in order to arrive at a pure, objective interpretation of the Bible. Kierkegaard, however, diagnoses the modern angst as a fear of becoming oneself *coram Deo* and suggests the flight is from God and ourselves before the mirror of God’s word. No doubt dogma and authority can be hiding places, as can the false faith of Christendom’s presumption. But the root-cause of our flight-impulse *coram Scriptura* is the offense sinners take to God.

On this analysis objectivity, far from a pass through superstition into enlightenment, is merely a refuge for unbelief—a desperate resort of the person who is unwilling to be oneself *coram Deo*. The only cure to our sickness is not further depersonalization, and thus dehumanization, but the infinite interestedness and passion of Christian faith. What modern, critical-era exegetical methods and practices bracket, in other words, is precisely the cure for the sin-sick self *coram Deo*. Essential truth is to be rightly related to God, self, and

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<sup>66</sup> Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, 42.



others; methodological objectivity is not aimed at this end and even prevents one from ever arriving at such truth. Scripture, however, as the mirror of the self *coram Deo*, is precisely what we need in order to become rightly related to God, self, and others—and it will infallibly bring us into this redeemed relation so long as we read in faith.

Kierkegaard was keenly aware that exegetical methods and practices were most often aimed at accommodating, covering over, and sheltering “enlightened culture” from the terrible majesty of the God who speaks in Scripture. Contra Spinoza (and Schleiermacher), neither God nor Scripture gives quarter to enlightened culture. Here, as readers of Scripture *coram Deo*, God calls us to “the martyrdom of faith”<sup>67</sup>—to die to the trappings of enlightened culture, including its intellectual vanities and comforts, and be crucified with Christ. For Kierkegaard, Scripture is irreducible to mere paper and ink because it is, in all its particularity, the word of God. The historical element Spinoza treats as chaff is vital to Christianity, which alone is the true religion:

Christianity is the only historical phenomenon that despite the historical—indeed, precisely by means of the historical—has wanted to be the single individual’s point of departure for his eternal consciousness, has wanted to interest him otherwise than merely historically, has wanted to base his happiness on his relation to something historical. No philosophy . . . , no mythology . . . , no historical knowledge . . . has ever had this idea—of which in this connection one can say with all multiple meanings that it did not arise in any human heart.<sup>68</sup>

Kierkegaard did not share Spinoza’s political opinions and was not afraid of religious passion so much as the eternal consequences of a deceitful, domesticated religion masquerading as

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<sup>67</sup> CUP, 31 (VII 20).

<sup>68</sup> PF, 109 (IV 271).

the true, radical religion of Christ. Scripture leaves no place for a cool, detached, scientific objectivity—there is only the passion of faith or the suicidal folly of offense.

Like many of the rationalist exegetes, especially Semler, Kierkegaard seems to draw a sharp distinction between biblical Christianity and dogmatic religion. But unlike the rationalists, his alarm over certain dangers of objectivity in theology does not lead him to set New Testament Christianity over against Lutheran orthodoxy, which he embraced as “excellent” and “the truth.”<sup>69</sup> Kierkegaard’s concern is narrowly related to certain abuses of dogmatic theology that support Christendom’s presumption and offer cover to offended unbelievers. Kierkegaard’s critique of dogmatic religion is that it tends to divert people from the kind of subjectivity necessary for salvation and essential to biblical Christianity.

The central message of Scripture—the preaching of Christ—is deeply offensive on several levels. The popular rationalist notion that the a-historical kernel of religion that is supposed to be the essence of the biblical message is available to human reason and inoffensive to enlightened civil society is ludicrous—completely out of whack with reality and the nature and function of Scripture as the mirror of the self *coram Deo*. Any exegetical method or practice aimed at discerning such a kernel from the historical husk of Scripture is deeply misguided and represents an abuse rather than an exegesis of Scripture.

Reimarus was more radical than Spinoza (or Semler) in his suspicion of Jesus and the disciples. According to him, Jesus was a would-be political hero who exploited Judaism in a vain attempt to seize power, establish himself as king, and overthrow Roman rule. What he

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<sup>69</sup> FSE, 24 (XII 315).

actually accomplished was to raise the hopes of the naïve and gather a handful of self-serving disciples on his way to being crucified. His disciples, determined to fulfill their own political ambitions despite their leader's death, fabricated the resurrection accounts and spiritualized the significance of his life and death. The New Testament is a reflection of the disciples' deceitful but surprisingly successful scheme imposed upon traces of the truth and Jesus' perfidy. Despite the tale Reimarus spins to explain away the historicity of Scripture—an example of how far enlightened unbelievers are willing to go—his radical suspicion blazed a trail many critical-era exegetes travelled. Reimarus set a wedge between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith and tried to drive it home until Christianity broke apart.

Not everyone who has considered the relationship of the Jesus of history to the Christ of faith has been as openly hostile to Christianity as Reimarus. Yet the quest for the historical Jesus clearly assumes that we cannot be confident that the biblical accounts present contemporary readers with a reliable depiction of Jesus of Nazareth and that we lack warrant to assume that Jesus is identical with the Christ of faith. Kierkegaard allows neither assumption. He does not, however, argue that the disciples are beyond reproach or above suspicion. On the contrary: he suggests the Bible already evidences some falling short of the ideality of Christianity among the apostles.<sup>70</sup> But this in no way compromises the ability of Scripture to present a sufficient and fully reliable testimony to Christ from the standpoint of faith. Yet the question remains as to whether the (true) Jesus of history is obscured behind

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<sup>70</sup> "Seen in the light of ideality," Kierkegaard writes, "every human being as a rule is a worm," PC, 347-48 (*Addition to Pap. X<sup>3</sup> B 29:10*). Much more specifically, however, Kierkegaard offers a startling critique of the apostles in, for example, TM, 180-81 (XIV 193).

the (fictive) Christ of the disciples' faith. This question concerns the reliability of Scripture and the identity of the Christ of faith with the Jesus of history.

Kierkegaard firmly maintains that Jesus Christ is only ever available to faith, whether one was an eyewitness of the historical Jesus or a contemporary Bible reader. There is no other Jesus than the Christ and he is available to faith alone. The mere Jesus of history is nothing other than the Christ of faith as he appears to unbelief. The Christ testified to in the Bible is none other than the Jesus of history.

But there is another point to Kierkegaard's thought in play here than the reliability of Scripture or identity of the Jesus of history with the Christ of faith, as important as these are. For Kierkegaard, the preaching of Christ at the center of the biblical revelation and Christian faith is so profoundly paradoxical that no human mind could have thought it up:

No philosophy (for it is only for thought), no mythology (for it is only for the imagination), no historical knowledge (which is for memory) has ever had this idea—of which in this connection one can say with all multiple meanings that it did not arise in any human heart.<sup>71</sup>

The very idea of it is beyond us and thus it must be transcendentally revealed and as such it must be revealed to faith and for faith.<sup>72</sup> This is fundamental to Kierkegaard's concept of Scripture and denies every view of Scripture that grounds its preaching of Christ in us or takes its essence to be something accessible to reason, imagination, or memory alone.

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<sup>71</sup> PF, 109 (IV 271).

<sup>72</sup> For a careful analysis of exactly what Kierkegaard excludes see C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 53-63.

### ***2.5 Kierkegaard and Lessing on Scripture***

Kierkegaard's relationship to Lessing is a complicated issue that, for the most part, goes well beyond the scope of this dissertation. Hannay warns us not to assume a perfect identity between the Lessing of the *Postscript* and the actual, historical Lessing. The Lessing of the *Postscript* is presented "as a paradigmatic subjective thinker."<sup>73</sup> Kierkegaard was, however, both familiar with and grateful for the work of the historical Lessing.

Kierkegaard admires Lessing's style and grants several of his points. Still, their respective projects and life trajectories diverged sharply. Lessing used his position as librarian at Wolfenbüttel to publish provocative works, sometimes written by others like Leibniz and Reimarus, allowing him to distance himself from the views expressed. He intends these works to clear away the "patchwork of bunglers and half-philosophers" who propose a rationalist "religious system which they now want to put in place of the old" Christian orthodoxy. Similarly, Kierkegaard used his financial independence to publish provocative works, many under various pseudonyms, allowing him to distance himself from the views expressed. He intended these works to accomplish the very similar project of clearing away counterfeit forms of Christianity current in Christendom in order to clarify what he took to be Christian orthodoxy understood as authentic New Testament faith. Both aimed at showing how, in Lessing's words, the older "is in manifest conflict with human reason," though the nature of that "conflict" was conceived somewhat differently between

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<sup>73</sup> Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, 284, 286-87.

them.<sup>74</sup> They recognized that Enlightenment versions of Christianity represented a different religion trying to supplant biblical faith while claiming as much of its heritage and moral authority as possible.<sup>75</sup> Neither was satisfied with this new, counterfeit form of Christianity.

The crucial difference between them, however, is that Lessing seemed convinced that the presumed conflict between reason and biblical Christianity proved fatal for orthodox Christianity whereas Kierkegaard thought it highlighted Christianity's transcendence over human reason and demand for faith—especially faith as a kind of personal *fiducia*. Such faith, at least for Kierkegaard, includes a kind of certainty that lies beyond anything even “the necessary truths of reason” are able to attain.

Kierkegaard can freely admit, as Lessing observes, that “Christianity was there before the evangelists and apostles wrote” the New Testament and he would agree that Christianity “is not true because the evangelists and apostles taught it; but they taught it because it is true.”<sup>76</sup> It is not the authority of the human authors or an ecclesiastical body but the power and veracity of God's word that demands faith from Bible readers. This is the position articulated within the Protestant Reformation on both its Lutheran and Reformed fronts and represents a clear distinction between Protestants and Roman Catholics. It also represents a

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<sup>74</sup> Lessing, *Lessing's Theological Writings*, ed. Henry Chadwick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 13. These two quotes are taken from excerpts of letters Lessing wrote to his brother.

<sup>75</sup> For Kierkegaard's analysis of Christendom's version of Christianity as “baptized paganism” see especially CUP, 368 (VII 319).

<sup>76</sup> Lessing, *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 18. This quote is taken from the “Editor's Counterpropositions” Lessing appended to the publication of the *Wolfenbüttel Fragments* of Reimarus' *Apology*. Others offer similar arguments based upon the same observation—see for example Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 593.

clear distinction in nineteenth-century Copenhagen between Kierkegaard and Grundtvig who espoused the “matchless discovery” of “the Church theory.”

Climacus sees “the Church theory” as a retreat within Protestantism to a Roman Catholic position on Scripture in the face of the “attacks” of a suspicious historical criticism. Such attacks led many would-be apologists to abandon the Bible “as a secure stronghold” for faith.<sup>77</sup> But Kierkegaard’s rejection of ecclesiastical authority as a foundation for faith is coupled with his sarcastic criticism of the ecclesiastical establishment of his day. This is another place where he finds some common cause with Lessing and other Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment figures, surprising for one who apparently held conservative political positions in mid-nineteenth century Europe.

Unlike Lessing, Kierkegaard does not turn the fact that Christianity precedes the New Testament into an argument against the necessity of Scripture for the present-day believer. On the contrary, Kierkegaard seems to maintain that the only access we who are not eyewitnesses of the Incarnate now have to him is through Scripture. We can think here of the role the eyewitness reports play in *Fragments*. “There is no hint in Kierkegaard,” Evans observes, “that the [gospel] narrative could be replaced . . . On the contrary, it is through engagement with the narrative that the hearer comes to know God in a concrete, particular way.”<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, Kierkegaard contends that the present-day believer’s access to Christ through Scripture is in no way an impediment or obstacle to faith. Faith, or at least

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<sup>77</sup> CUP, 34-37 (VII 23-26).

<sup>78</sup> Evans, *Historical Christ*, 57-58.

the condition for faith, is given immediately by God on the occasion of reading the testimony of the true witness. Ultimately, faith is equally difficult (and equally easy) for both the eyewitnesses and the disciples at second hand. The point here is that there is no reason to believe that the supposed historical gap between the present-day Bible reader and the Christ-event represents an obstacle to faith. Instead, the present-day Bible reader is supplied with just the same occasion for faith as the eyewitnesses of God incarnate in Jesus Christ.

But the historical gap between the Jesus of history and the contemporary reader is not the primary issue Lessing has with the nature and function of Scripture. The larger problem is categorical—that Christianity points to an historical event as the grounds of our eternal happiness. Kierkegaard has much to say on this point. Our concern in this dissertation must be restricted to the place and role of Scripture as the source of knowledge about the historical facts upon which our eternal happiness is based.

Lessing argues against the necessity of Scripture for Christian faith both before and after the formation of the canon. “The letter is not the spirit, and the Bible is not religion,” Lessing contends. “[O]bjections against the letter, or against the Bible, are not *ipso facto* objections against religion.”<sup>79</sup> Christian faith is supposedly insulated from all assaults on Scripture. Hannay captures the thrust of Lessing’s argument: “Even if everything said in the Bible were true, all claims made on behalf of Christianity could still be false. Conversely, even if what the Bible said were false, the latter claims might still be true.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Lessing, *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 18.

<sup>80</sup> Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, 234.



Lessing's division between Christian faith and Scripture is built upon his appropriation of Leibniz's distinction between accidental truths of fact and necessary truths of reason. Scripture, then, relates entirely to the former, factual or historical truths. The inward truth of religion, if it is to merit my absolute confidence as a secure foundation for eternal happiness, must be founded upon the necessary truths of reason. Lessing proposes a standard rationalist approach to dealing with Scripture as an historical document: "The written traditions must be interpreted by their inward truth."<sup>81</sup> He immediately adds that "no written traditions can give . . . religion any inward truth if it has none."<sup>82</sup> This is the familiar, rationalist kernel and husk analogy. But Lessing's final remark hints at something even more radical: perhaps Christian orthodoxy lacks any inward truth. If so then Scripture is hopeless to confer that upon it. Here Lessing points to a position more radical than Reimarus's, who ultimately proposed some universal and generic moral value to the teachings of Christ and the apostles recorded in Scripture. This, Reimarus suggests, confers some dignity upon a rational "Christian" religion which it otherwise lacks.

Johann Goeze found Lessing's counterpropositions more dangerous to Christian faith than the published fragments of Reimarus's *Apology*. He and other orthodox defenders replied to Lessing with objective, rational, and historical arguments grounded in miracles, fulfilled prophecy, and the like. But this only served to focus Lessing's attention on the crux of the problem as he saw and experienced it: that "*accidental truths of history can never become the*

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<sup>81</sup> Lessing, *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 18.

<sup>82</sup> Lessing, *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 18.

*proof of necessary truths of reason.*”<sup>83</sup> Since eternal happiness seems to require an absolute or unqualified certainty which contingent facts can never enjoy, it is impossible, Lessing argues, to move from the contingency of historical facts to certainty of eternal significance sufficient to secure confidence in eternal happiness: “That, then, is the ugly broad ditch which I cannot get across, however often and however earnestly I have tried to make the leap.”<sup>84</sup>

Kierkegaard believes Lessing made a valuable contribution to the discussion and is in some significant respects closer to the truth than are the would-be defenders of orthodoxy. This puts Kierkegaard in the ironic but perhaps necessary position of siding with Lessing over against the defenders of orthodoxy, not because he disagrees with the doctrinal content of orthodox Christian faith but because he is convinced the apologists’ attempt to defend that faith is profoundly misguided. Just as Goeze was convinced that Lessing’s counterpropositions represented a greater threat to faith than the published fragments of Reimarus’s *Apology*, so Kierkegaard is convinced that the apologists’ responses represent a still greater danger to Christian faith. If followed they would nullify faith through objectivity and leave confidence out to hang on the flimsy limb of rational and historical argumentation.

From Kierkegaard’s point of view Lessing had, with admirable wit, humor, and irony, focused his attention on exactly the right place—the true location of the scandal to reason that lies at the heart of biblical Christianity: that the basis of our eternal happiness has a highly particular, concrete, historical point of departure. For this Kierkegaard was grateful

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<sup>83</sup> Lessing, “On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power,” in *Lessing’s Theological Writings*, 53.

<sup>84</sup> Lessing, “On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power,” in *Lessing’s Theological Writings*, 54, 55.

and counted Lessing far more valuable than the “receding little station on the systematic world-historical railway” to which Climacus claimed the Idealists had relegated him.<sup>85</sup>

### ***2.6 Kierkegaard and the Idealists on Scripture***

We are not through with Lessing—have not even taken up Kierkegaard’s response to Lessing’s ditch. Before considering Kierkegaard’s response to this problem and its implications for the nature and function of Scripture it will be helpful to explore the alternative responses offered in Kantian moral idealism and Hegelian absolute idealism. Idealism, especially in its Hegelian form, is in many ways the primary target of Climacus’s comments in *Fragments* and *Postscript*, including his commentary on Lessing. Thus it is quite fitting for us to consider the Idealists in the context of our discussion of Lessing.

Kant’s moral idealism and Hegel’s absolute idealism envision a time when Christianity in its traditional religious and historical expression would be transcended. At that point, enlightened moderns would no longer be dependent upon the authority of any positive, historical, supposedly divine revelation. Whether this transcendence in time represented a step beyond or a fulfillment of Christianity depends upon one’s interpretation of Christianity. Either way, the necessity of Scripture was going to be a casualty in the process, its usefulness exhausted. Until then, however, Scripture has an important, perhaps even vital role to play in the world-historical process of enlightenment.

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<sup>85</sup> CUP, 67 (VII 51).

Both Kant and Hegel conclude that the past and to a large extent the present state of affairs had not yet realized this celebrated and much anticipated transcendence. They did believe the transcendent moment was being realized in their respective generations in the more enlightened cultures of the world (i.e. Europe), even through their own writings. Each defended the historical role of Scripture along similar though not identical lines and expressed gratitude for the contribution the Bible had made toward the present enlightening.

Where confidence in the sufficiency of reason is lacking, Kant maintains, the people “demand divine revelation, and hence also an historical certification of its authority.” This certification comes through an examination of “the evidence” available to historical scholarship. Kant outlines a program for evaluating the “historical credibility” of “the human reports” that constitute our only line of historical evidence: “Hence *Scriptural scholarship* will [ever] be required,” Kant argues, “to maintain in authority a church founded upon Holy Scripture.”<sup>86</sup> The same requirement does not apply to “a religion, which, to be universal, must always be founded upon reason alone.”<sup>87</sup> Kant has relatively modest expectations. Yet, “even though this scholarship settles no more than that there is nothing in the origin of Scripture to render impossible its acceptance as direct divine revelation,” it will be constantly required to maintain a church founded upon the Bible.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, tr. Theodore M Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 103 (emphasis and brackets original to the translation).

<sup>87</sup> Kant, *Religion*, 103.

<sup>88</sup> Kant, *Religion*, 103.

Seeking historical credibility through an examination of the evidence available to biblical scholars will not suffice. No amount of scholarship will provide a foundation firm enough to satisfy the demands of those infinitely interested in their eternal happiness. Though Lutheran and Reformed Protestants have long engaged in the kind of apologetic biblical scholarship Kant here envisions they tended to deny, often in very strong terms, that the church's faith and hope are dependent upon this scholarship or that the conviction that the Bible is God's word is grounded in it. Kierkegaard seems to believe that many Protestant apologists and Bible scholars forget this point and proceed to act as though faith does rest upon such scholarship; he clearly believes that some forms of apologetics and biblical scholarship are inherently misguided in just this way. For him, such scholarly activity represents a falling away from biblical Christianity and saving faith, not an establishing or guarding of it as Kant envisions.

Kant is not arguing that an absolute confidence in Scripture can be established in this way, either. He envisions people coming to Scripture already convinced that their faith depends upon the Bible. Kant's larger point is that this conviction represents a fundamental misunderstanding of true religion and saving faith. But it is precisely this prior conviction that people bring to the text that compels Scripture scholarship both in its apologetic and exegetical aspects. If this conviction is not the result of historical biblical scholarship, but rather its motivation, from where does it come and is it warranted?

Kant believes that if Scripture scholarship can successfully defeat those threats to the Bible that would "render impossible its acceptance as direct divine revelation" then "this would suffice to provide security for those who fancy that they find in this idea [of a divinely

revealed Scripture] special fortification of their moral faith, and who therefore gladly accept it.”<sup>89</sup> He continues: “no one can deny the *possibility* that a scripture which, in practical content, contains much that is godly, may . . . be regarded as a genuinely divine revelation.”<sup>90</sup> On this basis he proposes, as a matter of public policy, that “the most intelligent and most reasonable thing to do is from now on to use the book already at hand as the basis for ecclesiastical instruction and not to lessen its value through useless or mischievous attacks, yet meanwhile not forcing belief in it, as a requisite to salvation, upon any man.”<sup>91</sup>

Yet Kant believes Scripture is ultimately irrelevant to “true religion,” that is, “the pure religion of reason” or “pure religious faith, which bases itself wholly upon reason.”<sup>92</sup> The “special fortification” Bible adherents believe they derive from it is only a “fancy”—an exercise in self-deception, a perhaps useful fiction or mere placebo that may offer them some psychological help but do not need and ultimately are better off without. The only secure foundation for faith is in practical reason alone. Hence,

the sacred narrative . . . can have and, taken by itself, ought to have absolutely no influence upon the adoption of moral maxims, and since it is given to ecclesiastical faith only for the vivid presentation of its true object (virtue striving toward holiness), it follows that this narrative must at all times be taught and expounded in the interests of morality; and yet (because the common man especially has an enduring propensity within him to sink into passive belief) it must be inculcated painstakingly and repeatedly that true religion is to consist not in the knowing or considering of what God does or has done for our salvation but in what we must do to become worthy of it.

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<sup>89</sup> Kant, *Religion*, 122.

<sup>90</sup> Kant, *Religion*, 122-23 (emphasis original).

<sup>91</sup> Kant, *Religion*, 123.

<sup>92</sup> Kant, *Religion*, 123, 105, and 106, respectively.

This last can never be anything but what possesses in itself undoubted and *unconditional* worth, what therefore can alone make us well-pleasing to God, and of whose necessity every man can become wholly certain without any Scriptural learning whatever.<sup>93</sup>

Kant looks to practical reason for certainty on transcendent matters. He places no epistemic confidence in Scripture, though he freely admits that a supposed case of divine revelation cannot be absolutely denied so long as it agrees with the dictates of practical reason. John Hare notes that Kant “is limiting knowledge in order to make room for faith.”<sup>94</sup> But Kant’s faith is “rational belief” not merely in the sense that the content of faith is compatible with reason but in the robust sense that its content is both dictated and circumscribed by an all-sufficient, a-historical reason in its practical and critical modes. Such faith is not a personal *fiducia* in the other before the other’s word as we see in Abraham (Gen 15:6), but a confidence in the sufficiency and infallibility of right reason for right living and believing.

Kant places freedom, God, and the afterlife on the near side of Lessing’s ditch—as necessary postulates of practical reason—and denies that our eternal happiness can have an historical point of departure. He does not deny that an historical fact or narrative might serve as the occasion for introducing one to the true religion of reason. (Lessing was also ready to grant as much.) Indeed, “a revelation . . . might well be . . . very advantageous to the human race,” Kant reasons, “in that, when once the religion thus introduced is here, and has been made known publicly, everyone can henceforth by himself and with his own reason

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<sup>93</sup> Kant, *Religion*, 123.

<sup>94</sup> John E. Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God’s Assistance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 91. See also 39-48.

convince himself of its truth.”<sup>95</sup> The “revelation might subsequently be entirely forgotten without the slightest loss to that religion.”<sup>96</sup>

Although an historical fact may serve as just such an occasion, eternal significance falls entirely on the side of the necessary postulates of practical reason. These alone offer a sufficient basis for pure religious faith.

Historical faith (which is based upon revelation . . .) has only particular validity, to wit, for those who have had access to the historical record upon which this faith rests; and like all empirical knowledge it carries with it . . . the consciousness of its contingency . . . [O]nly pure religious faith, which bases itself wholly on reason, can be accepted as necessary and therefore as the only one which signalizes the *true* church.<sup>97</sup>

This, however, places Kant’s moral idealism squarely in the sights of Climacus’s critique in *Fragments*. The historical event, the person of the teacher, the positive religion and its cult, any reputed divine revelation including the Bible—all of these are, in Kant’s totalizing system, reduced to a mere occasion for learning what one already knows or at least has the ability to know he must believe on the basis of practical reason alone.

Kant’s “historical faith”—belief that takes its point of departure in a particular, historical, divine revelation—“must finally become mere faith in Scripture scholars and their insight,” he argues.<sup>98</sup> As such, historical faith (and ecclesiastical faith) must eventually be transcended by what he calls pure religious faith. Faith in Scripture scholars is simply not an

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<sup>95</sup> Kant, *Religion*, 105.

<sup>96</sup> Kant, *Religion*, 105.

<sup>97</sup> Kant, *Religion*, 105-6 (emphasis original).

<sup>98</sup> Kant, *Religion*, 103.



adequate basis for saving faith. So he seeks to displace historical faith with an a-historical pure religious faith grounded in the dictates of practical reason.

In sharp contrast to Kant, Kierkegaard insists upon an historical point of departure for saving faith. Yet he is aware of the inadequacy of a purely historical approach to faith and rejects any attempt to found faith on historical biblical scholarship. Like Kant, he is convinced that a purely historical approach reduces faith to something like confidence in Bible scholars. He is likewise convinced that historical biblical scholarship is an inadequate basis for faith; faith in historical biblical scholarship is not saving faith. Yet he insists it is possible for faith to have an historical point of departure and avoid the trap of being reduced to faith in historical scholarship.

Kant subjects Scripture to an historical-critical approach designed to discern the rational, which alone is the object of pure religious faith, from the merely historical:

not only the *authentication* of Holy Scripture, but its *interpretation* as well, stands in need of scholarship, and for the same reason. For how are the unlearned, who can read it only in translation, to be certain of its meaning? Hence the expositor, in addition to being familiar with the original tongue, must also be a master of extended historical knowledge and criticism in order that from the conditions, customs, and opinions (the popular faith) of the times in question he may be able to derive the means wherewith to enlighten the understanding of the ecclesiastical commonwealth.<sup>99</sup>

Again, "Rational religion and Scriptural learning are thus the properly qualified interpreters and trustees of a sacred document."<sup>100</sup> This is very near the position advocated by Hegel.

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<sup>99</sup> Kant, *Religion*, 103 (emphasis original).

<sup>100</sup> Kant, *Religion*, 106.

Kierkegaard refuses to allow reason (speculative, practical, critical, or otherwise) the highest court of appeal and denies that a religion of reason transcends Christianity as revealed in Scripture. He confines reason to its properly limited domain (*usus organicus*) consistent with the Lutheran orthodox *usus rationis ministerialis* or *instrumentalis* and denies anything approaching a *usus rationis magisterialis* when it comes to matters of essential truth. Although Kant begins his project by seeking the bounds of reason he ends by leaving reason enthroned as the ultimate judge of all things, including the content and warrant of faith. *Philosophical Fragments* can be profitably read as a creative yet orthodox critique of the *usus rationis magisterialis*. This perspective enables us to see the heart of Kierkegaard's critique of idealism, moral or absolute. It also accounts for the increasing realization of the necessity of transcendent revelation achieved through the work.

Kant sought to describe the limits of knowledge to create space in his totalizing system for a rational faith founded upon practical reason. What he ends up with is a kind of "religiousness A," something that has a form of godliness but exists entirely on the near bank of Lessing's ditch and is scandalized by the historical particularity of the Incarnate central to orthodox Christianity and the biblical message. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, sought to describe the limits of *reason* to highlight the nature of faith that is open to the knowledge of God as transcendentally revealed and given to us in Jesus Christ the God-man. In Kant's moral idealism Scripture becomes a mere candidate for divine revelation that can neither be denied nor fully admitted, but must rather be radically subjected to the dictates of practical reason and historical-critical scholarship. For Kierkegaard, however, Scripture is a

divinely-authored, supra-rational (though not irrational) revelation of the absolute paradox in all its historical particularity to which we must fully submit and be conformed.

Despite significant differences between Kant and Kierkegaard on Scripture, Evans argues that “Kierkegaard’s own view turns out to be quite similar to Kant’s” on at least one point, “though it is not clear whether Kierkegaard is aware of this.”<sup>101</sup> This similarity stands out against the claim of Hegel and some Hegelians regarding the possibility of achieving absolute knowledge. Far from taking offense at the scandal of historical particularity, Hegelians boldly declare that the historical can be conceived of as necessary:

the claim, made by Hegel and employed by some religious Hegelians in the defense of Christianity, [is] that historical events can be understood as necessary. If historical assertions could be converted philosophically to necessary truths, then Christianity could retain its historical foundations while at the same time gaining a kind of invulnerability to the ravages of historical-critical scholarship.<sup>102</sup>

Evans notes that “Hegel sees himself as vindicating ‘absolute knowledge’ against the Kantian ‘idealism’ that limits human knowledge to appearances.” From Hegel’s standpoint, Kant seems like a skeptic.

Kant’s denial of the possibility of knowing being or things in themselves restricts all knowledge to the phenomenal. Under this restriction human knowledge of the world, though true knowledge of the appearance of things, can never be known to be more than a mere approximation of reality. Hegel believes it is possible, via his dialectical method, to

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<sup>101</sup> C. Stephen Evans, “Realism and Antirealism in Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*,” in *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 37.

<sup>102</sup> C. Stephen Evans, “Does Kierkegaard Think Beliefs Can Be Directly Willed?” in *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 301.

secure the vantage point of pure thought. Kierkegaard, however, is much nearer to Kant's more skeptical position than Hegel's audacious claim to absolute knowledge.

Kant does not doubt that there is an objective reality to be known. He is skeptical of our ability to know it as it really is, independent of our thinking about it or interpretation of it as it appears to us. Knowledge, being restricted to things that appear to us, is possible and has an objective character, though it does not extend to things which do not appear to us such as human freedom, God, and the immortality of the soul. These three things cannot be known even though practical reason demands we believe in their reality and these beliefs can enjoy a kind of subjective certainty.

Kant seems like a skeptic to Hegel because he denies the possibility of "absolute knowledge." Yet in Hegel,

Kantian skepticism is not merely confronted with a dogmatic denial. Rather, the standpoint of absolute knowledge is supposed to emerge from the process of reflection that has itself generated Kantian skepticism. The skeptical standpoint is in some way supposed to overcome itself. Though there is an obvious Cartesian flavor to this idea (we discover absolute certainty by an attempt at universal doubt), at the heart of it lies the Hegelian conviction that skepticism, like every other one-sided philosophical doctrine, contains the seeds of its own destruction, but that this is a destruction which does not merely negate but also constructively preserves what is right about skepticism.<sup>103</sup>

Hegel's absolute idealism overcomes Kantian skepticism through the identity of thought and being realized through his dialectical method. When thought is identical with being, then

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<sup>103</sup> Evans, "Realism and Antirealism," 37.

absolute knowledge is obtained. Kierkegaard, however, is convinced that Hegel's quest for (and claim to) absolute knowledge is exceedingly dangerous nonsense.

For Kierkegaard, "thinking necessarily fails to grasp being in its concrete actuality."<sup>104</sup> Thinking of or about the other, by its very nature, trades in concepts which are possibilities—possible ways of being. As such, when thinking of some concrete entity other than oneself, we work with universalized abstractions at the level of approximations. Thought and being are never identical and thought, except perhaps in self-consciousness, does not grasp concrete actuality itself.<sup>105</sup> An exceedingly stubborn uncertainty and epistemic risk plagues all objective knowing:

ideally speaking thought and being are identical, but only in the sense that being as thought is equivalent to thought. The union of thought and being . . . in fact is a sign that thinking has totally abandoned any attempt to make contact with actuality and is content with the world of possibility.<sup>106</sup>

As Evans points out, this critique seems to place Kierkegaard on the side of Kantian skepticism. But Kierkegaard maintains, over against Kantian skepticism, that there is a certainty enjoyed by saving faith. This goes further than Kant's claim that we must believe certain things we cannot know. Kierkegaard's certainty of faith, although similar in certain respects to the "moral certainty" of Kant's rational belief, is not grounded in the demands of practical reason but in the fact of transcendent revelation. The subject who has such faith, it

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<sup>104</sup> See Evans, "Realism and Antirealism," 38.

<sup>105</sup> Evans maintains that Kierkegaard's answer to Kantian skepticism is the "noumenal quality of the thinker's own existence" that allows the existing individual to know his or herself "as actuality without transforming that actuality into possibility." See "Realism and Antirealism," 38.

<sup>106</sup> Evans, "Realism and Antirealism," 38.

seems, would “be able to boast that he knows that there is a God.”<sup>107</sup> More than this, he would be able to boast that he knows God. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard is much closer to Kant on this issue than he is to Hegel.

Hegel claims his totalizing system is a philosophical exposition of Christianity. In his system the religious is converted into the philosophical, representing the fulfillment of Christianity. This is a view which can only be maintained at the expense of traditional Christianity’s faith and proclamation. Hegel realizes this and is willing to pay the price.<sup>108</sup> He proceeds to convert the particularity of historical events foundational to Christianity and known religiously (as *Vorstellung*) into philosophical concepts (*Begriff*) that express world-historical necessities. These necessities represent great moments of awakening self-consciousness in the grand world-historical process. The incarnation represents one of the greatest such moments—an absolutely necessary moment—and the New Testament, which interprets this moment in religious terms, has played a vital role in the drama.

So long as Christianity remains religious (and what else can it be?), its form remains that of mere consciousness even if its content is that of self-consciousness. Rather than own it for themselves, Christians objectify the great awakening of self-consciousness achieved in the Incarnate as the self-consciousness of another. So long as Christians remain in this

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<sup>107</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Normann Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965), 650.

<sup>108</sup> Merold Westphal notes that Hegel does not claim to be “a Christian theologian . . . who sought to give a conceptual exposition of the very faith taught in the scriptures and proclaimed by the church.” He “is most explicit [in his *Phenomenology*] in underscoring the difference between the truth of Christianity as *Begriff* [concept] and the way it was originally understood.” *History and Truth in Hegel’s Phenomenology*, 3<sup>d</sup> ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 204-5.

religious mode they remain imperfect, failing to embrace the form of self-consciousness consistent with the content or object of their faith. Christianity, then, must be transcended through its philosophical conversion in which the religious knowing of *Vorstellung* is translated into the philosophical knowing of *Begriff*.

What is true of Christianity as the consummate religion is true of its scriptures. The Bible's content, in which Jesus becomes conscious of himself as the God-man, represents the acme of religious development and greatest contribution religion can make to the world-historical process. It is entirely fitting, then, that for some—that is, for Christians—the “spirit gives witness to” the “doctrines of the Christian religion” as the Bible is read:

this can happen in an entirely immediate fashion, with one's innermost being, one's spirit, one's thought, one's reason, being touched by them and assenting to them. Thus the Bible is for Christians the basis, the fundamental basis, which has this effect on them, which strikes a chord within them, and gives firmness to their convictions.<sup>109</sup>

This is a welcome recognition of the status of Scripture for Christian faith. But there is a fundamental problem with both the form and the traditional Christian use of Scripture that has marred its interpretation and application in every age till Hegel. This problem involves a basic misunderstanding of the nature of Scripture as revelation. In the Bible the revealed content is “given in a positive fashion.”<sup>110</sup> As such the self-consciousness achieved in Christianity and revealed in Scripture is projected away from the reader's self and objectified in another—namely Jesus of Nazareth. Christianity takes its starting point in the incarnation

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<sup>109</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: The Lectures of 1827*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 399.

<sup>110</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 399.

understood “as an event, a *contingent* happening [i.e. as *Vorstellung*], while *Begriff* means viewing it as the expression of a *necessity*.”<sup>111</sup> So long as believers remain Christian in their thinking they remain caught up in the inferior and even sub-biblical way of thinking of *Vorstellung* that must be transcended by the way of thinking of *Begriff*:

This way of thinking [i.e. *Vorstellung*] is not adequate to the divine content; the latter is ruined by it. . . . [What is pertinent here] can only be forms that are genuine and logically developed in terms of necessity. But the investigation of these forms of thought falls to philosophy alone. . . . Only the *concept* [*Begriff*] on its own account liberates itself truly and thoroughly from the positive.<sup>112</sup>

The incarnation can only be properly exegeted when interpreted philosophically, in terms of necessity, according to *Begriff*. Hegelian philosophers are the properly equipped interpreters of the content of Scripture for only they, through the Hegelian philosophical exegetical approach, are able to transcend Scripture’s formal positivity—the letter that kills—because only they are rightly related to the content of the revelation—the spirit that gives life.<sup>113</sup>

The Christian concept of the nature and function of the Bible must be transcended; the Christian reader needs to be perfected through a philosophical conversion.

The incarnation means that God is present as observable human self-consciousness. But seen in the form of *Vorstellung* this refers uniquely to the historical individual known as Jesus of Nazareth. To see the unity of the human and divine as a necessity, and thus in the form of *Begriff*, is to see the human self-consciousness in which God is present and united with man as the universal self-consciousness of the congregation which, in principle at least, incorporates all of humanity. . . . The Christian congregation can

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<sup>111</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 402 (first set of brackets original to translation).

<sup>112</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 402-3.

<sup>113</sup> Cf. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 93-94, 402.



become the bearer of this new mode of experience . . . and of the Absolute Knowledge it makes possible only by radically transcending itself and ceasing to be what it has historically been. It must become a philosophical community instead of a religious community in the strictest sense.<sup>114</sup>

This does not mean that all people in this philosophical community must become professional philosophers anymore than all Christians must become professional theologians. But it does mean that “the collective self-consciousness of the community attains philosophic form, throws off the elements of unconsciousness involved in the structures of projection,” including the positivity of the Bible, “and recognizes itself to be the truth of prior projections.”<sup>115</sup> It also means that the Bible must be read philosophically as opposed to Christianly—that only a philosophical exegesis penetrates the religious form and grasps the true meaning of the content of Scripture. This is the backdrop against which Kierkegaard insists on just the opposite position: that the only way to grasp the true meaning of Scripture—the divine message to us—is to read it Christianly. To read it philosophically, scientifically, or in any other way than Christianly, Kierkegaard insists, is to fail to read the Bible as the word of God, whatever else one may be doing in the name of exegesis.

Hegel’s approach to Scripture is the driving force behind D. F. Strauss’s *Life of Jesus*. By his own admission, Hegel’s distinction between *Vorstellung* and *Begriff* was formative in his thinking. His *Life of Jesus* is an attempt to fully apply Hegel’s methodology and distinctions to biblical exegesis. Concluding that the positive, historical element belongs to the form rather than the content of Scripture, Strauss immersed the Bible in the acid bath of historical

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<sup>114</sup> Westphal, *History and Truth in Hegel’s Phenomenology*, 204, 205-6.

<sup>115</sup> Westphal, *History and Truth in Hegel’s Phenomenology*, 206.

criticism in order to recover the Hegelian idea at its core. From the perspective of precritical exegesis the results are truly wild. Strauss concludes that the historical narratives of the Gospels are mere mythical “ornamentation” decorating an objectification of the consciousness of the church. “Humanity is the union of the two natures.”<sup>116</sup> Christians project this consciousness onto Jesus of Nazareth.

Strauss’s application of Hegel’s principles and distinctions is one possibility for a Hegelian style of biblical exegesis. There are others. The differences between those developed in Kierkegaard’s day revolve around the historicity and significance of the incarnation in each system. Strauss seems to believe that the incarnation was a mere projection of humanity’s consciousness of being divine. Feuerbach is even more radical, contending that the incarnation was a projection of idealized humanity, cropping God out of the idealist picture. But “for Hegel the historical character of the Bible belonged essentially to the content of truth.”<sup>117</sup> The incarnation is not an accident of history but a world-historical necessity. Jesus was a man in whom the self-consciousness of being divine actually existed; he is not merely a blank canvas upon which people project their own consciousness. As for Scripture, the positivity of the form of biblical revelation and of Christianity in general, though something to be philosophically transcended, fulfilled a vital role in the world-historical process. It becomes the way to absolute knowledge in which spirit’s self-consciousness becomes the object of its own consciousness. This, Hegel insists, is the

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<sup>116</sup> David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, tr. Leander E. Keck (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 780.

<sup>117</sup> Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, 96.

fulfillment of Christianity that, due to its content, compels its adherents out of the structure of projection onward to perfected self-consciousness.

In his own estimation Hegel has provided Christianity with a strong philosophical defense and justification while capturing the true meaning of the essence of the faith revealed in Scripture. Ironically, he has in fact relegated Christianity to a “wholly . . . historical phenomenon like feudalism.”<sup>118</sup> Westphal sounds Kierkegaard’s trumpet when he insists that since Christianity “has always claimed to be more than that its fulfillment could only be in the confirmation and not in the falsification of that claim”<sup>119</sup>—the claim that it is itself ultimate and as such impossible to transcend. Kierkegaard will ardently defend this position. Left-wing Hegelians like Strauss and Feuerbach, however, seized upon the relegation of Christianity to an historical phenomenon in their attempts to push it completely off the world-historical stage. By relegating Christianity to a “wholly . . . historical phenomenon,” Hegel invites a yet more radical and philosophically sophisticated historical criticism than rationalism or Kantian skepticism had practiced—the very thing he seems to have wanted to secure Christianity against.

According to Kierkegaard, Hegel’s attempt to overcome Kantian skepticism and transcend epistemic risk utterly fails and plunges his followers into paganism:

The reader of the fragment of philosophy in *Fragments* will recollect that the pamphlet . . . took its point of departure in paganism in order by imaginatively constructing to discover an understanding of existence that truly goes beyond paganism. Modern speculative thought seems almost to

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<sup>118</sup> Westphal, *History and Truth in Hegel’s Phenomenology*, 207.

<sup>119</sup> Westphal, *History and Truth in Hegel’s Phenomenology*, 207.

have performed the feat of going *beyond* Christianity on *the other side* or of having gone so far in understanding Christianity that it has returned almost to paganism. That someone prefers paganism to Christianity is not at all confusing, but to make paganism out to be the highest within Christianity is an injustice both to Christianity, which becomes something different from what it is, and to paganism, which becomes nothing whatever, although it was indeed something.<sup>120</sup>

Instead of explaining Christianity as presented in Scripture, in Enlightenment thought in general and idealism in particular “one hits upon something oneself and explains it as Christianity.”<sup>121</sup> What Christianity is, as revealed in the New Testament, is “of no concern to speculative thought, which . . . only wants to have its benefit from Christianity.”<sup>122</sup> Indeed, it wants to include Christianity only to make “a really good show” of going beyond it.<sup>123</sup> The tragic result, however, is that “speculative thought makes paganism the outcome of Christianity [and] changes Christendom into a baptized paganism.” Christianity, however, is to paganism “the most decisive heterogeneity possible.”<sup>124</sup>

### ***2.7 Back to Kierkegaard's Response to Lessing***

From Kierkegaard's viewpoint, Kant, Hegel, Strauss, and the others stand in the line of “modern philosophy” which “begins with doubt.”<sup>125</sup> To begin with doubt is to adopt a

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<sup>120</sup> CUP, 361 (VII 312-313).

<sup>121</sup> CUP, 370 (VII 320).

<sup>122</sup> CUP, 370 (VII 320).

<sup>123</sup> CUP, 370 (VII 320).

<sup>124</sup> CUP, 368 (VII 319).

<sup>125</sup> See *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est*, appended to PF, 113-72 (IV.B.1 103-50).

stance of willful unbelief. This is the trail blazed by Descartes' attempt at universal doubt as a method for discovering something certain in order to overcome skepticism. Over against methodological doubt Kierkegaard prescribes faith. Faith in a generic sense is required for knowledge of the external reality in the face of objective uncertainty. Faith in the explicitly Christian sense is required to know God. This faith is not just the adoption of a believing attitude before the world but involves an entrusting of one's self and one's eternal happiness to God on the basis of his transcendent revelation in Christ and in his word, including his written word, the Bible.

Kierkegaard does not dispute that our eternal happiness requires an absolute or unqualified certainty. Contra Hegel, however, he insists that historical knowledge can never attain such objective certainty. This would seem to leave us at an impasse—and this is true so long as the only kind of certainty we allow is an objective certainty. In this regard Kierkegaard is a rather radical skeptic, at least on the matter of what can be known of the external world via an objective approach in search of epistemic certainty. The ideal of certain objective knowledge of the external world reached from a starting point free from epistemic risk is a mirage. This, it seems, calls into question the entire epistemic front of the Enlightenment. Lessing's broad ugly ditch turns out to be an abyss.

“But note, the issue is not, after all, a logical issue—indeed, what does logical thinking have in common with the most pathos-filled issue of all (the question of eternal happiness)?”<sup>126</sup> Skepticism is not the final answer because knowledge is not restricted to that

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<sup>126</sup> CUP, 362 (VII 313).

which enjoys objective certainty. Objectivity is unable to answer pathos-filled, “existence-issue” questions. His comment on idealism applies broadly to all “pagan” thought: “first [one must] separate speculation and the speculative philosopher, and then, just as with enchantment, witchcraft, and demon possession, to use a powerful incantation in order to get the bewitched speculative thinker transformed or changed into his actual form, into an individual *existing* human being.”<sup>127</sup> The only hope for modern philosophers is intervention.

But what is not possible via objectivity is possible through the passionate subjectivity of faith. This is true even for non-religious objects of knowledge:

Kierkegaard’s view is not that human knowers can never make contact with an external world, but that all such contact involves *faith* or *belief*. . . . The idea is not that people are imprisoned within their own consciousness but that knowledge of the external world is never objectively certain. All such knowledge involves a risk, the possibility of error, and such a possibility must be annulled by the decision not to take the skeptical attitude.<sup>128</sup>

Kierkegaard prescribes faith for doubt and subjective passion in the face of objective uncertainty. How much more is faith required in order to know that which is entirely beyond the reach of objectivity—what can only be known via transcendent revelation? The certainty eternal happiness demands does not precede faith as its secure, foundation but is enjoyed through faith the condition for which is given by God.

Lessing is correct when he claims that the epistemic requirement Christianity demands is a “leap” across a wide and repugnant ditch. It is right here, on the near bank of this ditch, that the human knower is confronted with the limits of reason and need for faith

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<sup>127</sup> CUP, 362 (VII 313) (emphasis original).

<sup>128</sup> Evans, “Realism and Antirealism,” in *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self*, 39.

(to overcome the offensiveness of its repugnancy) and transcendent revelation (to span the qualitative expanse of its breadth and depth). But Kierkegaard believes that,

There are two glaring mistakes in Lessing's account. First, [Lessing fails to grasp that] the 'leap' is a decision ('the category of decision'), which means you either do it or you don't do it. There can be nothing called trying or failing to do it. . . . Second, if there can be no trying to leap, then there can be no 'earnest' in doing so either.<sup>129</sup>

The leap involves a certain decisive attitude one adopts before objective reality in its concrete, historical particularity. This includes the truth-claims of Christian Scripture that the Son of God became a man, was thereby revealed to and believed on in the world, crucified, rose again bodily, and ascended into heaven where he now reigns.

The secondary literature devotes significant attention to the epistemic dimensions of both Lessing's ditch and the leap it takes to traverse it—and rightfully so. Though sometimes neglected in contemporary discussions, the set of problems raised by Lessing's ditch arise and are supposedly problematic for Christianity due to the basic status of Scripture for Christian faith. There are other ways an historical fact can claim significance for one's eternal happiness and thus raise this set of problems. But in Christianity the problem of Lessing's ditch arises over the role of Scripture as testimony to the Christ event, an historical point of departure for our eternal happiness. This is clearly grasped in the primary literature, beginning with Lessing himself.

Driven to epistemology, would-be apologists in large part search for an alternate foundation for Christian faith—one that ultimately displaces the Bible's basic status.

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<sup>129</sup> Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, 293.

Whether the would-be apologists recognize what they are doing, Kierkegaard is convinced that they compromise the precritical Protestant Scripture principle. Some would-be apologists, for example, sought to defend the basic status of the Bible for Christian faith and practice on the purely objective grounds of its historical reliability.<sup>130</sup> Kierkegaard rejects this approach in part because an objective approximation cannot support the full weight of Christian faith and hope. In such apologies the Bible is no longer basic for faith; the arguments used to prop up the historical reliability or trustworthiness of it are. Others, he believed, tried to maintain some sort of role for the Bible while consciously rejecting it as a basic source and norm for Christian faith.<sup>131</sup> For these, as for the first, the Bible is argued to, not from, and its privileged status is only established through a variety of arguments. The

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<sup>130</sup> The version of “the Bible theory” in which the “theology scholar” attempts to successfully demonstrate “that everything is . . . in order with regard to the Holy Scriptures” falls into this category, CUP, 28-29 (VII 17-18). Climacus speaks of “learned theologians” who continue to “defend” the Bible “linguistically and critically” even though many others have “abandoned [it] as a secure stronghold” for faith, CUP, 35 (VII 24). In one sense the rationalist theologian Henrik Nicolai Clausen (1793-1877) belongs to this category. Clausen stressed the Protestant “principle of Scripture” while advocating historical-critical exegesis. Lessing’s opponent, Johann Goeze (1731-1793), belongs to this category, too. A better representative of the type, however, would be the “neopietist” Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg (1802-1869). Hengstenberg, a contemporary of Kierkegaard, was “professor of exegesis” at Berlin from 1828-1869. Though it is not clear that Kierkegaard paid much attention to Hengstenberg while in Berlin, Hengstenberg represents precisely the kind of person Kierkegaard seems to have in view in his criticisms of orthodox defenders of Scripture on objective grounds. A learned theologian and pietist defender of Lutheran orthodoxy, Hengstenberg is perhaps best known for his defense of the Bible “linguistically and critically.” Hengstenberg employed philosophical studies and historical-critical methods to defend the historicity of the Bible from the rationalist application of historical-critical exegesis. See Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, 123-27.

<sup>131</sup> Climacus sarcastically notes that “the Church theory,” just such a rejection to Scripture, is “a Danish idea.” N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783-1872) offered this proposal as his own “matchless idea” and Jacob Christian Lindberg (1797-1852) championed it. Kierkegaard dismisses it as a retreat, within Protestantism, to the church as a “secure stronghold” for faith similar to the Roman Catholic position. Kierkegaard also suggests that the idea is anything but “matchless,” claiming a similar proposal was offered in Germany by Johann Friedrich Ferdinand Delbrück (1772-1848), with whom Grundtvig was well acquainted having worked on the Danish translation of one of his books. The abandonment of the Bible under the Church theory, it should be noted, is only with respect to its priority as the source and norm of Christian faith. Grundtvig and Lindberg did not abandon the Bible completely they just demoted it, as it were.



object of these arguments may or may not include the historicity of the narratives or trustworthiness of its testimony, and often involves a reinterpretation of its message along the lines of the kernel and husk analogy. Yet others simply abandoned the Bible altogether.<sup>132</sup> Kierkegaard rejects each of these options and in so doing links himself with the precritical tradition in Lutheran orthodoxy that embraces the Bible as the properly basic source and norm for Christian faith.

As Kierkegaard explains in the *Postscript*, he avoids Christian terminology in the *Fragments* for a variety of reasons, including his desire to distance himself from and clarify Christianity's sharp contrast with speculative philosophy, which had co-opted Christian language for its own purposes. It is not surprising, then, that his discussion of Scripture in the *Fragments* is treated under phrases like "eye-witness reports" and topics like "the follower at second hand." This thin linguistic veil, however, may help explain why many commentators overlook the place of Scripture in Climacus's imaginative construct.<sup>133</sup> This oversight is especially unfortunate given that Kierkegaard opens the *Postscript* with a discussion of Scripture and its abuses, refers to Scripture as the source and norm of Christian beliefs and practices, and argues from Scripture's supreme authority in the conclusion.<sup>134</sup> To summarize Climacus's position, which is Kierkegaard's own as evidenced in "What Is Required" and elsewhere, the Bible functions as a vital instrument in the

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<sup>132</sup> In "What Is Required" Kierkegaard suggests that there is a kind of utter abandonment of the Bible on the practical level in the general population: "the majority regards God's Word as an obsolete ancient book one puts aside," he notes, FSE, 33 (XII 322).

<sup>133</sup> CUP, 361 (VII 312)

<sup>134</sup> See, for example, CUP, 23-37 (VII 12-26), 369-70 (VII 319-20), and 603-5 (VII 525-27).

existence-communication of the divine teacher to those becoming disciples at second hand, used to bring the believing reader into a right relationship with God, self, and others.

To approach the Bible as something merely objective is to abuse it. Certainly the Bible provides readers with a sufficient objective description of what Christianity is. Objective knowledge is necessary for faith and Scripture is the source and norm of the content of Christian faith. But to read the Bible as merely the communication of objective knowledge is to miss the point. The Bible is intended to subjectively communicate Christian existence to the reader who must receive this existence-communication by faith or else take offense and turn away in unbelief. For those who can only believe “at second hand,” Scripture ordinarily fills the role that the Incarnate served for the eyewitness disciples.

This brings us to the willfulness of unbelief *coram Deo* and the application of this willful unbelief to exegetical methods and practices *coram Scriptura*. The exegetical implications of faith and unbelief *coram Scriptura* will be a central concern in chapters four and five. In the following chapter we will consider what Kierkegaard means when he claims that the Bible is God’s word and how he envisions it functioning as such. One major proposal has been set on the table by Timothy H. Polk. We will consider Polk’s important proposal at some length as we seek to clarify Kierkegaard’s own position.

## CHAPTER 3

### SCRIPTURE AS GOD'S WORD: A HUMAN CONSTRUAL?

#### *3.1 Introduction*

I have argued that Kierkegaard's view of Scripture is in many ways more closely related to precritical Protestant conceptions of its nature and function than Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment, historical-critical conceptions current in his day. Kierkegaard counts the Bible as the divinely authoritative word of God, the basic source and norm of Christian doctrine and life for second-hand disciples. His emphasis on subjectivity might initially seem to add a new twist to an otherwise precritical Protestant inheritance. But this is not a radical departure from precritical orthodoxy despite his rhetoric against "orthodox" apologists and his sometimes severe criticism of objectifying abuses of Christian Scripture and dogma. Calvin, for example, begins the *Institutes* with a reflection on the essential, intimate relation of the knowledge of God with self-knowledge and piety.<sup>1</sup> And Kierkegaard praises Luther in this vein, that his personal appropriation of the Bible's teachings is a model of exactly the kind of thing he has in view in his emphasis on subjectivity.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I.ii.1-2; I.v.9-10; I.vi.2.

<sup>2</sup> CUP, 366 (VII 317).

That Kierkegaard views the Bible as God's word is not in doubt. But exactly what this means for him is the question of this chapter. There are many ways to construe the claim that Scripture is the word of God. That this claim can mean different things to different people is not a recent insight or development. This was as true of the precritical tradition as it is the critical era. Here, Kierkegaard carves out a distinct and relatively radical position in the post-Enlightenment milieu—a startlingly conservative Protestant position from which he “attacked” the “paradigm of historical-critical objectivity.”<sup>3</sup>

Timothy H. Polk, author of the most substantial work on Kierkegaard's exegetical method and practice to date, finds Kierkegaard's position compares interestingly with both the precritical exegetical tradition and recent developments at the intersection of philosophy, theology, and biblical exegesis. In general, I am strongly sympathetic to Polk's attempt to bring Kierkegaard's approach to Scripture into conversation with the broadly Augustinian, precritical tradition of reading Scripture by the *regula fidei*. I believe there is much in Kierkegaard to commend expositions of his thought along these lines.

But Polk gets Kierkegaard's “vision of scripture” wrong. He interprets Kierkegaard as proposing a model for Bible reading that is the kind of approach Kierkegaard rejects. Contra Polk, Kierkegaard is not trying to find a mediating pathway between suspicion and naïveté while avoiding the unmitigated force of divine authority that attends God's word. It is true, as Polk observes, that Kierkegaard does not line up with either theological liberals or biblical fundamentalists, but this is because his own position is self-consciously more radical than either. Kierkegaard opposes any mediating, mitigating, or compromising form of

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<sup>3</sup> Polk, *The Biblical Kierkegaard: Reading by the Rule of Faith* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 4.

“Christianity,” whether designed to accommodate the bourgeois sensibilities of mid-nineteenth century Danish or contemporary American society and academy.

Likewise, Polk’s interpretation of Kierkegaard as an anticipator of post-liberal, anti-foundationalist approaches to Scripture is problematic. Reading Kierkegaard as an anticipator of any subsequent figure, movement, or school of thought, whether that be existentialism, neo-orthodoxy, postmodernism, post-liberalism, or whatever else, is unhelpful.<sup>4</sup> Such approaches have been and remain a particularly prominent problem in Kierkegaardian studies. On the other hand, this does not mean that Kierkegaard’s thought has not proven influential or inspiring to subsequent thinkers; neither does it deny that there are interesting points of comparison to be explored between Kierkegaard and later figures.

This chapter and the next are devoted to Kierkegaard’s view of the nature and function of the Bible *as God’s word*. We will clarify his concept of the Bible as God’s word by contrasting it with Polk’s post-liberal interpretation presented in *The Biblical Kierkegaard*. This book represents the most significant work to date on Kierkegaard’s approach to biblical exegesis. His read of Kierkegaard, a valiant effort to relate Kierkegaard to some of the most noteworthy developments in recent theological and exegetical discussions on the American scene, includes many insightful points. But it is also deeply flawed.

### ***3.2 Naïveté of Objectivity***

Polk’s interpretation misses the central thrust of Kierkegaard’s position: that the Bible *is* God’s word such that to read it is to be addressed by God and confronted with oneself *coram Deo*. Those familiar with Polk’s work might be surprised by this critique since

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<sup>4</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 4.

his stated aim is to show how Kierkegaard can help enlightened contemporaries “read the Bible as scripture.” But for Polk “the Bible” is not identical with “scripture:” the former refers to the text and the latter to an imaginative religious construct that esteems this text (or something it contains or conveys) as special, typically in terms of authority or efficacy. As we shall see, Polk is adamant that the Bible does not count as God’s word “in virtue of any inherent property [it] may have, such as being inerrant or inspired.”<sup>5</sup> The Bible must first be imaginatively construed as such by the reader before it can count as Scripture.

The assumed non-identity of the Bible and Scripture is in sharp contrast to Kierkegaard who clearly believes that the Bible is God’s word because it has God as its author. True, inspiration is a conviction of faith that cannot be objectively proved or disproved. But such faith does not constitute the Bible as Scripture but simply recognizes it as such and confesses it to be so. Kierkegaard is an objective realist when it comes to the status of the Bible as the God’s word and believes that it functions as such for both the believer and the unbeliever, whether the unbeliever acknowledges it as such or not. This difference between Polk and Kierkegaard may seem subtle, but it is of enormous magnitude. Although Polk wants to ascribe canonical authority to the text such that it counts as Scripture, he insists that the Bible counts as Scripture only for those readers who imaginatively construe it as such. The non-identity of the Bible with God’s word is presupposed throughout Polk’s project, and is evident in various ways. We will return to and expand upon this initial observation throughout the chapter.

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<sup>5</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 75. Polk is quoting David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 47.

Polk commends Kierkegaard’s “vision of scripture as an aptly Christian alternative to those scripture-killing styles of misreading that . . . technically would be called the hermeneutics of either suspicion or naïveté.”<sup>6</sup> But the “vision of scripture” Polk ascribes to Kierkegaard is a view Kierkegaard passionately urges his readers to reject. Kierkegaard, it turns out, holds a concept of the Bible as inherently God’s word that Polk dismisses as a “scripture-killing style of misreading” along the lines of “the hermeneutics of . . . naïveté.”

Polk unpacks the “hermeneutics of . . . naïveté” in these terms:

[W]e have so many ways of trying to make scripture a dead letter. One way is by ossifying it into the proverbial “tablets of stone.” That is, we forget scripture’s character as a historical witness and absolutize it into an idol. . . . We shrink from the burden of discernment that the gospel itself lays upon us as the good news of a living Lord/Word, whose sovereign summons calls us beyond the cultural prejudices and limited horizons of the biblical writers themselves, privileged prophetic and apostolic witnesses though they be. Scripture’s authority does not simply extend—and must not naively be extended—to all the historically conditioned customs, values, and habits of mind of its writers.<sup>7</sup>

There is little doubt that “we have many ways of trying to make scripture a dead letter” and “ossifying it,” as it were. This observation is in line with the central thrust of Kierkegaard’s critique of critical-era exegetical methods and practices. Kierkegaard believes that some would-be defenders of Lutheran orthodoxy are guilty of this error. But Kierkegaard’s diagnosis of the causes of these problems is radically different from Polk’s.

It is not clear how to “forget scripture’s character as a historical witness” or extend its “authority . . . to all the historically conditioned customs, values, and habits of mind of its writers” amounts to idolatry. This charge seems to presuppose that God is not the author

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<sup>6</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, viii.

and that the human authors are not authorized by him to write “scripture.” Granted, textual authority is often complex and can be quite subtle. And there is no reason to dispute that there are ways to transform a discourse into an idol. But acknowledging that an author’s authority extends to the whole of his or her discourse does not seem to be one of them. Even if the discourse were originally written by a person without authority there would seem to be no error in ascribing to that discourse the authority of another who later claims it as his or her own. Such an error in ascribing authority to a text arises in one of two ways: either by attributing a discourse to one who does not claim it or by ascribing more authority to the discourse than the author possesses. Polk apparently believes that at some level the hermeneutics of naïveté of the “orthodox” is guilty of both errors. First, by ascribing, in a simple and straightforward manner, divine authority to the text just as it stands and has been received, forgetting it is a merely human product “with all the marks of historical contingency all about it.”<sup>8</sup> Second, by attributing to these human authors greater authority than they could rightfully claim, given that they are merely “privileged . . . witnesses” and their texts are not identical with the message claimed by God.

The influence of Karl Barth is obvious. The Bible, according to Barth, is not God’s word “in itself and as such” but “becomes God’s Word” only “to the extent that He speaks through it” in the “event” of revelation.<sup>9</sup> The Bible, in itself, is the product of merely privileged human witnesses to the Word. Although Polk departs from Barth on some points, and believes there are other ways of construing “scripture” than just as God’s word,

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<sup>8</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 22.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 109-111.



his distinction between the Bible and Scripture is similar to Barth's and serves a parallel purpose. So also is Polk's view of the Bible's authorship.

The attraction of distinguishing between the Bible as a text authored by privileged human witness and scripture as an authoritative word for the Church is, according to Kierkegaard, quite understandable. The "marks of historical contingency" are indeed "all about" the Bible just as Polk declares. One way to deal with the scandal this creates for a faith founded on the testimony of Scripture is to make a distinction between the merely historical and the eternally significant. Barth and Polk distinguish between what the human authors wrote and what God is saying by means of what the human authors wrote. This distinction is not entirely objectionable. It is not unthinkable that God says more through the text, for example, than the human authors may have intended to say by authoring the text. This could occur through the process of canonization, for example, when the various particular writings are placed in a larger, possibly enriching and deepening context. It is also appropriate to distinguish between the Bible and the word of God. The word of God ought not to be reduced to the Bible as though the Bible alone is the word of God. Furthermore, it is true that the human authors act as privileged human witnesses. What is objectionable—and contrary to Kierkegaard's view—is the complex claim that the human authors were merely privileged witnesses, that the Bible is merely the product of such human authors, and that as such it does not count as scripture or God's word in itself, in an objective, non-derivative way. On each of these three points Kierkegaard stands within the orthodox Protestant tradition. For him the human authors were witnesses who were authorized by God to speak or write on his behalf, the Bible has both these authorized human authors and God as its author, and the Bible in itself counts as Scripture or God's word.

Polk's diagnosis of naïveté assumes the Bible is not a divinely authored text. In his view, the "cultural prejudices and limited horizons" of the human authors have so marred the Bible that it is unreasonable for enlightened, contemporary readers to accept it as authoritative Scripture. Readers must first imaginatively construe the Bible so as to explain away its "manifold shortcomings," embarrassing "barbarisms,"<sup>10</sup> and "systemic prejudice and vice" located "deep within the fabric of the writings."<sup>11</sup> Finding it to be "a guilty text"—"a rich repository of oppression freighted with . . . hypocrisy"<sup>12</sup>—he seeks to excuse God from its authorship. From this perspective, Polk's project is a creative attempt to maintain the priority of the Bible in the face of its many faults. Polk is persuaded that "the gospel itself lays upon us" this "burden of discernment" and "calls us beyond the cultural prejudices and limited horizons of the biblical writers."<sup>13</sup> He believes Kierkegaard shows us how to achieve this through a creative application of the Augustinian *regula fidei* of love.

Kierkegaard does criticize a kind of biblical naïveté. In the *Postscript*, for example, he insists that the Bible, considered from a purely objective angle, does not offer "a secure stronghold" for faith.<sup>14</sup> By "secure stronghold" he appears to mean an objectively certain or risk-free epistemic basis for faith. The error of thinking the Bible could provide such security for faith is "the Bible theory." He dismisses this theory as essentially naïve.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 91.

<sup>11</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 52.

<sup>13</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, viii.

<sup>14</sup> CUP, 35 (VII 24).

<sup>15</sup> CUP, 45 (VII 33).

In “What Is Required” Kierkegaard criticizes a different but intimately related abuse of the Bible. Here he has in view a reduction of the Bible’s function and purpose to providing “merely a doctrine, something impersonal and objective.”<sup>16</sup> Drawing an analogy between the way the Bible is often treated by its would-be readers and the way David initially handles Nathan’s rebuke for stealing Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:1-7a), he exclaims “Oh, what depth of cunning! One makes God’s Word into something impersonal, objective, a doctrine.”<sup>17</sup> Kierkegaard believes David’s error is not relating Nathan’s parable to himself. Presumably, as a prophetic word, David ought to have seen himself reflected in the mirror of the parable as the sheep stealer. He instead was moved only with the objective passion of a king concerned with justice among his people and not with the personal, infinitely interested passion of one whose eternal happiness was at stake in this prophetic word. Finding fault with David’s initial, objectifying interpretation of Nathan’s parable, he takes this kind of objectification of God’s word as an illustration of the way the Bible is read within Christendom. This is a second, but intimately related, naïveté.

The error of the Bible theory is a methodological error determined by a prior, fundamental misunderstanding of the nature and function of Scripture and the demands of Christian faith; the latter, Davidic error refers to the outcome of such an ill-conceived approach to Scripture that objectifies the biblical message as either merely informational, as though it were of purely doctrinal or historical interest, or written for or about someone else. For Kierkegaard, the real error in both cases is a merely objective concept of Scripture that either neglects or denies its weighty and essential subjective significance. If the nature and

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<sup>16</sup> FSE, 43 (XII 331).

<sup>17</sup> FSE, 39 (XII 327).

function of Scripture is naïvely mistaken to be something merely objective then both the exegetical method and the exegetical outcome will be something merely objective too.

Objectivity in itself is not problematic for Kierkegaard. Notorious for his emphasis on subjectivity—especially Climacus’s assertion that “truth is subjectivity”<sup>18</sup>—it is sometimes overlooked that Kierkegaardian subjectivity is coordinate with and dependent upon objective reality. Polk, for example, fails to appreciate just how critical and elementary a role objective reality and objective, propositional truth plays in Kierkegaard’s thought. As Evans observes, this is a common error in Kierkegaardian studies.<sup>19</sup> It seems especially prevalent among those who read Kierkegaard as an “anticipator” of some form of existential or postmodern thought. Polk believes Kierkegaard anticipates Stanley Fish’s argument that “our interpretive strategies determine the nature and function of the texts we read. In short, different strategies produce different texts, even of the ‘same’ piece of writing.”<sup>20</sup> He reads Kierkegaard as inclined toward a non-realist concept of Scripture.

Subjectivity is a critical category in Kierkegaard’s thought, including his thinking on the nature and function of Scripture and biblical exegesis. We will explore the exegetical implications of this category later in this dissertation. The point stressed here is that Kierkegaardian subjectivity is coordinated with the objective reality to which the subject is related.<sup>21</sup> When it comes to reading Scripture the most critical question is whether one is

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<sup>18</sup> CUP, 189 (VII 157). I consider the implications of this claim for Scripture below, in chapter six.

<sup>19</sup> C. Stephen Evans, “Realism and Antirealism in Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*,” in *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 29-46. Evans presents a concise and compelling defense of Kierkegaard’s realism and commitment to objective, propositional truth.

<sup>20</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 8.

<sup>21</sup> The case is somewhat different for God whose subjectivity is essentially related to himself and through himself.

rightly related to the objective reality of this text as divine discourse and the realities to which it testifies. The answer depends on one's relationship with those objective realities (Scripture, God, self, others, Christian doctrine, etc.) and not just one's construal of them.

The person who is rightly related to these particular objective realities is a Christian—one who, as Polk puts it, begins “to speak, feel, think, see, and imagine Christianly.”<sup>22</sup> Due to the structure of reality and especially of human selfhood, to be rightly related to anything one must be rightly related to God. The rather radical implication is that there is no right way to be in the world other than to be a Christian. Kierkegaard applies this logic of subjectivity *coram Deo* directly to exegetical method and practice. Only the Christian is in truth. But the Christian's subjectivity responds to objective realities which, although they may not be knowable with certainty via merely objective methods and approaches, are nonetheless objectively real and inescapably confronting us.

Given human freedom, we must choose how to relate ourselves to objective reality—in which God is ultimate—and through it (or him) to ourselves. This choice does not determine objective reality, only our subjective relationship to it. “Truth is subjectivity” only insofar as that subjectivity consists of being rightly related to what is objectively true. If that subjectivity is not rightly related to what is objectively true it becomes untruth. Neither objectivity nor subjectivity is sufficient in itself. Bringing sinners into a right relationship with those realities most crucial to realizing one's self *coram Deo* is the purpose of Scripture.

Polk either misreads or misapplies Kierkegaard's diagnosis of objectivity *coram Scriptura*, treating it as an issue of the historical conditioning of the text. The person who forgets the Bible's essential character as an historically conditioned product of privileged but

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<sup>22</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 22.

corrupt human witnesses may exaggerate or overextend its authority, thereby objectifying the Bible as an idol. This turns the living word of Scripture into the dead letter of the Bible.

For Kierkegaard, one does not kill Scripture by ascribing more authority to it than is fitting or by overextending divine authority into the whole of the canon. One kills Scripture, using Polk's language, by failing to ascribe divine authority to it. Denying or in some way negating the essential, subjectively significant, interpersonal dynamic of being addressed by God when reading the Bible is the common denominator of all merely objective approaches:

Oh, what depth of cunning! One makes God's Word into something impersonal, objective, a doctrine—instead of its being the voice of God that you shall hear. This is the way the fathers heard it, this terrifying voice of God; now it stands as impersonal as calico! And one relates impersonally (objectively) to this impersonal thing. . . . Oh, what depth of cunning! This impersonality (objectivity) in relation to God's Word is all too easy for us human beings to maintain; it is actually a congenital genius we all have, something we obtain gratis—by way of hereditary sin. . . . No, if you are to read God's Word . . . then during the reading you must incessantly say to yourself: It is I to whom it is speaking, it is I about whom it is speaking.<sup>23</sup>

Far from killing Scripture by failing to limit its canonical authority vis-à-vis the historical conditioning of the human authors, Kierkegaard sees the historical character of Scripture as the way God directly addresses the contemporary reader. Not only were the human writers serving us, the contemporary readers, in their divinely authorized prophetic and apostolic authorial activity but we have been written into and are depicted by the text in manifold ways—sometimes as David, sometimes as Nathan. We are the divinely intended audience.

The imagination, no doubt, has an important role to play in discovering the various ways the reader is being addressed by the text. But the imagination plays a far more modest and limited role for Kierkegaard than the constitutive role Polk envisions. Either way, in

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<sup>23</sup> FSE, 39-40 (XII 327-328).

Climacian terms the Bible is not just eyewitness human reports, it is also the lesson of the divine teacher featured in *Fragments*, the highly creative and effective means he employs in his existence-communication to second-hand disciples that begins with the prerequisite condition for being in truth.<sup>24</sup> The role the physical presence of the Incarnate once served as an occasion for faith and conversion of the eyewitnesses from untruth to truth, the Bible now serves for contemporary disciples. The Bible is the means by which Christ is made present to contemporary readers.

To forget to read the Bible as an historically-conditioned, humanly-authored document is not, on Kierkegaard's diagnosis, the central exegetical problem of naïveté. Reading the Bible as merely or even primarily this is a problem. To objectify the Bible as merely an historical witness—little more than an artifact or relic of a no-longer viable worldview—is ossifying. Under this scenario the Bible must point away from itself to some other supposedly authoritative word. One may still theorize that the Bible is special or even unique since it is, for example, the earliest, purest, or maybe even the only recognized, authoritative human witness to this other word. Likewise, one may try to hold the Bible and this other word very close together. But however one may try to work out these details, so long as the Bible does not count as the word of God just as it is, it will be objectified as an historical artifact. This historical objectification of the Bible, common to all historical-critical exegetical approaches to Scripture, disturbed Kierkegaard.

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<sup>24</sup> The Bible is not the only instrument available to the divine teacher. Preaching and personal testimony—at least that of the believing eyewitnesses—would be other means Kierkegaard allows.

### ***3.3 The Bible Theory and the Church Theory***

There are many ways to objectify Scripture, rendering it “as impersonal as calico.” One can objectify it as literature, or an historical artifact, or even a manual of doctrine. In many ways the objectification of Scripture is a defining mark of modern, critical-era exegetical methodologies (though ironically not of practice since no exegete is able to entirely negate one’s self or subjectivity). But objectifying Scripture is not just a critical-era problem even if it is especially acute in this era. The impulse to objectify Scripture is a standard strategy of self-defense that sinners of every era employ *coram Scriptura*.

When it comes to biblical exegesis Kierkegaard is fully aware of the false start of methodological objectivity—exegetical strategies that seek to bracket the reader’s subjectivity. He adamantly denies the sufficiency of teleological objectivity, which takes something merely objective, such as rightly formulated doctrine, to be the ultimate exegetical end.<sup>25</sup> For Kierkegaard, the ultimate end of Bible reading and exegesis is soteriological—to realize a fully human existence *coram Deo*. This goal is impossible to achieve while bracketing one’s subjectivity, maintaining a kind of indifferent aloofness from the subject matter, or aiming at something merely objective.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Kierkegaard does not deny that objectivity is a proper method or goal in some cases—such as in science or history. His point is not to reject the ideal of methodological and teleological objectivity in general but to be a realist as to the possibility of realizing this ideal and, more to the point here, to limit this ideal to its proper domain, which does not include the religious. This is why historical and scientific methodologies are inappropriate strategies for biblical exegesis. Just as the ideal of objectivity is not appropriate for matters of vital religious significance it follows that the tools developed and employed by historians and scientists are not to be uncritically applied to biblical exegesis.

<sup>26</sup> Kierkegaard does not dispute that rightly formulated doctrine is an appropriate exegetical enterprise. Christian doctrine must be derived from and judged by Scripture. Kierkegaard’s point is not to reject theology but to recover the proper teleological justification for Christian theology. Rightly formulated doctrine is not an end in itself but an instrument employed by the Church for the purpose of salvation. The ultimate goal for which the Bible ought to be read is salvation through personal appropriation by which the reader realizes a fully human existence *coram Deo* through faith. We will explore the exegetical significance of Kierkegaard’s view of salvation in chapter five.



That the purpose of the Bible and proper end of Bible reading is soteriological has enormous implications for exegetical method and practice. Exploring these implications is the focus of chapters four and five. The point here is that this concept of Scripture and the corresponding exegetical end represents a dramatic break from modern, critical-era exegetical methods in which objectivity is esteemed as perhaps the highest exegetical ideal. Especially common in critical-era exegesis is the *historical* objectification of the Bible. It is this form of the error that the Bible theory commits: not merely the naïveté of thinking that the Bible offers a secure, objective epistemic stronghold for faith but the underlying naïveté that objective knowledge is of decisive significance for faith.<sup>27</sup>

Polk is fully aware that, objectively considered, “Kierkegaard believed there could be no such impersonal guarantees” for faith, and he agrees.<sup>28</sup> But he fails to appreciate how deeply Kierkegaard’s criticism of objectivity cuts in relation to biblical exegesis. Polk abandons the Bible as a secure, objective stronghold for faith and, like Nicolai F. S. Grundtvig (1783-1872) and Jacob Christian Lindberg (1797-1857) in Kierkegaard’s day, resorts to the apparent safety of the living Church instead. According to Climacus, the Grundtvigian (or Lindbergian) version of “the Church theory” is that “the Living Word in the Church, the Creed, and the Word with the sacraments . . . was supposed to decide objectively what is the essentially Christian and what is not.”<sup>29</sup>

Kierkegaard’s critique of the Church theory depends on his critique of the Bible theory. A crucial observation to note in the discussion that follows is that Kierkegaard’s

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<sup>27</sup> Note that Climacus’s discussion of the Bible theory and the Church theory is treated under the heading “The Historical Point of View,” CUP, 24 (VII 13).

<sup>28</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 4.

<sup>29</sup> CUP, 37 (VII 26).

critique of the Bible theory does not compel him to abandon the priority of the Bible as basic for faith and practice. On the contrary, Kierkegaard is committed to the basic status of Scripture for the disciple at second hand and is arguing not against the priority of Scripture but against what he believes is the threat of objectivity to that priority. Kierkegaard opposes the Bible theory, in other words, in part to defend the priority of Scripture for Christian faith. The threat of objectivity, however, is not restricted to the Bible theory but is a present danger to the Church theory, too, and applies fully to Polk's hypothesis.

### *3.3.1 The Problem with the Bible Theory*

The normative role "the Living Word in the Church" fills in the Church theory is the role Scripture fills within Protestant orthodoxy. It is also the role ascribed to Scripture in the Bible theory. Kierkegaard grants (and exemplifies) the Protestant orthodox position on Scripture so far as objectivity goes: the Bible is the objective source and norm for Christian doctrine, which is something properly objective in itself.<sup>30</sup> He even grants the validity of critical inquiry into the historicity of the text, assuming one is operating within the bounds of objectivity alone and is not trying to wring from this inquiry something of decisive subjective significance, since that is impossible.<sup>31</sup> Operating within these bounds, securing the "reliability" of "Scripture historically-critically" is "the important thing."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Steven M. Emmanuel, *Kierkegaard and the Concept of Revelation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), xi, contends that "true religious subjectivity must conform to the objective standard that is set by the Christian revelation. The life of the believer must be regulated in all its aspects by reference to dogmatic Christian concepts." This revelation, of the absolute paradox, is suprarational, not irrational, 39f. Yet he also argues, on the basis of subjectivity, that Kierkegaard holds an anti-propositional, regulative concept of doctrine, anticipating Lindbeck, 95f. Though some doctrines function regulatively, Emmanuel over concludes.

<sup>31</sup> CUP, 21 (VII 11).

<sup>32</sup> CUP, 24 (VII 14).

Here we run up against a critical problem for any merely objective approach:

“*approximando*.”<sup>33</sup> We have already encountered the problem of approximation in chapter two. There we noted that the conclusions and demonstrations of historical inquiry are insufficient to support the certainty demanded by Christian existence:

If the inquiring subject were infinitely interested in his relation to this truth [i.e. Christianity as revealed in Scripture], he would here despair at once, because nothing is easier to perceive than this, that with regard to the historical the greatest certainty is only an *approximation*, and an approximation is too little to build his happiness on and is so unlike an eternal happiness that no result can ensue.<sup>34</sup>

Because “thinking necessarily fails to grasp being in its concrete actuality,”<sup>35</sup> thinking about some object other than oneself necessarily trades in universalized abstractions at the level of approximations. This includes any objective “demonstration” of the historicity of Scripture.

In most endeavors *approximando* is not a problem. Approximation is a reasonable basis to build historical or philosophical knowledge upon. But where one’s eternal happiness is concerned mere approximation is insufficient.

The historian seeks to reach the greatest possible certainty, and the historian is not in any contradiction, because he is not in passion; at most he has the research scholar’s objective passion, but he is not in subjective passion. . . . [A]ll historical knowledge is only an approximation. This is no minimizing of historical research, but it illustrates the contradiction in bringing the most extreme passion of subjectivity into relation with something historical.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> CUP, 575 (VII 501).

<sup>34</sup> CUP, 23 (VII 12).

<sup>35</sup> Evans, “Realism and Antirealism,” 38.

<sup>36</sup> CUP, 575 (VII 501).

The “most extreme” and “deepest passion of all”<sup>37</sup> can not be satisfied with the merely approximate knowledge of historical or philosophical inquiry. The approximate is always subject to correction, for example, and belongs to an ongoing project, “from generation to generation,”<sup>38</sup> that will occupy the human race the rest of the age. To rest one’s eternal happiness on the merely objective would be to suspend it on the current state of historical scholarship, philosophical argumentation, or historical-critical biblical scholarship.

Kierkegaard grants, via Climacus, that,

objectively understood, truth can signify: (1) historical truth, (2) philosophical truth. Viewed as historical truth, the truth must be established by a critical consideration of the various reports etc., in short, in the same way as historical truth is ordinarily established. In the case of philosophical truth, the inquiry turns on the relation of a doctrine, historically given and verified, to eternal truth.<sup>39</sup>

There is validity to the historical critical enterprise that subjects Scripture as an historical document, to historical-critical scrutiny, just as there is to an objective use of Scripture as a source and norm in dogmatic theology. Scripture is, for Kierkegaard as for the Protestant orthodox, both an historical document making historical truth-claims and the objective source and norm of Christian doctrine.

Climacus even expresses sincere “gratitude and admiration [for] the splendid accomplishments within the presupposition” of the Bible theory, “those writings invested with rare learnedness and thoroughness” it has produced.<sup>40</sup> This is ironic: the presumably non-Christian authorial character, Climacus, curiously admits benefitting from and

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<sup>37</sup> CUP, 575 (VII 501).

<sup>38</sup> CUP, 575 (VII 501).

<sup>39</sup> CUP, 21 (VII 11).

<sup>40</sup> CUP, 45 (VII 34-35); cf. FSE, 28 (XII 318).

apparently once subscribing to the Bible theory. But “he became more and more convinced of the dialectical distortion concealed in it.”<sup>41</sup> This seems to be one of those places in the *Postscript* where, as Anthony Rudd remarks, “we hear Kierkegaard’s own voice.”<sup>42</sup>

Whether this curious comment reflects Kierkegaard’s own history or not, Kierkegaard grants that the Protestant orthodox position is correct so far as it goes. The problem of the Bible theory is not the turn to Scripture in pursuit of objective ends via objective methods but the naïveté of objectivity that mistakenly takes objective methods and ends to be subjectively sufficient. This is “the dialectical distortion concealed” in the Bible theory. Weaker to begin with, the Church theory is inflicted with the same fatal disease. Kierkegaard does not advocate abandoning the traditional Protestant view in favor of the Church theory (or any other theory along these lines) because the fundamental problem is not with the Bible but with the underlying naïveté of objectivity. Contrary to David Gouwens’ sweeping claim that Kierkegaard was “suspicious of Lutheran orthodoxy’s biblicism and the inflated claims made for historical-critical scholarship as indispensable for understanding,”<sup>43</sup> we are able to distinguish between biblicism in the sense of adhering to

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<sup>41</sup> CUP, 45 (VII 33).

<sup>42</sup> Anthony Rudd, “On Straight and Crooked Readings: Why the *Postscript* Does Not Self-destruct,” in *Anthropology and Authority: Essays on Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. by Poul Houe, Gordon D. Marino, and Sven Hakon Rossel (Amsterdam – Atlanta, GA: Editions Radopi B. V., 2000), 199. Rudd goes too far, however, in suggesting “that we hear Kierkegaard’s own voice more fully in this work [i.e. *Postscript*] than in most of his signed writings—the *Edifying Discourses* with their very self-consciously rhetorical, quasi-sermonic style.” There is no reason to suppose that a sermonic style in any way mitigates the authenticity of Kierkegaard’s voice. Indeed, given both the sometimes torturous deliberations on whether to sign a work and his expressed thoughts on power and eloquence in sermons as grounded in the voice of the author, I believe we can safely conclude the contrary.

<sup>43</sup> David Gouwens, “Kierkegaard’s Hermeneutics of Discipleship: Communal and Critical Uses of Scripture in the 1854-1855 Attack,” in *Søren Kierkegaard and the Word(s): Essays on Hermeneutics and Communication*, ed. Houe, Poul and Gordon D. Marino (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel, 2003), 88.

the Protestant Scripture principle and a kind of biblicism that seeks to establish this principle through historical-critical methods. It is objectivity that fails us, not the Bible.

Even at its best, methodological and teleological objectivity proves insufficient for faith. No amount of inquiry or scholarship along objective lines will ever secure the certainty the infinitely interested person demands:

It is more important that it be understood and borne in mind that even with the most stupendous learning and perseverance, and even if the heads of all the critics were mounted on a single neck, one would never arrive at anything more than an approximation, and that there is an essential misrelation between that and a personal, infinite interestedness in one's own eternal happiness.<sup>44</sup>

The “essential misrelation” here is the problem of *approximando* once again. To seek a purely objective certainty as a foundation for faith is to commit a categorical error.

There is an irony at play here that is crucial to Kierkegaard's critique of exegetical method and practice: those who are infinitely interested will not adopt an objective end or method—their passion precludes this. Such people are completely involved in their quest for eternal happiness. This is their subjectivity. Only those who fall short of being infinitely interested, who in some way or to some degree are disinterested, will fall into the trappings of objectivity. Their disinterestedness is their objectivity and leads them to adopt an objective end and pursue it via objective means. Thus the pursuit of a subjective end by merely objective means is always a cause for suspicion. This does not mean a person who is infinitely interested will never engage in objective-type inquiries. However, the person who is passionate in the extreme will never be content with a purely objective approach.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> CUP, 24 (VII 13).

<sup>45</sup> CUP, 575-76 (VII 501-2).

This helps explain why Kierkegaard is so suspicious of objectivity *coram Scriptura*. No one who is earnest *coram Deo* will begin to read the Bible this way.<sup>46</sup> The earnest person may formulate biblical teachings into doctrines, but such a person will never treat the Bible as something merely objective. Instead, those who are earnest *coram Deo* will approach Scripture, assuming they are infinitely interested in their eternal happiness, as something essentially subjective, always and necessarily involving the entire person *coram Deo*. Those who are not earnest *coram Deo* will, if they take up the Bible at all, approach it with a detached, disinterested air that delights in the trappings of objectivity because such trappings are subversively useful for defending themselves against God's word and its radical claim on their lives. Far from being frustrated by the insufficiency of objectivity for faith, they relish this insufficiency and seek, consciously or not, to lose themselves in the labyrinth it opens.

The difference between reading and misreading the Bible may have nothing to do with the intellect or understanding and everything to do with the passion or interestedness—the subjectivity—of the reader. Unfortunately, objective exegetical methods and practices dominate both in and out of the academy. This is to be expected because we are all sinners who are more invested in defending ourselves against God's word than receiving it. He believes that “this impersonality before God's Word” is both as casual and universal as sin. It “is all too easy for us human beings to maintain,” he argues, because “it is actually a congenital genius we all have, something we obtain gratis—by way of hereditary sin.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> On “earnestness” in Kierkegaard see David J. Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 96-97.

<sup>47</sup> FSE, 39 (XII 327).

### 3.3.2 *Seeking Shelter in an Eternal Parenthesis*

Beyond the comfortable personal detachment objectivity allows would-be readers, sinners serendipitously discover the joy of the “dialectical distortion” concealed in objective approaches to Scripture: that objective strategies open a parenthesis they find impossible to close. This makes the objective approach to Scripture enormously useful to those who, for whatever reason, pretend to be earnest about reading the Bible but who are in fact defiantly defending themselves against God’s word.<sup>48</sup> It is possible, for example, through objective exegetical methods and practices, to claim that you want to understand God’s word and are willing to obey it if only . . . (and here one can insert almost any of the objective questions critics deem exegetically decisive). Kierkegaard pictures the scene in “What Is Required”:

“God’s Word” is indeed the mirror—but, but—oh, how enormously complicated—strictly speaking, how much belongs to “God’s Word”? Which books are authentic? Are they really by the apostles, and are the apostles really trustworthy? Have they personally seen everything, or have they perhaps only heard about various things from others? As for ways of reading [i.e. interpretations], there are thirty thousand different ways. And then this crowd or crush of scholars and opinions, and learned opinions and unlearned opinions about how the particular passage is to be understood.<sup>49</sup>

Climacus also depicts the phenomenon of the eternal parenthesis. Cast in terms of the Bible theory, though presented in his discussion of the Church theory, he clearly means his analysis to apply to both theories because both share the dialectical distortion of a purely objective approach to matters of vital religious significance. The “first dialectical difficulty with the Bible,” he maintains, “is that it is a historical document.” As such, “as soon as it is

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<sup>48</sup> As we have just noted, at some level and to some degree we are all committed to defending ourselves against God’s word. Yet not all people pretend to read the Bible. See FSE, 31-33 (XII 320-22).

<sup>49</sup> FSE, 25 (XII 315).



made the stronghold [for faith] . . . the subject is diverted into a parenthesis, the conclusion of which one awaits for all eternity.”<sup>50</sup> This is yet another complication of *approximando*.

Kierkegaard does not deny the historical character of Scripture: the “New Testament is something of the past and is thus historical in a stricter sense.” But this “is the beguiling aspect that prevents making the issue subjective and treats it objectively, whereby it never comes into existence at all.”<sup>51</sup> So long as we are naïvely diverted by the Bible’s character as an historical document, believing or pretending to believe that this is somehow a decisive issue for faith, we will remain hopelessly lost in an eternal parenthesis. Pursued objectively, the subjective significance of God’s word is never realized—“never comes into existence at all”—because the actual reading of the Bible is endlessly deferred by this never-ending preliminary dialectic. What objectivity begins it is incapable of concluding. Objectivity proves incapable of providing final answers to the questions it raises and insists are necessary to answer *before* one can decide the meaning of the text and thus its subjective significance.

The person who begins in objectivity—assuming, for example, that the Bible is merely an historically conditioned human witness—actually begins in doubt or unbelief *coram Scriptura*. To be in doubt is to be, in Climacian terms, in untruth. One who is in untruth is ignorant of the truth or is not rightly related to it. So long as one begins in doubt one will never be able to overcome doubt and will end up where one began, which is, in Anti-Climacian terms, in despair. Against objectivity, which broadly comprehends every approach that presupposes the *usus rationis magisterialis* on matters of essential truth,

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<sup>50</sup> CUP, 38 (VII 27).

<sup>51</sup> CUP, 38 (VII 27).

Kierkegaard insists we are not only radically dependent on a transcendent revelation but, à la Augustine and Anselm, we must begin with faith and seek understanding as far as possible.

Faith is able to grasp and hold things that are beyond reason's reach. Of course, just because something is beyond reason's reach does not mean that it is contrary to reason.

Evans argues that Kierkegaard does not propose belief in that which is contrary to reason in the strong sense of being a logical contradiction. But not all things that seem contrary to reason are in fact contrary to reason and there is a sense in which reason itself, when it overreaches, must be and deserves to be contradicted. Understanding may and often will follow faith, but not necessarily. Some things are not just presently beyond reason's reach but are truly above reason and may lie outside the limits of human understanding. The incarnation is Kierkegaard's classic example and this is what he means when he calls it "the absurd" and "the absolute paradox"—it seems to be such to reason but it is not for faith.<sup>52</sup>

Christianity is not irrational but reason must recognize its own finitude and submit to God's transcendent revelation declared to us and for us in his written word, the Bible.

### *3.3.3 Polk's Hypothesis: A Post-liberal Version of the Church Theory*

Polk mishandles the radical implications of Kierkegaard's critique of objectivity for the nature and function of Scripture and exegetical method and practice. He proposes and reads Kierkegaard as proposing a post-liberal version of the Church theory in which the

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<sup>52</sup> For a fuller treatment of Kierkegaard's epistemology see C. Steven Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason: A Kierkegaardian Account* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 78-112, and his three essays: "The Relevance of Historical Evidence for Christian Faith: A Critique of a Kierkegaardian View," in *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 151-68, and "Kierkegaard and Plantinga on Belief in God: Subjectivity as the Ground of Properly Basic Religious Beliefs," in *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006): 169-82; and "Externalist Epistemology, Subjectivity, and Christian Knowledge: Plantinga and Kierkegaard," in *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006): 183-205.

community's "rule of faith" functions as "a primal imaginative construal of scripture."<sup>53</sup> Polk connects his version of the rule of faith with Augustine's *regula fidei*, but there is a crucial difference that seems to come in part from reading Augustine through Stanley Fish. For Augustine, the *regula fidei* of love for God and neighbor is a teleological regulative principle. Love is the edifying end all exegesis promotes if the exegete has accurately grasped the meaning of the text. But the *regula fidei* of love is neither constitutive of meaning nor a sufficient condition of accurate exegesis:

So anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbour, has not yet succeeded in understanding them. Anyone who derives from them an idea which is useful for supporting this love but fails to say what the writer demonstrably meant in the passage has not made a fatal error, and is not a liar[, but rather is] misled unknowingly. . . . Anyone with an interpretation of the scriptures that differs from that of the writer [but is still conducive to love] is misled, but not because the scriptures are lying. If, as I began by saying, he is misled by an idea of the kind that builds up love, which is the end of the commandment, he is misled in the same way as a walker who leaves his path by mistake but reaches the destination to which the path leads by going through a field. But he must be put right and shown how it is more useful not to leave the path, in case the habit of deviating should force him to go astray or even adrift.<sup>54</sup>

For Augustine, love for God and neighbor belongs to the *regula fidei* because it captures the salvific *scopus scripturae*. It is not a rule imposed upon Scripture but an exegetical conclusion derived from it that then functions as a governing exegetical principle. It does not stand over Scripture but over the exegete who dares to say what Scripture means.

In stark contrast to Augustine, Polk (and Fish) view the "rule of faith" as a constitutive principle. Polk writes that,

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<sup>53</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 49.

<sup>54</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), I.xxxvi.40-41.

The sense we make of texts is a function of the interpretive strategies we use, which is also to say that our interpretive strategies determine the nature and substance of the texts we read. In short, different strategies produce different texts, even of the “same” piece of writing. On the other hand, the same strategy can produce the same text, even from ostensibly disparate writings, like those that make up the Bible.<sup>55</sup>

Quoting Fish, Polk maintains that “Augustine urges such a strategy . . . in *On Christian Doctrine* where he delivers the ‘rule of faith’.”<sup>56</sup> We “might even say that the approach, indeed the construal of scripture as love, makes it such—as if scripture’s meaning were in its use, and its **explanation defined** what it is. This Wittgensteinian maxim,” he continues, “will be repeatedly demonstrated.”<sup>57</sup>

It is not clear how we are supposed to take the counterfactual statement just quoted. It is possible that Polk is being ironic here. Sometimes the counterfactual form is used pedantically to accuse or state an obvious conclusion.<sup>58</sup> Or perhaps Polk wants to maintain that the principle of constitutive imaginative construal is very similar but not even identical to Wittgenstein’s maxim that “meaning . . . is . . . use,”<sup>59</sup> such that Wittgenstein’s maxim does not apply to the case of Scripture. If this is Polk’s meaning it is difficult to understand why he stresses the maxim so strongly in the argument of the book or how it can be “repeatedly demonstrated” when it is contrary to the facts of the case he is considering and in some

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<sup>55</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 8.

<sup>56</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 8. The passage is drawn from Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 170.

<sup>57</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 57 (emphasis original).

<sup>58</sup> As when a parent says something like this: “There’s brightly-colored waxy stuff melted into the fabric all over the back seat of the car, *as if* someone had left their crayons laying in the sunshine. And now you can’t find your crayons? It’s *as if* the two facts were somehow related.” In both cases the counterfactual is ironic—the speaker does not really believe these statements are contrary to fact.

<sup>59</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 2d ed. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958), 20 (section 43).

noteworthy way dissimilar to the principle of constitutive imaginative construal he labels the rule of faith. Or maybe Polk wants to hold Wittgenstein's maxim and the principle of constitutive imaginative construal together but believes their applicability to Scripture is contrary to fact. On this read, Scripture does not belong to the "*large* class of cases" in which the meaning is in its use and the imaginative construal is constitutive.<sup>60</sup>

Surprisingly, both the first and last options have some merit in the context of Polk's larger argument. There are places where Polk argues his case so strongly that he seems to reserve no role for the counterfactual "as if" except the ironic. There are other places where he seems to suggest that the constitutive construal is not absolutely decisive but that we must proceed as if it were. But in many of these latter cases a closer look seems to eliminate the counterfactual altogether. Following Kelsey, for example, he argues that "authority cannot be established, only attested. . . . I.e., the authority [of Scripture] is conferred by (or simply is) God." Kierkegaard, he observes, "does not . . . try to *establish* scripture's authority but to *realize* it" existentially.<sup>61</sup> But even here Polk places the basic nature of the authority of Scripture—"the claim that scripture is the Word of God"—under the paradigm of the community's imaginative construal. In other words, and here he quotes Kelsey,

The authority of scripture is understood in functional terms when "the texts are authoritative not in virtue of any inherent property they may have, such as being inerrant or inspired, but in virtue of a function they fill in the life of the Christian community." . . . The scriptures are scripture, I think the church wants to be able to say, because they speak of Christ, are a unique witness to Christ. But as I have been arguing, this subject matter can only be said to "inhere" in scripture insofar as the reader is equipped to "see" it there

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<sup>60</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 20 (section 43): "For a *large* class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language." Polk does not discuss the limits of Wittgenstein's definition of meaning.

<sup>61</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 75 (emphasis original).

in a way that seems to him or her virtually self-evident, indeed, to see it as the literal sense of the text. As I have been saying, when it comes to meaning, “inherent” is a highly ambiguous concept.<sup>62</sup>

To “see” is to imaginatively construe. Seeing Scripture according to “the Rule that scripture ‘speaks’ the Love of God” is to imaginatively construe it as “the Word of God” and thus divinely authoritative. The divine authority of Scripture as God’s word, then, “is analytic in the Rule.” It is not something that inheres in Scripture or is true of these writings because of “any inherent property they may have, such as being inerrant or inspired.”<sup>63</sup> On his view there does not seem to be anything in Scripture that stubbornly resists the imaginative construal of the text one way or the other.

This leads to a curious point in Polk’s interpretation of Kierkegaard. He contends that Kierkegaard rejected the “route taken by the orthodox apologetics of his own day,” which “was flatly to assert scripture’s authority *because* it is the Word of God.”<sup>64</sup> Kierkegaard did reject the line of argument pursued by would-be apologists, but he did so because they were not “flatly” asserting the Bible’s authority on the grounds that it is God’s word. The problem was that the apologists were not simply confessing Scripture to be God’s word by faith but were trying to argue to this end via inference from evidence. This path of securing faith via objective arguments and evidence is what Kierkegaard rejected. He was not rejecting the position that Scripture is authoritative because it is the word of God.

According to Polk, the Bible only functions as Scripture for those who construe it as such—that is, in such a way that its authority is “analytic” in the rule of faith one adopts as

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<sup>62</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 75-76.

<sup>63</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 75.

<sup>64</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 74.

one's imaginative construal. Kierkegaard, however, maintains that Scripture is the word of God independent of our thinking or imagining, and as such is divinely authoritative for all people in all places and at all times. Polk admits that "Kierkegaard would of course acknowledge . . . that from God's point of view—and that of faith—God's Word is always God's Word."<sup>65</sup> Apart from this rather dismissive comment, the significance of the objective status of the Bible as God's word in Kierkegaard's thought is hardly noted.

If Scripture were not objectively God's word then there would be no basis for its universal subjective significance or the unbeliever's despair *coram Scriptura*. Hence my original criticism of Polk: that he misses the central thrust of Kierkegaard's position that the Bible is God's word such that to read it is to be addressed by God and confronted with oneself *coram Deo*. According to Polk, "Faith makes the Bible scripture."<sup>66</sup> According to Kierkegaard, that the Bible is God's word is objectively true and subjectively significant for believer and unbeliever alike. Contra Polk, the requirement for faith is not a prerequisite for apprehending that Scripture is God's word, much less for rendering it so. Faith is necessary for readers to overcome their offense *coram Scriptura* in order to derive saving benefit from it. But many unbelievers also apprehend that Scripture is God's word and despair before it.

### 3.3.4 *The Requirement for a Constitutive Rule of Faith*

Polk's interpretation of Kierkegaard as advocating a constitutive rule of faith is drawn in large part from "What Is Required" (a.k.a. "The Mirror of the Word"):

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<sup>65</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 58.

<sup>66</sup> Polk immediately hedges: "At least, only by faith can readers see it as such." This much weaker assertion is in many ways preferable but is still out of whack with Kierkegaard who believes the Bible functions as God's word even for unbelievers. We will explore this point in chapter five. Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 88.

With regard to “The Mirror of the Word,” Kierkegaard’s point (repeated six times, 53-58) is that the way God’s Word is read in Christendom means that it is not God’s Word that is being read. As he says, there is “a distinction between reading and reading” (52), i.e. between various uses of the text, and the different uses construct different texts.”<sup>67</sup>

This conception of the rule of faith is as alien to Kierkegaard as it is to Augustine. I will return to the “distinction between reading and reading” below—it is not what Polk takes it to be. The point here is that the constitutive use of the rule of faith, in which the community determines what the text is and means through their imaginative construal of it, is actually a version of the Church theory that Kierkegaard rejects.

Polk appeals to the rule of faith “to decide objectively what is the essentially Christian and what is not.”<sup>68</sup> True, Polk believes that the *regula fidei* of love he advocates, and argues Kierkegaard advocates, is true to Scripture and Kierkegaardian subjectivity. But he also believes that Scripture contains many things that fall short of love or contradict this rule and are thus sub- or anti-Christian. The rule becomes the canon in the community of readers and determines the content of revelation and scope of Scripture. On Polk’s read, love is taught by Scripture as a rule that defines what is and what is not Christian. But the Bible also teaches much that deviates from this rule. Thus the Bible must be ruled by the *regula fidei* of love before it can count and function as Scripture for the church. Kierkegaard, he insists, understood the priority of love and the vital role of the reader’s imagination and shows us how to read by the *regula fidei* of love and thus how to read the Bible as though it were God’s word in spite of its sub-Christian content that offends enlightened,

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<sup>67</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 57-58. The other key text Polk draws from is a short passage found in WL which I will discuss below.

<sup>68</sup> CUP, 37 (VII 26).



contemporary readers. At the heart of Polk's proposal is an exegetical method for explaining away the "manifold shortcomings"<sup>69</sup> and "sins of scripture."<sup>70</sup> Kierkegaard shows us how to do this. This is why he is worthy of attention and imitation.<sup>71</sup>

Polk seems to believe that the role he allots to the community of readers in the dynamic of reading by the rule of faith adequately accommodates Kierkegaardian subjectivity. But the constitutive construal of the rule of faith ought not to be confused with Kierkegaardian subjectivity. Polk is aware of Kierkegaardian subjectivity *coram Scriptura*, writing that "God's Word . . . [is] a medium of communication between personal agents, Subject and subject." As such, "scripture must engage the . . . capacities constitutive of personhood."<sup>72</sup> Against the Enlightenment ideal of bracketing the reader's subjectivity in biblical exegesis, Polk argues that the reader must "let scripture pry deep into one's sense of self."<sup>73</sup> He also understands that Kierkegaardian subjectivity is not just vulnerability *coram Scriptura* but the reader's passion for eternal happiness realized through the transformation of the self *coram Scriptura*.<sup>74</sup> But his main discussion of Kierkegaardian subjectivity *coram Scriptura* "assumes of course that one agrees to construe scripture as divine instruction in the first place, that is, to construe it by the Rule" such that it will have this subjective potency.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 91.

<sup>70</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 52-53.

<sup>71</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 52-53.

<sup>72</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 84.

<sup>73</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 85.

<sup>74</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 86.

<sup>75</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 85.

Although subjectivity is, according to Polk, “*foregrounded* as both an active ingredient of the reading process and a target for alteration and development,”<sup>76</sup> there is nevertheless a radical “Rule-dependency”<sup>77</sup> to Kierkegaardian subjectivity *coram Scriptura*: “the Rule potentiates scripture’s instructional efficacy” or subjective significance “by declaring it.”<sup>78</sup> Only when the Bible is imaginatively construed as subjectively significant in a certain way does it become or even have the potential for becoming subjectively significant for the reader. It is the declaration which makes it so; the “*explanation*” of it as such “*is decisive*.”<sup>79</sup> This proposal amounts to a post-liberal version of the Church theory in which the imaginative construal of the reading community defines, explains, and is “decisive” as to what is and what is not “essentially Christianity.”<sup>80</sup>

Kierkegaard does not assume or maintain that Scripture lacks efficacy for the one who refuses or otherwise fails to construe the Bible as efficacious in some particular way. On the contrary, he is convinced that unbelievers sometimes spend enormous amounts of energy trying to defend themselves against the Bible’s subjective significance or efficacy. Neither the nature nor the function of Scripture, for Kierkegaard, is as radically rule-dependent as Polk imagines. Construing the subjective significance of Scripture as radically rule-dependent is to fall into a trap and come under Kierkegaard’s critique of the naïveté of

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<sup>76</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 85.

<sup>77</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 86.

<sup>78</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 87.

<sup>79</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 76 (emphasis original). Polk is quoting his “focus text,” a brief passage in WL, 291-294 (IX 278-280), in which Kierkegaard is considering how love, via the “mitigating explanation” we might call the judgment of charity, “hides the multiplicity of sins” in one’s neighbor. The applicability of this passage to Scripture is a matter I consider later in this dissertation.

<sup>80</sup> See *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 57, 76, and 87; cf. CUP, 37 (VII 26).

objectivity. It is also to deny the basic status and function of the Bible since it only counts as God's word when so construed. Kierkegaard, however, insists on the basic status and function of Scripture, his entire critique depends upon it being so.

Kierkegaard believes there is a particular way one must read the Bible *to realize the saving benefit* God intends to accomplish through it. Those who fail to read it this way (and to this end) are failing to read the Bible rightly. But the force of Scripture, though ultimately for us and our salvation, is one of law and gospel, condemnation and salvation, death and everlasting life. The unbeliever turns away from Scripture in despair precisely because it is the word of God. To read it is to come under the judgment of God—to hear “the law’s loud thunder,”<sup>81</sup> to see oneself as a sinner *coram Deo*. All reactions to Scripture in despair (or unbelief) are ways of avoiding or defending oneself against God’s word. As such, they are ways of non-reading even if we think or pretend they are proper ways of reading.

Kierkegaard illustrates how far removed these ways of non-reading are from true reading by drawing two analogies: the way we read a letter from a lover and a notice of a royal decree. For Kierkegaard, the Bible is “living and active, . . . discerning the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” of both those who receive it as such *and* those who vainly try to defend themselves against God’s word. The Bible is not passively awaiting the imposition of a particular kind of imaginative construal before it comes alive and acquires subjective potency or divine authority but is inherently powerful to offend and save no matter how it is construed.<sup>82</sup> There is no requirement to imaginatively construe the Bible a certain way for it

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<sup>81</sup> John Newton, “Let Us Love and Sing and Wonder,” in *Trinity Hymnal* (Atlanta/Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 172.

<sup>82</sup> Hebrews 4:12. Polk would grant that, for the believer who imaginatively construes the Bible according to the rule of love as God’s word, it does have a universal force and applicability. We should not be

to count as Scripture or function as God's word. There is only one way to read it according to its proper nature and function and myriad ways of construing and misreading it in despair.

### *3.3.5 Kierkegaard as Advocate for a Post-liberal Church Theory*

The post-liberal flavor of Polk's read of Kierkegaard is obvious. It counts as a version of the Church theory because the construal of the community of readers is decisive for deciding what is and what is not essentially Christian. But this move conceals a "dialectical distortion" very similar to the one Kierkegaard found in the Bible theory. The question will always arise as to the criterion for determining the rule of faith. How do we know that *this* is what Christianity essentially is? Polk argues that the rule is somehow grounded in a dialectical relationship between the reader's imagination (and all that this reader brings to the reading act) and the content of Scripture. But, as we have seen, he also argues quite strongly that the Bible cannot be read as Scripture unless it is first imaginatively construed as such. So the priority rests on the side of the reader's imagination rather than the Bible's nature and function. Indeed, there is nothing inherent in Scripture to determine its nature and function—no particular construal is inevitable.

The matter is somewhat complicated, however, because Polk believes one cannot see what is in fact not present to be seen. This seems as obviously false as his prior contention that "different strategies [of reading] produce different texts." We often "see" and imagine falsely or fancifully or in some other way that defies reality. Either way, Polk does not want

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surprised, then, to find that Kierkegaard here assumes this perspective: it is "analytic" in the rule of faith he adopts. Kierkegaard, however, grounds his proposal in the objective nature and function of Scripture as God's word and not in the construal of Scripture as such by the reader. The reader must construe Scripture in this way because Scripture is this and to construe it in any other way is to react out of offense *coram Deo*.

to propose a purely arbitrary construal regime. He instead intends to argue that a valid construal of the Bible can only construe it as something that is somehow present and able to be seen in it despite his denial that there is anything in the Bible that determines its construal. To him, the Bible is ambiguous in terms of its nature, function, and meaning. The many different ways of construing it are not just possible but viable and valid because of this (inherent?) ambiguity. Polk reads this classic post-liberal view back into Kierkegaard's distinction "between reading and reading."<sup>83</sup>

Each valid construal relates to the Bible as "rabbit" and "duck" relate to the well-worn rabbit-duck drawing<sup>84</sup> lifted out of gestalt psychology and popularized by Wittgenstein.<sup>85</sup> Some have used this as a model for the role of the imagination in theology, drawing connections between this model and Thomas Kuhn's work on paradigms in the natural sciences.<sup>86</sup> From one perspective the drawing depicts neither a rabbit nor a duck. Therefore neither construal is inevitable or excludes the other. From another perspective, however, the artist has produced a sketch that is intentionally ambiguous by simultaneously depicting both a rabbit and a duck. It would be a curious exercise to consider a construal alien to the artist's intention, such as "alligator." Is this also a valid construal of the drawing?

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<sup>83</sup> FSE, 27 (XII317).

<sup>84</sup> The Rabbit-duck Drawing:



Joseph Jastrow, *Fact and Fable in Psychology* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1900), 295.

<sup>85</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 194.

<sup>86</sup> See, for example, David Kelsey, *Imagining Redemption* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 99-102 and Garret Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1989), especially 49-54, 60-80.

What limits the range of valid construals or interpretations? The point here, however, is that Polk maintains that the content or subject matter of Scripture is the raw material with which the reader's imagination works and by which it is in some way limited, though just how is unclear. Again, "the facts are basic, but the explanation is decisive."<sup>87</sup>

Whether Kierkegaard would allow the possibility of multiple meanings or senses of the text of Scripture is not clear to me.<sup>88</sup> He may, as much of the pre-Reformation tradition did. But even then there were clear tendencies to limit the number of senses (often to four, as in the *quadriga*, or two, as in Nicholas of Lyra) and prioritize one sense over the others (as in Thomas Aquinas, who prioritizes the literal sense and identifies it with the sense intended by the divine author). Many Reformers and their Protestant orthodox heirs strengthened the priority of one sense over the others, affirming a single sense with multiple applications. Luther was not clear on this point but tends to move toward a single sense with multiple applications over the course of his ministry.<sup>89</sup> Later Lutherans defended the single sense of the text with multiple applications and it is likely that Kierkegaard would have too.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 50, cf. 76.

<sup>88</sup> Jolita Pons, *Stealing a Gift: Kierkegaard's Pseudonyms and the Bible* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 100-122, explores Kierkegaard's "deviations" where he departs from a strict translation or citation of the text when quoting Scripture. In her estimation Kierkegaard's practice evidences an intentionality that goes beyond faulty memory or the freedom in citation common to authors of his time. She identifies nine types of deviations, concluding that "some of the[se] 'misquotations' play a vital role in Kierkegaard's arguments," 101. Elaine Peterson, "Søren Kierkegaard's Use of Scripture in *Fear and Trembling* and *Three Edifying Discourses*" (M.C.S. Thesis: Regent College, April 1977), 49-52, and 59, also notes Kierkegaard's "interpretive additions" and "elaborations." Both authors overlook the common medieval practice of paraphrasing quotations as a way of commenting on meaning when citing. This has a very long Judeo-Christian tradition (Pons does note that some "deviations" appear in the Bible). Though this phenomenon does not correspond with either multiple senses or applications of the text it does suggest one more connection between Kierkegaard's exegetical method and practice and the precritical exegetical tradition.

<sup>89</sup> See James Samuel Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969), 153-271.

<sup>90</sup> This is strongly implied by his insistence that we read the Bible literally, though his definition of the literal sense would not be compatible with the impoverished historical-critical definition of the most primitive

This reconfiguration of the multiple senses of medieval exegesis into a paradigm of one sense entailing multiple applications should not be viewed as a rejection of or sharp break with the prior exegetical tradition so much as a modification of it consistent with the trajectory inherited by the Reformers and their heirs. By asserting one sense with multiple applications, Protestants sought to preserve the best of the medieval exegetical tradition in a Protestant form. To my knowledge Kierkegaard never directly addresses this issue. He does, however, apply the text quite freely and creatively in his writings and exemplifies that almost Puritan sensibility that no reading or exegesis is complete until the force of the text is fully brought to bear upon the contemporary reader or hearer. This is where he sees a vibrant role for the imagination—in recognizing these various applications of Scripture. But this is not the constitutive use of the imagination envisioned by Polk.

What is clear is that for Kierkegaard, as for Augustine, the divine author, rather than his readers, determines the meaning and range of appropriate applications of Scripture. This means that biblical exegesis is controlled by the divine author's intent, which extends as far as the efficacy of the text. Biblical efficacy is not to be reduced to or confused with an exegete's application of textual meaning to various contemporary issues. These issues will be

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meaning. Pons, *Stealing a Gift*, 98-99, stresses the importance of "literal reading" for Kierkegaard as a "supplement" and "corrective" to imagination and argues that the role of imagination in interpretation is to help "read *the* story literally, but—it is important to note—not as somebody else's actuality. Rather, as a possibility for us," 99. In addition to "interpretive additions" and "elaborations," Elaine Peterson, "Kierkegaard's Use of Scripture," briefly mentions Kierkegaard's claim to read Scripture at "face value" or "literally" (see EUD, 59), interpreting this claim as a commitment to the literal sense of the text, 44. She later briefly discusses Kierkegaard's "spiritual exegesis" in which Kierkegaard develops multiple contemporary applications of the literal sense of a text at various levels of personal identification with it. In an insightful but undeveloped comment Peterson states this: "Spiritual exegesis comes more easily to Kierkegaard. Because he viewed the Bible as the Word of God, he had no trouble seeing particular verses as speaking directly to him and his situation," 52.

explored in chapters four and five. For now it is enough to note that authorial intent is an important and in some sense governing exegetical category or criterion for Kierkegaard.

Authorial intent not only determines the content of a text but its proper function, too, which is also integral to its meaning. Polk notes the role of function in Kierkegaard's concept of textual meaning; he overlooks that textual function is grounded in authorial action, which is itself, as Vanhoozer observes,<sup>91</sup> determined by authorial intention.

Grounding function in authorial action allows us to connect authorial intent and meaning in a straightforward way that runs directly through authorial action and textual function.

Kierkegaard clearly believes that authorial intent involves more than just scribbling down intelligible notations (locutions) or making promises, disclosing information, issuing commands, and the like (illocutions). Authors intend to bring about particular effects by writing texts (perlocutions). Here is where a fascinating comparison with speech-act theory as applied to the Bible by Kevin Vanhoozer comes into focus. Vanhoozer proposes a model of the Bible as divine communication. This will be a central topic in chapter five.

Polk is correct to point to function as playing an important role in Kierkegaard's concept of Scripture and thoughts on exegetical method and practice. He even conceives of this function as coordinate with the perlocutionary effects of Scripture within the reading community (though he does not state it in these terms). Unlike Polk, however, Kierkegaard grounds function in authorial intent.

Here we stumble across an ancient problem in biblical exegesis. One possible basis for multiple senses of Scripture to which some have appealed is that there are multiple

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<sup>91</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 246-49.



authors of a single discourse and therefore multiple authorial intentions.<sup>92</sup> The human author may intend one thing and the divine author may intend another. Or the intentions of the original human author may have related entirely to the immediate historical occasion for writing whereas the intentions of later redactors or those who formed the canon may have related to a perceived normative use and meaning of the text. Perhaps the canonical intention is identical with the divine intention and perhaps not. So there could be as many intentions as there are authorial acts involved in the production of the received canonical text. But even if there were myriad authorial acts involved, though such a situation may seem intolerably complicated, the meaning or meanings would still be determined not by the contemporary reader but by those who have performed the various authorial acts. Only if the contemporary reader were to use this text to perform an authorial act could that reader determine its meaning. But when this occurs one ceases to be a reader and becomes an author (or speaker). Readers do not assume the same rights and responsibilities as authors when they act. They rather assume the rights and responsibilities of readers. The distinct rights and responsibilities belonging to each seem to distinguish the two kinds of acts: authorial acts and reading acts. It is a rebellious act for a reader to presume the rights of an author in the name of reading and it is confusion for a reader to attempt to fulfill the responsibilities of an author by means of reading.

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<sup>92</sup> See David C. Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Precritical Exegesis," *Theology Today* (April 1980): 27-38, who argues that in the precritical tradition "the meaning of Scripture in the mind of the prophet who first uttered it is only one of its possible meanings and may not, in certain circumstances, even be its primary or most important meaning." To support his case he cites, *inter alia*, Origen, Augustine, Cassian, Thomas, Nicholas of Lyra, and Luther. See also Brevard Childs, "The Sensus Literalis of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem," in *Beiträge zur Alttestamentlichen Theologie*, eds. H. Donner, R. Hanhart, and R. Smend (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1977), 80-93; and Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson, "The Significance of Precritical Exegesis: Retrospect and Prospect," in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 335-45.

That there could be two or more authorial acts and thus intentions involved in a single text may create a complex or even ambiguous exegetical situation similar to the situation of the viewer confronted with the rabbit-duck drawing. One may discern either a rabbit or a duck (or both) and explicate the drawing accordingly; likewise, one may discern in Scripture either the human intention or divine intention (or both) and explicate the text accordingly. Perhaps one may even detect multiple human intentions: the original author's, a later editor's, the community's who gathered and ordered the canon, a later copyist's who took the liberty of smoothing away difficult readings, etc. The divine intention may or may not be identical with one or some combination of the various human intentions. There is no reason to believe that the various human intentions are incompatible; they may complement one another. They may also be perfectly consistent with the divine intention. Inspiration, an article of faith for Kierkegaard, seems to imply that the words written by the human authors express the divine intention. Inspiration is not often construed in a way that also maintains that the human intentions are identical with the divine intention, though it does not preclude this. But whatever the relationship between the various intentions involved in the various authorial acts generative of the biblical text it remains the case that, like seeing either a rabbit or a duck in the drawing, the meaning of the text is determined by the author(s) and not readers.

Providing a sufficient account of what constitutes an authorial act, though important, does not fall within the scope of this dissertation. It is clear, however, that there are some rights and responsibilities an author enjoys that a reader does not.<sup>93</sup> Once one assumes these

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<sup>93</sup> Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 82-113.

rights and responsibilities vis-à-vis a text one has become an author. Metaphorically, Kierkegaard would have us all become authors of Scripture in and with our lives. Also metaphorically, like Paul, Kierkegaard would have his readers become his own glorious text as we live out the life he describes. But we may also become authors *with* Scripture (though not *of* Scripture) in a non-metaphorical way. This happens when we use Scripture to perform our own authorial acts. Such acts have to fulfill various necessary conditions to count as a use of Scripture and not a falsifying or counterfeiting abuse of Scripture. Not every use of Scripture counts as speaking or writing with Scripture. Among other conditions we must put Scripture to a use consistent with its divinely intended use.<sup>94</sup>

The larger point is this: reading the Bible is not the same as using it to perform authorial acts. To read is to attempt to discern what the author seeks to accomplish via his authorial act in order to make an appropriate response. The Bible reader's responsibilities are not fulfilled until one rightly responds to the divine will. In every passage the divine author demands something, or perhaps many things, of the reader even if the appropriate response is not made explicit in a command, admonition, exhortation, or the like.

Contrary to Polk, readers do not create meaning through their responses but rather respond to perceived meaning, whether the reader perceives the meaning rightly or not. This does not mean that readers are merely passive when reading. Nor does it relegate the reader's activity to merely the response one makes to the perceived meaning of the text. To read is to act, not just react; and Kierkegaard insists that the act of reading Scripture rightly and truly—that is, with saving benefit—requires courage, humility, trust, hope, patience,

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<sup>94</sup> One can think of the analogous case Lindbeck raises of the crusader who utters "Christus est Dominus" while "cleaving the skull of the infidel" with his battle axe. See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 66.

submission, and a host of other spiritual virtues. And yes, it requires both love and imagination, too, but not as Polk envisions. Most of all, reading Scripture for saving effect requires faith. Only by reading in faith can one overcome the inherent offensiveness of the word of God to sinners. Those who take offense, however, are in despair and recoil from the prospect of reading and resort to the various self-defensive strategies ranging from ignoring the Bible to reading it defiantly. Because the author's ultimate intent is the salvation of the reader, and because the possibility of offense is unavoidable, it turns out that it is impossible to read the Bible rightly without faith. One will either read the Bible for meaning by faith or read it in such a way so as to defend oneself against it, which is not really reading the Bible even if it involves performing reading acts with it.

But even apart from the peculiar case of Scripture, a reader assumes a set of rights and responsibilities that attend to readers. Kierkegaard realizes that reading is a morally significant and interesting act. Applying this insight to his analysis of biblical exegesis sets Kierkegaard's critique apart from those that treat reading as if it were a morally neutral enterprise. Polk, for example, is quite willing to speak of the immoralities of the Bible and the need to explain away its offensive elements, but is insufficiently critical of the morality of a model of reading as explaining away.<sup>95</sup> For him, reading might serve a moral end but the act itself is not treated as morally significant. So he argues that reading the Bible should serve the end of love and that love compels us to explain away the offensiveness of the Bible as we read it but he never questions whether explaining away satisfies the responsibilities of reading.

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<sup>95</sup> Polk's concept of the offensiveness of the Bible is significantly different from Kierkegaard's, it should be noted. See chapter five.

I am willing to grant that the judgment of charity may compel us to give others the benefit of any doubt we might have as to their culpability, including authors of texts. I also fully agree that where personal offense is involved love compels us to forgive the offender completely and freely. But whatever love demands of us in interpersonal relationships, Kierkegaard is convinced that reading aimed at explaining away the Bible's offensiveness is a deeply subversive strategy of self-defense, not generosity. Such an approach either fails to understand or else simply dismisses the author. Either way, on Kierkegaard's analysis it is a morally blameworthy way of misreading. It is precisely this kind of misreading that distorts Christianity into something convenient and comfortable to the cultured sensibilities of Christendom, whether in mid-nineteenth-century Europe or early-twenty-first-century America. So long as authorial acts and reading acts are confused—that is, the rights and responsibilities belonging to one kind of act are improperly attributed to the other—the moral edge of Kierkegaard's critique will be blunted.

Polk's post-liberal read of Kierkegaard passes over all of this by abandoning the Augustinian insistence on authorial intent as a quaint naïveté. His concept of Scripture is more like ink blots on a page, wide-open to being construed in disparate ways, each a potentially valid and morally neutral construal or interpretation, than it is a drawing of a rabbit-duck. There is no governing authorial intent and no determinate meaning or possibility of determinate meaning based on anything inherent in the text. The imaginative construal is decisive: "The facts are basic"—readers try to make sense out of *these* markings in *this* book and not some other set of markings in some other book; "But the explanation is decisive" because the imaginative construal is ultimately constitutive.

The priority in post-liberal exegetical approaches of “the creative imagination of the church” and the eclipse of “determinate meaning” is criticized by Brevard Childs.<sup>96</sup> Polk addresses Childs’ critique in two ways. First, he contends “that giving scripture its due as *formative* of the church’s creative imagination involves recognizing that the relationship between the two, scripture and imagination, is nonetheless dialectical.”<sup>97</sup> But as we have seen, the priority appears to fall on the side of the church’s creative imagination. As for the loss of “determinate meaning,” Polk is content to do without it and substitute in its place the “reasonable consensus” on “the literal sense” he believes “can often be reached within a given “interpretive community.”<sup>98</sup> But,

the construal of the Bible as scripture is irreducibly, inescapably, inexhaustibly imaginative. That implies a degree of persistent open-endedness in interpretation. No discursive, propositional formulation of the Rule of faith can so circumscribe any one of the gospel’s images as to preclude further argument over meaning, even within the context of canon and the community of faith.<sup>99</sup>

However strong the consensus, it is impossible to “limit . . . meaning to one meaning.”<sup>100</sup>

In sum, Polk reads Kierkegaard as requiring an imaginative construal of the Bible as Scripture to even see it as such, much less to exegete it accordingly or realize its subjective force. Construing the Bible as Scripture is by no means “inevitable.”<sup>101</sup> It is a choice one

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<sup>96</sup> Brevard Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 546. Childs concludes that Lindbeck’s “cultural-linguistic” model is “of mixed use in describing the theological function of the canon as scripture of the church.”

<sup>97</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 203.

<sup>98</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 203.

<sup>99</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 202.

<sup>100</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 203.

<sup>101</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 201.

makes as a reader imbedded in a particular reading community. How a constitutive version of the rule of faith can be built up out of the content of Scripture is not clear since it takes a prior imaginative construal of scripture according to the rule of faith to see it as such. This much is clear: he believes that, for Kierkegaard, the rule of faith functions constitutively in biblical exegesis, defining what one is reading and therefore how one is to read it and to what end. As such, the construal of the community decides what is and what is not essentially Christian. This, in turn, determines how the Bible is viewed and read within that community. That is a post-liberal version of the Church theory.

### ***3.4 Kierkegaard's Treatment of the Bible***

Polk's version of the Church theory—which he reads out of Kierkegaard—falls into the eternal parenthesis into which the naïveté of objectivity inevitably leads. This happens because all objective approaches raise questions they cannot conclude. The effect, so Kierkegaard maintains, is to indefinitely defer the actual reading of God's word until these preliminary, objective questions receive conclusive answers. Kierkegaard does not deny that open-ended questions exist or that there is value in raising them; indeed, they play an important role in his critique of this kind of naïveté and in reason's self-critique. He instead points to their open-endedness as a sign of the futility of a merely objective approach to biblical exegesis and a symptom of a deeper spiritual or psychological issue at play. In this light he calls contemporary readers to admit that they are going about the exegetical task wrongly—that they have embraced a faulty methodological paradigm and turned into an exegetical cul-de-sac. What both the church and academy of Christendom call earnestness is not earnest at all *coram Scriptura*, *coram Deo*, or even *coram se*.

Repenting of what begins to look like the self-serving deceit of objectivity *coram Scriptura* would be the reaction of an honest exegete who is truly earnest about reading God's word. That we embrace "the limitless horizons of prolixity"<sup>102</sup> and even celebrate such prolixity as a noble scholarly enterprise, delighting ourselves in it as a profoundly fruitful program of study rich in insights and advances *for faith*, publicly betrays our lack of earnestness *coram Deo*. It is the way a guilty person acts when the police are diverted on a wild-goose chase: there's something deeply suspicious at work here.

Polk's version of the Church theory calls all would-be readers and exegetes to shoulder the "burden of discernment"—distinguishing "the good news of a living Lord/Word" from "the cultural prejudices and limited horizons of the biblical writers." On his proposal the meaning of Scripture cannot be decided until we first determine what in the Bible is God's word. This process can take on a variety of forms, from the crude picking and choosing between different texts and passages within the canon to the sometimes sophisticated idealist hermeneutic used by thinkers like Kant and Hegel. Polk belongs to the idealist camp and reads Kierkegaard as though he did too—everything must be construed and exegeted in terms of a preconceived ideal of love in order to discern what is of abiding significance for the contemporary reader. He seeks a construal of the Bible, given "its manifold shortcomings" and "barbarisms," that reasonable, enlightened contemporaries can receive as divinely authoritative good news.

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<sup>102</sup> This is Walter Lowrie's translation of the phrase "uoverskuelige Vidtløftighed," see the 1941 Princeton edition of FSE. Hong and Hong have published two different translations of this phrase: "tedious verbosity" (1940 Augsburg edition) and "enormously complicated" (1990 Princeton edition). I prefer "prolixity" for *vidtløftighed* for several reasons. Among these, "prolixity," contrary to "complexity," retains the sense of verbosity *vidtløftighed* often involves. Prolixity also suggests the endless deferral of getting to the point central to Kierkegaard's critique of exegetical method and practice.



### 3.4.1 Polk's Exclusion and Embrace of the Bible

Thus, Polk attempts to simultaneously exclude and embrace the Bible. Polk excludes the concept of Scripture found in “pre-critical orthodoxies,” along with all contemporary views of the Bible that locate its authority in “inherent ‘properties’ or ‘characteristics’ that might be claimed for the writings,” such as divine inspiration,<sup>103</sup> as “oppressively closed-ended, ‘dogmatic’ in the pejorative sense.”<sup>104</sup> One way to understand his rejection of Protestant orthodox concepts of Scripture is as a simple choice against this construal based upon various reasons that appeal to the community of readers to which he belongs. This is the basis of his rejection of the construal “classic,” for example.

It is not clear to me on what grounds Polk can exclude any particular construal or concept of Scripture. He argues that no particular construal is determined by the Bible. The construal “classic” is to “scripture” in relation to the Bible what the construal “rabbit” is to “duck” in relation to the rabbit-duck drawing:

Insofar as neither construal, scripture or classic, is inevitable, there is an element of freedom in their adoption. If the reader is at all self-aware, he or she makes a choice between them, and choosing among options entails *imagining* them: comparing them in the mind's eye, grasping their forms, projecting the processes and probable effects of their application. This is part of what it means to call the construals “imaginative.”<sup>105</sup>

As the mind toggles back and forth, comparing two or more paradigms, it evaluates the implications of each and freely chooses between them. “Another part of what it means” to

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<sup>103</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 74, 75.

<sup>104</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 202.

<sup>105</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 201-2.

call the construals imaginative, he writes, “is that any given construal . . . of the Bible . . . is irreducibly, inescapably, inexhaustibly imaginative.”<sup>106</sup> As such, it is impossible to absolutely exclude an alternative construal; one simply chooses between alternatives.

This raises a problem Polk glides past: namely, the location of the reader in relationship to the Bible when evaluating (or criticizing) different imaginative paradigms. Is there a position outside every imaginative paradigm one can occupy to make an objective evaluation? Polk denies that there is—we are always imagining the Bible one way or another, as this or that. It is also impossible to extract oneself from one’s subjectivity, history, and situation.<sup>107</sup> Presumably, the only way to try would be through the imagination, and Polk insists that the imagination is always formed and informed by “the concrete particularities of the common life of the community” to which the reader belongs and of which the reader “is a product.”<sup>108</sup> Just as every reader belongs to a community, so also every reader “inescapably” operates under a particular imaginative paradigm: “the construal is always ‘logically prior’ to any particular textual exegesis.”<sup>109</sup> And just as one can only read under a particular imaginative paradigm so also one can only evaluate or criticize other imaginative paradigms from within a particular imaginative paradigm.

If the evaluation and criticism of other paradigms is this paradigm dependent, one wonders, given his anti-foundationalist epistemology, how Polk avoids radical relativism. Coherence and function alone, even when expanded to include the beliefs and practices of

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<sup>106</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 202.

<sup>107</sup> Cf. Polk’s embrace of the label “fideist,” *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 88.

<sup>108</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 12. Polk cites Kelsey, *Uses of Scripture*, 193.

<sup>109</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 12.

the interpretive community, are insufficient. Augustine believed it was possible to have a coherent exegesis that functioned effectively and still be wrong about the meaning of the text. Kierkegaard is convinced that ways of reading the Bible other than the way he advocates are ways of misreading, not viable alternatives. But on Polk's read, Kierkegaard would view other approaches as valid ways of construing and reading the text that cannot be absolutely excluded. Marcion, Augustine, Bultmann, and Barth represent nothing more than alternative, even if mutually exclusive, ways of construing and reading the Bible.

Polk does not refrain from "ruling certain construals as out of the ballpark,"<sup>110</sup> or criticizing others as naïve, severe, wanting, and so on. He proposes organizing the great diversity of possible construals according to family resemblances. It turns out, for example, that there is not just one construal of the Bible *as classic* but a set of such construals.<sup>111</sup> More to the point here, Polk proposes that,

Kierkegaard's 'vision of love' constitute[s] a construal prior even to the 'logically prior' construals Kelsey speaks of, one that . . . [is] capable of ruling those other construals so that, despite their irreducible diversity, they retain a family resemblance as Christian.<sup>112</sup>

Construals that count as "Christian" are those ruled by the supposedly Augustinian-Kierkegaardian constitutive *regula fidei* of love. Construals not so ruled are "ruled as out of the ballpark" or "Christian" family. In other words, they are non-Christian construals.<sup>113</sup>

It is not clear that Polk admits the construal of the Bible *as inspired* into the Christian family. Following Kelsey's definitions, Polk initially treats the construal of the Bible "as an

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<sup>110</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 6.

<sup>111</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 20-21.

<sup>112</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 13.

<sup>113</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 13.

inspired set of inerrant doctrines” as an option within the Christian family of construals.<sup>114</sup> But his criticism of this construal is rather severe in places and his rejection of it appears absolute. The construal of the Bible *as inspired* is not open to being ruled by a constitutive application of the *regula fidei* of love and therefore cannot be admitted to the Christian family of construals. To be so ruled is required precisely because the Bible, as it stands and is received, is not consistent with love in all its teachings. Therefore there must be an imaginative construal to loosen the relationship between the Bible and “scripture” or “God’s word” in order to allow for the “mitigating explanation” that is suppose to be the genius of Kierkegaard’s exegetical method and practice. Any construal that takes the Bible as it stands to be identical with God’s word is a form of idolatry—namely, bibliolatry.

#### 3.4.2 How to Handle a Guilty, Barbaric Text

Polk feels compelled to adopt the construal regime as a way to deal with the many embarrassing and deeply disturbing *teachings* he finds in the Bible.<sup>115</sup> He finds the Bible so offensive that it cannot be received as Scripture just as it stands. Polk’s driving question is “how Kierkegaard might help Christians read the Bible as scripture in the face of its manifold shortcomings: its patriarchalism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, sectarian anxieties, and other such barbarisms that give us offense.”<sup>116</sup> He believes Kierkegaard does so by

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<sup>114</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 11.

<sup>115</sup> Polk would not be nearly as disturbed if the barbaric and immoral element in Scripture were restricted to its descriptive narratives. It is only to the degree that the barbaric and immoral belongs to or enters into the didactic aspect of Scripture that it becomes problematic. Also, the barbaric and immoral aspect Polk perceives is not restricted to just one or two points of doctrine but is “systemic,” seated “deep within the fabric of the writings themselves” (13), being rooted in the “cultural prejudices and limited horizons of the biblical writers” (viii).

<sup>116</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 91.

showing us how to construe the Bible according to the *regula fidei* of love and read it accordingly. This is the genius of Kierkegaard's approach to Scripture:

scripture is the “**guilty one**” to be explained, a rich repository of oppression freighted with the hypocrisy of easy wisdom, patriarchy, ethnic prejudice, etc. Kierkegaard would have us read this guilty text with suspended judgment until, lovingly, forgivingly, we find the “**mitigating explanation.**”<sup>117</sup>

Polk finds the Bible “offensive” and in need of a “mitigating explanation,” which in practice looks very much like explaining away its offensiveness. Offense *coram Scriptura* compels him to adopt the construal regime and to construe the Bible according to the *regula fidei* of love.

Polk finds Kelsey's analysis descriptively compelling; but his interest is more prescriptive than descriptive: in how one can use the construal regime to deal with certain unacceptable teachings he finds in the Bible. That offense compels Polk is exactly what Kierkegaard's critique would lead us to suspect. No one is exempt from the possibility of taking offense at God's word; we are all called to earnest self-examination *coram Scriptura*.

One might reasonably expect the reader who construes the Bible as Scripture according to the *regula fidei* of love would be blind to its offensive teachings. After all, this construal of the Bible according to the *regula fidei* of love supposedly defines the text and its literal sense in a way that its offensiveness no longer comes into view. But this is obviously not what happens. On the contrary, Polk's construal begins by seeing the text as “the guilty one” in need of a “mitigating explanation” in order to hide its multiplicity of sins. One wonders what it would look like to simply construe the Bible *as innocent* or even *as inerrant*. But Polk flatly dismisses this possibility; he is certain it is riddled with immoral and barbaric

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<sup>117</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 52 (emphasis original).

teachings that cannot simply be deemed divine but must be mitigated and somehow excluded from God's word.

But prior to construing the Bible according to the constitutive *regula fidei* of love Polk apparently reads it under some other paradigm by which he finds it "guilty" of espousing various immoral and false (or at least intolerable) teachings. These teachings must then be explained away in order to esteem the Bible as Scripture. To construe the Bible as Scripture is to commit oneself to an exegetical method and practice that mitigates and explains away its offensive teachings. Having first excluded the Bible from counting as Scripture just as it stands (offensive teachings included and unmitigated), he then seeks and believes he has found in Kierkegaard a way to re-construe the Bible that enables him and other morally enlightened contemporaries to embrace it as Scripture. This works in large part because to construe the Bible is to construe its literal sense, meaning, and even to change it into a different text.<sup>118</sup> Now the Bible appears to teach only what is consistent with the reading community's idea of love, though at first it taught many things contrary to this rule.

Under what paradigm is the Bible initially read and found offensive that compels Polk to embrace the construal regime? Was he then reading under the imaginative paradigm of the rule of love? If so, there is actually a double hermeneutic involved: "love" reads the text at "face value,"<sup>119</sup> let us say, and is initially offended. Unwilling to give up so easily,

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<sup>118</sup> See, for example, Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 8-9, 57-58, 87-88, and elsewhere.

<sup>119</sup> Cf. Kierkegaard's claim in EUD, 59 (III 277), that the "apostle's words, . . . in order to be understood must be taken literally" or, as David and Lillian Swenson, *Edifying Discourses*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943), translate it: "the apostolic word . . . must be taken at its face value," 66. Ironically, the "apostolic word" Kierkegaard has in view in this discourse as needing to be read "literally" or at "face value" is 1 Peter 4:7-12 on the ability of love to hide a multitude of sins. This is the same passage and topic Kierkegaard is treating in the passage Polk lifts out of *Works of Love* (280f) and, subjecting it to an allegorical interpretation, makes his "focus text."

“love” then goes to work seeking a mitigating exegesis that is able to explain away the offense and bring its message into conformity with itself. But it is only this second moment that involves construing the Bible *according to the regulae fidei* of love. The first interpretive moment did not exegete the Bible according to the rule of love or it would have not found it to teach things offensive or contrary to love. Given his claim to have derived the *regula fidei* of love from the content of the Bible, this first interpretive moment must discern the priority of love in the Bible in the midst of many contrary and unloving teachings and then elevate it to a constitutive rule. But the question remains: what paradigm or imaginative construal does Polk initially presuppose that sees “manifold shortcomings” and “barbarisms” (together with the priority of divine love) in the Bible that then compels him to re-construe the Bible according to the *regula fidei* of love such that he can explain away all of the contrary teachings? And how can he be certain that these other teachings are *in fact* contrary to love? Polk maintains that it is impossible to arrive at a determinate exegesis of any passage. So it is always possible that Polk and others simply misread these passages. But even more problematic is the conclusion we seem forced, on his logic, to draw: that his (or anyone’s) finding offense can only ever be a product of their imaginative paradigm. It is only because Polk chooses to read the Bible this way that he finds these passages offensive. After all, “the explanation is decisive,” Polk continuously reminds us.

At this point the Bible is in grave danger of becoming a wax nose—the mutable, pliable face of a faith that with the right twist this way or that is able to accommodate whatever one brings to it or whatever use to which one puts it, however contrary or alien to the biblical message itself. After all, “the possibilities are limited only by the imagination as it

encounters the shifting historical situations of human communities.”<sup>120</sup> Polk admits that there is no way “to prevent ingeniously self-interested readers—i.e. each and every one of us—from making malevolent use and self-deceptive sense of scripture.”<sup>121</sup> Kierkegaard would agree, and he suspects subtle forms of such exegetical abuse dominate exegetical method and practice in Christendom. This is in many ways the heart of his critique. But Polk interprets Kierkegaard as proposing an exegetical paradigm model that seems to represent precisely this kind of phenomenon. Under the construal regime we lack the ability to demonstrate that our imaginative construal and exegesis of the text is anything other than a “malevolent use” of the Bible. The most one can hope to offer are reasons why *this* imaginative construal or exegesis is consistent with and functions according to the reading community’s sense of how things are and ought to be.

Kierkegaard’s critique, however, is filled with the certainty of a faith that is convinced it has a hold of a reality greater than itself or its community’s sense of things. This faith knows that the Bible is the word of God for all people at all times and in all places and that only those who read it accordingly read it rightly. Kierkegaard’s critique is not grounded in the reader’s construal but in the objective nature and function of the Bible as God’s word. It is because the Bible is inherently God’s word just as it stands—that it functions as it does both in causing offense and saving sinners. For Kierkegaard, the Bible is not guilty; but the reader almost certainly is.

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<sup>120</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 12.

<sup>121</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 4.



## CHAPTER 4

### AUTHORITY, INTENTION, AND EFFICACY

#### *4.1 Introduction*

Clarifying Kierkegaard's concept of Scripture as the word of God, the task taken up in chapter three, remains the central task of chapter four. Here, however, our focus is on the intersection between textual meaning and efficacy. Kierkegaard's concept of biblical meaning is distinct from both Polk's post-liberal proposal (and reading of Kierkegaard) and Vanhoozer's theory of meaning as communicative action; it is also deeply informed by the Lutheran orthodox concept of the efficacy of Scripture as God's written word. Having demonstrated in chapter three that Polk's proposal renders biblical meaning and efficacy relative to each reading community's construal of the text, the present chapter will demonstrate that this view is unable to account for Kierkegaard's concept of meaning—that textual meaning is determined by the author's intentions. But Kierkegaard also conceives of biblical meaning as geared to each individual reader's subjectivity. Kierkegaard does not advocate anything like the construal regime proposed by Polk. His concept of biblical meaning is a form of "hermeneutic realism." Yet there is, as Polk perceives, a reader-relative aspect to Kierkegaard's concept of biblical meaning and efficacy. Therefore the form of hermeneutic realism found in Kierkegaard defies Vanhoozer's rather strict dichotomy

between hermeneutic realism and non-realism. It is not surprising, then, that Vanhoozer's proposal of meaning as communicative action is also unable to accommodate Kierkegaard's concept of the meaning and efficacy of Scripture. By exploring Kierkegaard's concept of biblical meaning and efficacy in relation to Polk's construal regime and Vanhoozer's communicative-action theory, the distinctiveness of Kierkegaard's contribution to the contemporary debate on theological exegesis will come into sharper focus. The exegetically significant contours of Kierkegaard's distinct contribution to theological exegesis explored in this chapter include the nature of textual and biblical authority, the significance of authorial intentions for meaning, and the efficacy of God's word. Ultimately we will come to see that Kierkegaard's distinctive contribution to theological exegesis is deeply informed by the orthodox Lutheran concept of biblical efficacy.

#### ***4.2 Imagination Run Amok***

The ability to accommodate the spirit of the age by construing the Bible as inoffensive to contemporary sensibilities seems, on Kierkegaardian terms, to be an evil of possibly demonic proportions.<sup>1</sup> This is the kind of exegetical abuse the Bible is subjected to within Christendom that he is determined to expose as anti-Christian. Where Polk "sees" embarrassing "barbarisms" that call readers of the Bible to shoulder a "burden of

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<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard reflects at length on the demonic under the pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis in CA, 118f (IV 386f), and under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus in SUD, 71-74, 108-10. In CA the demonic consists in "anxiety about the good" as opposed to "anxiety about the evil," 119 (IV 387). In SUD this demonic anxiety, a kind of despair over sin, is a conscious "effort to give stability and interest to sin as a power by deciding once and for all that one will refuse to hear anything about repentance and grace," 110 (XI 220).

discernment,” distinguishing what is God’s word from what is not,<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard pronounces the undivided whole “God’s Word” and calls readers to suffer the “martyrdom of faith.”<sup>3</sup> Polk claims that the “burden of discernment” is thrust on us by the gospel and that we cannot exegete God’s word in the Bible until we have first distinguished this word from the “systemic prejudice and vice deep within the fabric of the writings themselves.”<sup>4</sup> The aim is to construe the Bible in a sufficiently accommodating fashion, “however great the imaginative strain.”<sup>5</sup>

There is a paradox here: though every particular construal is decisive, no construal can be taken to be determinate. The decisiveness of any particular imaginative construal for determining the text and its meaning, to which Polk frequently appeals, is not only rule-dependent but always circumscribed by a greater indeterminacy. If by the “persistent open-endedness in interpretation”<sup>6</sup> Polk merely meant that every particular exegesis of the text fails to exhaust its meaning, this would be unobjectionable—and this is certainly part of what he means.<sup>7</sup> But his argument involves a more radical indeterminacy. The indeterminacy he has in view is not just the kind of indeterminacy that attends inexhaustibility of meaning; it is

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<sup>2</sup> Polk, *The Biblical Kierkegaard: Reading by the Rule of Faith* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), viii.

<sup>3</sup> CUP, 30-31 (VII 19-20).

<sup>4</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 206.

<sup>6</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 202.

<sup>7</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 71, 203, sometimes uses the phrase “*fully* determinate” when making this point to try to emphasize what I take to be the inexhaustibility of meaning. He also, however, adamantly denies the possibility that “there is only one right reading” even when alternative readings may be mutually exclusive, 66.

indeterminacy between competing alternatives, whether those competing alternatives are between divergent interpretations, ways of reading, or even imaginative construals of the text. Under the construal regime such indeterminacy at any level goes all the way down. Alternative interpretations arise out of alternative ways of reading that arise out of alternative imaginative construals of the text.

Because construals are constitutively decisive, such indeterminacy is semantic and not merely epistemic. The problem is not just that we cannot know which alternative is right or wrong but that there are multiple viable construals, right ways of reading, and valid interpretations even among conflicting alternatives. Indeterminacy between alternatives, then, tends toward a kind of exegetical relativism: “The numbers and kinds of *right* reading possible are indefinite, as are the contextual situations in and for which they are produced.”<sup>8</sup> The imaginative task of discerning God’s word in and from the Bible may arrive at a construal or exegesis it is pleased to take as decisive, but under the construal regime the reader is never entitled to hold to this construal as definitive—not even for one’s own community of readers.<sup>9</sup> It is impossible that the burden of discernment can ever be laid aside because it is impossible for a reader to reach a final conclusion on the matter. There is always one more way the Bible can cause offense, one more way to construe the text, one more interpretation to be considered, one more situation “in and for” which to read.

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<sup>8</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 66 (emphasis mine).

<sup>9</sup> Polk believes that readers read by a rule particular to their community of readers that excludes or “rules out” other alternatives. When Christians speak of right ways of reading or right interpretations they are really saying something like this: this way of reading or this interpretation does not violate the rules of the exegetical game we choose to play.

Though “a reasonable consensus can often be reached” within a particular community of readers, “[d]ifferences rooted in image and imagination will remain.”<sup>10</sup> The reader can never say, with finality and certainty, that this message is God’s word; the most one can claim is that this is what I take God to be saying to me or us at this time and in this situation. The corollary is that inspiration and authority are primarily located in the act of interpretation. This, he believes, is what reading by the rule of faith entails; it is certainly what he envisions under the construal regime and the approach he claims Kierkegaard advocates.<sup>11</sup>

Kierkegaard’s critique cuts against Polk: there is only one right way of reading and that way must accept the offensiveness of the Bible as from God himself; every other approach is a way to misread the Bible that takes offense and reacts against God’s word in despair *coram Scriptura*. We will explore the nature and exegetical implications of this offensiveness in chapter five. The point here is that Polk’s construal regime represents is an explicit reaction against the offensiveness of the Bible and as such is a form of misreading.

Somewhat surprisingly, the construal regime turns out to be very similar to the regime of objective demonstration at certain points; the former is a reign of the imagination, the latter a reign of reason. Both reason and imagination are presented under their respective regimes as able to justify or provide a foundation for faith in the practice of biblical exegesis. Kierkegaard is convinced that although faith reasons and imagines, neither rational demonstrations nor imaginative construals provides a sure foundation or represents

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<sup>10</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 203.

<sup>11</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 65-71.

a required starting point for faith *coram Scriptura*. On the contrary, such approaches to Scripture arise out of despair or unbelief and only feed the “monster” of doubt.<sup>12</sup>

This is not to say that reason and imagination have no role to play in exegesis. Catherine Pickstock notes that Polk is trying to “defend the approach of the ‘Yale School’ both from those postmodernists who deny the idea of a canon, and ultra-traditionalists who object to the exercise of imagination in reading the Bible.”<sup>13</sup> Both she and Polk seem to overlook that there are many ways of taking the imagination seriously, Polk’s proposal representing just one alternative. They are right to highlight the role of the imagination in Kierkegaard but wrong to ascribe it the role they do—or claim Kierkegaard does. As Pickstock herself points out, Kierkegaard was “extremely suspicious of the role of our imagination, because he thinks that this tends to lead us to substitute our own ideal reality for the actual world in which we seek various forms of melancholic consolation.”<sup>14</sup> It seems, however, that the construal regime Polk proposes is designed to allow exactly this kind of censorious exercise of the imagination. As such it is directly contrary to Kierkegaard’s intention in “What Is Required.”

Both reason and imagination play very important roles in Kierkegaard’s exegetical practice. But just as reason’s role is not magisterial but ministerial so also imagination’s role is neither magisterial nor constitutive. The imagination may be subject to divine influence but neither it nor its interpretative acts are the location of biblical inspiration or authority.

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<sup>12</sup> FSE, 68 (XII 352).

<sup>13</sup> Catherine Pickstock, “Review of *The Biblical Kierkegaard*,” *Modern Theology* 15 (October 1999): 524-25.

<sup>14</sup> Pickstock, “Review of *The Biblical Kierkegaard*,” 525.

For Kierkegaard, although the divine inspiration of the Bible cannot be rationally demonstrated and is an article of faith, it is posited of the text, not the reader. It is the text that must be accepted by faith as God's written word and read accordingly. It is not an act of the reader's imagination that constitutes the canonical text as God's word even though the imagination may help one grasp the weighty implications or *skandalon* of its meaning.

So, just as the effective preacher will reason with his parishioners so also he will find the imagination a useful instrument for drawing out the subjective significance of the text for the auditor. Jolita Pons summarizes the role of the imagination in Kierkegaard's approach to biblical exegesis like this:

Despite the prominent role that imagination plays in his authorship and in his approach to the Bible in particular, Kierkegaard's views on imagination are ambiguous in that according to him, if imagination is allowed to rule alone, it dissolves moral tension. As a supplement (and corrective) to imagination, Kierkegaard speaks about the need to understand the Bible literally. . . . One could say that imagination in Kierkegaard is employed not to make interpretation easier, but on the contrary to bring forward all the difficulty and uncertainty (*skandalon*, the subjective, the choice). . . . Imagination serves a double dialectical goal: we are given imagined stories [in *Fear and Trembling*, for example,] so that we will read *the* story literally, but—it is important to note—not as somebody else's actuality. Rather as a possibility for us.<sup>15</sup>

Imagination serves a supportive role employed for the purpose of clarifying the full, scandalous, subjective force of the "literal sense" or meaning of the text. To this end the imagination helps us relate ourselves rightly to the message of the text and via the text to its author: imagination helps us to find ourselves in the story, understand ourselves as those addressed, commanded, rebuked, called, exhorted, prayed for, and so on. It helps us feel the

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<sup>15</sup> Jolita Pons, *Stealing a Gift: Kierkegaard's Pseudonyms and the Bible* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 98-99.

weight of contemporaneity with Christ *coram Scriptura*—that God himself is addressing his word to the readers of this text here and now. It does not, however, constitute the Bible as God’s word; the Bible is this objectively. The role of the imagination with respect to the subjective significance of the text is roughly parallel to the role of reason with respect to the doctrinal content of the text—both play an important, constructive, subservient role to help us conceive and articulate the subjective and objective dimensions of the text’s meaning. Yet both reason and imagination are faculties of fallen human beings and subject to crafty, self-serving manipulation. Therefore both must be employed with great care and self-examination and are only rightfully used in biblical exegesis by faith.

To further illustrate the point we could easily substitute “construal” for “demonstration” in Kierkegaard’s critique of rational demonstration and accurately summarize his position on imaginative construal:

Here lies the difficulty. . . . For whose sake is the demonstration conducted [construal imagined]? Faith does not need it, indeed, must even consider it its enemy. When faith, however, begins to feel ashamed of itself, . . . that is, when faith begins to cease to be faith, then the demonstration [construal] is made necessary in order to enjoy general esteem from unbelief. . . . Faith taken in vain . . . will not and cannot, of course, bear the martyrdom of faith.<sup>16</sup>

Faith in rational demonstrations is not Christian or saving; on Kierkegaardian terms faith in imaginative construals is not Christian or saving either. Although both the rational and the imaginative forms of belief may have a legitimacy of their own, they fall short of Christian

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<sup>16</sup> CUP, 30-31 (VII 19-20).



faith and seem rather to serve unbelief, which balks at offense *coram Scriptura* and seeks an escape or diversion.

Polk proposes and reads Kierkegaard as proposing an exegetical method and practice aimed at avoiding offense *coram Scriptura*. For Polk, the Bible is embarrassingly out of step with the spirit of the age and must be accommodated—he claims a moral imperative and divine mandate to do so—to the sensibilities of readers who have “discovered” just how “deep” and “systemic” the text’s “prejudice” and “vice” are.<sup>17</sup> Contemporary readers recognize “the oppression enshrined in Christian scripture”<sup>18</sup> and discern how much this “rich repository of oppression” is “freighted with the hypocrisy of easy wisdom, patriarchy, ethnic prejudice, etc.”<sup>19</sup> For Polk, it is apparently unimaginable that this initial read or exegesis of the Bible might be wrong in the old-fashioned sense of contrary to the authorial intent. (Ironically, reading for authorial intent is evidently Polk’s basic, pre-construal habit of reading.) What is more, these discoveries—discoveries apparently undetected through centuries of close, careful exegesis—prove fatal for taking the Bible, in its entirety and just as it stands, as God’s word. God simply could not be thought to hold to or teach such offensive things; a distinction must be made between the Bible as the product and embodiment of deeply immoral human perspectives and Scripture as God’s word. Either we must abandon the Bible altogether or re-imagine it, however much it strains credulity, as God’s word.

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<sup>17</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 91.

<sup>19</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 52.

If these are the horns of the dilemma—to either abandon the Bible or imagine it as God’s word despite itself—then perhaps Polk ought to be commended for his creative attempt to hold onto the priority of the Bible for the church and thereby claim the grand sweep of Christian exegetical tradition. Polk is trying very hard to revitalize a broadly orthodox concept of Scripture for a postmodern age. Given his presuppositions, he is taking a bold and decisive stand with Scripture over against those who would simply abandon it. Kierkegaard, however, believes the more honest response under such presuppositions would be to lay the Bible aside.

Kierkegaard is convinced that reading in reaction to offense amounts to a crafty exegetical perversion. His critique leads us to reject the construal regime as likely a defiant form of exegetical despair. The argument of the previous chapter maintained that Polk reads Kierkegaard as advocating what amounts to a post-liberal version of the Church theory—a theory Kierkegaard has Climacus reject in *Postscript*. In the next section of this chapter we will carry some of the central points of that argument forward as we turn to the issue of textual meaning and efficacy.

### ***4.3 Rule-dependent Meaning and Efficacy***

As noted in the last chapter, Polk insists that the Bible is potentially efficacious as instruction only for those who so construe it: “the Rule potentiates scripture’s instructional efficacy,” he argues, “by declaring it.”<sup>20</sup> What is true for “instructional efficacy” is true for

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<sup>20</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 87.

other kinds of efficacy that may be ascribed to Scripture: there is a radical “Rule-dependency”<sup>21</sup> involved in Polk’s concept of biblical efficacy. So long as a reader of the Bible does not imagine that it is efficacious in some particular way it will lack that potential and not be efficacious in that way for that reader. The efficacy of Scripture is not the only thing implicated in this radical “Rule-dependency” of the imaginative construal regime; so also is the Bible’s meaning or literal sense.

This rule-dependency undermines Kierkegaard’s critique. For Polk, the meaning and efficacy of Scripture is undetermined by the author or the text, though the text may impose certain limitations upon the reader’s imagination. Such indeterminacy of meaning and efficacy might at first seem to empower Bible readers who no longer need to submit and respond to the author’s intended meaning and efficacy. Free to supply the meaning and determine the efficacy of the text for themselves, readers make of the Bible whatever they want or seems best to them or their community—an artifact, novel, textbook, classic, collection of sacred writings, divine discourse, repository of oppressive ideologies, expression of God-consciousness, projection of human self-consciousness, myth, folklore, socio-political manifesto, or even an ambiguous, indeterminate text to be used and construed however seems to best serve the interests and needs of each community of Bible users.

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<sup>21</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 86.

#### 4.3.1 *The Construal Regime Construal of the Bible*

Polk's argument presents the construal regime as a descriptively accurate account of the Bible's malleability, accommodating a great variety of ways people "see" and "read" the Bible. Taken as a purely descriptive account of the way people handle the Bible, I believe Polk's analysis is at times extremely insightful. It is characterized by the kind of descriptive brilliance that post-liberal theology sometimes exemplifies. Taken as a description of what the Bible actually is and how it properly functions, however, it is highly controversial and a relatively recent proposal that is out of step with roughly two millennia of Christian biblical exegesis. As a theory it is highly peculiar to the particular sensibilities of postmodern American society including its anti-foundational epistemic stance and commitment to religious pluralism. It is also inconsistent with Kierkegaard's view of Scripture and exegetical method and practice. The exegetical pluralism Polk describes he proceeds to license; yet what Polk licenses Kierkegaard criticizes in extraordinarily vivid language as the deceitful schemes of sinners in despair before God and his word.

To read the Bible *as scripture* according to the *regula fidei* of love is, according to Polk, one of many possible ways of construing the Bible. Despite his commitment to an even more fundamental indeterminacy, he fails to note or explore, at least within the pages of *The Biblical Kierkegaard*, that the construal regime already presupposes a peculiar, highly particular, community-specific, imaginative construal of the Bible as construable in a plurality of ways.

We observed in the last chapter that Polk's proposal involves an undisclosed double hermeneutic: first the Bible is apparently read according to the human author's intended meaning which is found to be quite offensive, at least to postmodern American sensibilities;

then it is construed according to a concept of love that explains away the offensive elements and read again under this new exegetical paradigm. So construed the Bible is supposedly enabled to function and be read as in some way divinely authoritative for the reader despite being an historically conditioned, sin-riddled text. Though the offense itself is not removed from the Bible, the Bible is distinguished from Scripture, “the living Word/Lord,” such that the offensiveness of the text is conceptually isolated from God’s word, capable of being explained away, and dismissed as not applicable to contemporary readers.

Here we observe a similar but distinct doubling involved in the construal regime itself. In order for the construal regime to be applicable to the Bible, the Bible must be capable of being construed in various ways—that is, it must be properly construable. To be properly construable, however, it must be in certain relevant ways like the rabbit-duck drawing: ambiguous and indeterminate (though even the rabbit-duck drawing is determined to be what it is by its artist). It turns out that this concept of the Bible as properly construable is itself a construal of the Bible—a construal of it as ambiguous enough to properly accommodate and justify a diversity of conflicting imaginative construals.

The question is not whether the Bible *can* be subjected to the various imaginative construals of its readers—clearly it can be and is. Again, Polk’s analysis is quite insightful on this point: readers do construe the Bible in various ways for various reasons related to various uses, and exegete it accordingly. The question is not even whether the Bible ought to be or must be imaginatively construed by its readers. It seems plausible that every reader necessarily imagines the Bible (or whatever other text they may be reading) as something and that this is an essential component in the structure of reading. The question here is whether

the Bible is such that readers' imaginative construals are decisive for determining the meaning or literal sense and efficacy of the text. This is the position Vanhoozer identifies as hermeneutic anti-realism. This is not how the Bible has been understood throughout the sweep of the Christian exegetical tradition prior to the advent of post-liberalism; neither is it the way Kierkegaard conceived of the Bible. As stated above, this construal seems to be peculiar to contemporary American post-liberal theology. Yet Polk presupposes this construal—the construal of the Bible as properly construable in a plurality of ways—as an absolute, universal, and descriptively accurate account of what the Bible actually is and how it functions. He makes this particular construal the foundation of his exegetical proposal and employs it to underwrite the construal regime.

Needless to say, not everyone agrees that the Bible is so ambiguous that readers are warranted to construe it any way that works for them or their respective communities. Even if the meaning of the Bible was thought to be ambiguous all the way down, it does not follow that the construal regime would be warranted. Likewise, even if the offensiveness of the Bible were as problematic as Polk claims, it hardly follows that contemporary readers are thereby warranted to construe it in a manner that allows for an exegetical strategy of hiding, explaining away, and forgiving its offenses in order to count it as God's word. It seems more likely that we should just abandon the claim that the Bible is the word of God than to take such liberties with the text. The point here, however, is that the construal regime presupposes a peculiar, highly particular, community-specific construal of the Bible as properly construable in a plurality of ways. Ironically, in order to avoid bibliolatry Polk construes Scripture in the image of contemporary American pluralism.

#### 4.3.2 *Confusing Reading with Writing*

As also argued in the last chapter, the construal regime confuses authorial acts with reading acts. Under the construal regime readers usurp the right of authors to determine meaning. This happens when the use to which the reading community puts the Bible is taken to determine the text's meaning rather than the use to which the author put the text, or intended it to be put. When this happens reading is confused with writing (or speaking). Under the construal regime we might say the text must be re-authored (put to use) by the reader for it to have a particular meaning and potential efficacy. To construe the text is to appropriate the words used by the original author to perform, in the name of reading, a discursive act by putting these words to the reader's intended use and thereby filling them with meaning and potential efficacy.

Note that even under the construal regime there is, on this analysis, an authorial intention informing meaning: readers act as authors (or speakers) when they use a text in such a way as to determine its meaning. This is directly applicable to exegesis. Exegesis, by definition, involves explaining meaning. When exegesis ceases to be the explanation of meaning and becomes the determination or even creation of textual meaning, then the act in view ceases to be exegesis and becomes something more like *eisegesis*. On Polk's analysis the exegete is explaining meaning even when determining meaning because the reader determines the meaning of the text by construing it one way or another. But if meaning is determined by the author then readers' imaginative construals of the text and the explanations that count as exegesis are limited by the author's intent for this text. If determining textual meaning is an authorial act then the construal regime does not escape

the priority of authorial intent for meaning but only relocates that authorial intent from the person who generated the text to the person who construes it.

Not every imaginative construal is problematic. As noted above, it seems likely that readers must imagine or construe the text they are reading as something (a letter, a novel, a dissertation, etc.). Imaginatively construing the text one is reading is likely an essential component in the structure of reading. But if the kind of text one is reading and the meaning of that text is determined by the author then the reader's construal is limited by and must correspond to the author's intent for that text. Something very similar, it seems, would hold for the uses to which a text is put. Some uses are consistent with the author's original use; more importantly, some uses are consistent with the use or uses the author intended his text to be put. In this way the use to which a reader puts a text may actually fulfill the author's intentions for that text in a manner that goes beyond what the author actually did with the text. Such uses ordinarily count as reading acts even if those acts at times involve significant re-contextualization of the original *sitz en leben* of the text.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, some

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<sup>22</sup> One example would be the reading of a psalm as a call to worship in a contemporary worship service in, say, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Narrowly considered, the addressees, place of worship, and even means of worship may have changed significantly between the original use of the psalm and the contemporary use. Yet the use to which the contemporary reader is putting the psalm may be exactly the kind of use the psalmist intended it to be put. There is a fundamental continuity between referents that seem to differ on the surface. What is true for psalms would also be true for other genres of Scripture. The primary concern in biblical exegesis as advocated by Kierkegaard, however, is not with the intention of the human author but with what the divine author intends to say through this text in its final, canonical form. In many cases it is evident that the human authors of the canonical writings discerned or intended that their texts would function as God's normative word for generations to come. Whatever the case may be with the human authors, it is certain, in Kierkegaard's mind, that the divine author's intentions are not restricted to the original historical *sitz en leben* of the human authors but extend to the contemporary reader such that the contemporary reader is being addressed by God in the present through this text. In this case the primary textual meaning is the contemporary meaning. In some cases the particular historical referents are understood as concrete types of present or future realities such that the referents of the historical meaning, narrowly conceived, were mere shadows of the referents in the contemporary context. Ultimately the original, historical meaning is the contemporary meaning since the current meaning is what the divine author intended the text to mean from the



explanations of a text's meaning express the authorial intent and thereby count as exegesis and some explanations deviate from the author's intent and represent something more like *eisegesis*.<sup>23</sup> Both exegesis and *eisegesis*, however, are authorial acts or speech acts even though reading is in many ways the heart of exegesis.

Even if meaning is generally found in use, as Wittgenstein claims, it does not follow that every use of a text constitutes a meaning. It is possible, therefore, to maintain that

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beginning. Reading a contemporary translation of the ancient call to worship in the context outlined above may be the purest exegesis possible of that psalm since it expresses both the subjective and objective aspects of the text's divinely intended meaning.

<sup>23</sup> Something similar holds for translations: some translations effectively communicate the author's intended meaning and thereby count as translations while others actually falsify the author's meaning. Translating, however, raises several problems that exegesis does not. A bad translation falsifies the meaning of the original. This would seem to count as an autonomous authorial act rather than a translation. Translating is, ideally, not an authorial activity even though it unavoidably involves the translator in author-like acts. The goal of these acts, however, is not to express one's own intentions but to produce a text that as accurately and completely as possible conveys the meaning of the original—so much so that the translation can rightfully be counted as the original work in another language. No translation is perfect, however; every translation is at best an approximation of the original. This raises a second problem: how can a mere approximation of the Bible mediated through a translator's authorial or author-like activity still count as God's word? This problem actually has at least two parts: the problem of approximation and the problem of inspiration. Since a translation is at best an approximation it would seem, on the surface, that it cannot count as the word of God no matter how objectively trustworthy or reliable the translation is. Kierkegaard does not address this problem directly. He does, however, commend the study of the original languages as have most Protestants. Prioritizing the original languages implies the relative inferiority of translations even if translations are highly commended and somehow continue to count as God's word. The appeal to the original languages does not entirely overcome the problem of approximation, however, since textual issues and possible corruptions of the autographs remain. Still, Kierkegaard seems to grant that reading the Bible in the original languages is preferable to reading the Bible in translation since presumably this removes at least one layer of approximation and possibility of corruption. The problem of inspiration, in this sense, is the problem of how the translation can be properly counted as God's word. The word of God in Lutheran orthodoxy exists in three forms: written, preached, and thought. Although the human authors were uniquely inspired as they wrote in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, the word of God is not identical to any particular positive expression. We may say that the Bible is the word of God without qualification but we cannot say that the word of God is the Bible without qualification, much less that the word of God is the Bible in its original languages alone. The Bible is the word of God in written form but the word of God also transcends the Bible. It is possible, then, that a translation counts as the word of God since the word of God, unlike perhaps the word of Allah, is not bound to a particular language or exact manner of expression within that language but is capable of being written, spoken, or thought in any and every human language. There is no reason, then, why a translation does not count as God's written word. Kierkegaard clearly assumes as much, not hesitating to claim that the Bible in translation is God's word even as he demonstrates classic Protestant-humanist sensibilities about the superiority of the original sources. Whether one reads the Bible in its original languages or in translation one is reading God's word.

meaning is generally found in use, that reading is a way of using a text, and yet reading does not determine or affect textual meaning, which is determined by the author. In other words, there are ways of using texts that do not affect, much less determine textual meaning. Any use that affects the meaning of a text would seem to count as an authorial use of a text and thus an authorial act; only those acts aimed at discovering the meaning of a text as determined by the author count as reading acts. On this analysis the construal regime does not escape the appeal to authorial intent; it rather confuses authorial acts or ways of using words with reading acts or ways of using words and then takes the intentional, authorial use to which the reader puts the Bible as determinative of meaning and potential efficacy rather than the intended use and efficacy of the original author.<sup>24</sup>

Kierkegaard insists that readers put the Bible to use *in and with* their life. Readers who fail to do this are failing to fulfill their responsibilities as readers of the Bible—that is, they are failing to read or are misreading God’s word. Minear and Morimoto, in stressing the priority on personal appropriation in Kierkegaard’s biblical exegesis, contend that it “is the degree of appropriation that provides S. K. with a standard for judging valid or useless methods of reading the Bible.”<sup>25</sup> They continue:

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<sup>24</sup> The process of canonization could easily be viewed as a kind of authorial act since placing these books together in a canon as one divinely authoritative work apparently affects their meaning. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 53-54, has entertained a similar view of canonization. It seems preferable, and perhaps more consistent with the self-understanding of those involved in the process, to interpret their acts in terms of recognizing the divinely-intended canonicity of each work, leading them to read it and eventually publish it in its proper canonical context. On this interpretation the formation of the canon was more similar to a reading act than an authorial act.

<sup>25</sup> Paul S. Minear and Paul S. Morimoto, “Kierkegaard and the Bible: An Index,” *Princeton Pamphlets—No. 9* (Princeton: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1953), 5.

In most readers, for example, he [i.e. Kierkegaard] finds an initial chasm between the eyes and the text, a chasm that makes genuine appropriation quite impossible. God and the person are so remote from each other that mutual respect and a hearty conversation are out of the question.<sup>26</sup>

Minear and Morimoto are pointing to the problem of objectivity in exegesis. Kierkegaard was convinced that both doctrinaire orthodox uses of the Bible and historical-critical uses of the Bible, which are no less doctrinaire, represent ways of abusing the Bible when they are taken as the proper, ultimate ends of reading. Personal appropriation is, for Kierkegaard, a singular way of using the Bible that is the essence of exegetical subjectivity *coram Scriptura*. Such singularity of use does not preclude many applications to particular individuals or communities in various situations and circumstances. How the word of God is appropriated will perhaps vary greatly from person to person, time to time, and place to place. Yet the act of personal appropriation according to the author's intended use of the text remains a criterion of right reading. Personal appropriation distinguishes ways readers use the biblical text rightly in the reading act from ways of misusing or abusing the text.

Minear and Morimoto argue that for Kierkegaard knowledge of the Bible—not even “the practice of learning the Bible by heart,” as “beautiful” as that is—is no substitute for personal appropriation.<sup>27</sup> Committing the Bible to memory may be a highly commendable practice but it is also perfectly compatible with merely objective uses of the text and thus no guarantee or sure sign of personal appropriation and right reading:

The reader may eulogize the Scriptural writers; he may exalt and adulate the heroes of faith; he may study the Bible day and night; he may compose

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<sup>26</sup> Minear and Morimoto, “Kierkegaard and the Bible,” 5.

<sup>27</sup> Minear and Morimoto, “Kierkegaard and the Bible,” 6.

monumental histories and commentaries: if his reading stops short of full personal appropriation, his is not genuine reading of God's Word. Such appropriation was both the goal and practice for this Danish Protestant.<sup>28</sup>

A fuller account of the kind of use personal appropriation is must be deferred to chapter five. It involves submission to the text and the text's author or authors. It is also deeply inward, shaping and transforming the most interior, hidden recesses of a person's self. But it is impossible for it to remain hidden since it will necessarily manifest itself in the reader's form of life.<sup>29</sup> In this way, the author of Scripture, through the inwardness of faith that appropriates the biblical message, becomes the author of the reader's existence or way of life through the text.

Remembering that exegesis is fundamentally explanation of meaning, Kierkegaard is convinced that biblical exegesis that satisfies the demands of the Bible must be offered out of such personal appropriation. He maintains that a true witness to the truth must first be a martyr in order to be a true witness. This point applies fully to the would-be exegete of the Bible. To the degree that one fails to appropriate the Bible as God's word for oneself one will also fail to explain the Bible rightly since the biblical message is aimed not primarily at

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<sup>28</sup> Minear and Morimoto, "Kierkegaard and the Bible," 6. Though Minear and Morimoto's pamphlet is in some ways groundbreaking and has become the standard point of reference for investigating Kierkegaard's use of Scripture, they suggest reading Kierkegaard as offering examples of "demythologized" exegesis *a la* Bultmann. This was consistent with the trend in Kierkegaardian and theological studies at the time they were writing. Many people were reading Kierkegaard as a noteworthy anticipator of existentialism. Following Wolfgang Schweitzer's analysis in *Biblical Authority for Today* (SCM Press, 1951), 149, they agree that "the present struggle in theology . . . for the recognition of the liberty and sovereignty of the Word of God against historicism" has arisen among those theologians and exegetes who were significantly influenced by Kierkegaard. But they allow the wedge between the Bible and God's word that these theologians and exegetes introduced over against Kierkegaard, "Kierkegaard and the Bible," 11-12.

<sup>29</sup> See David J. Gouwens, *Religious Thinker* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 213-16, for example, on Kierkegaard's move away from a merely "'hidden inwardness' to a public role for the Christian" (213). This turn in Kierkegaard's authorship, Gouwens argues, comes to the fore in 1847 and is evident in *Practice in Christianity*, *Book on Adler*, and *For Self-Examination*.

the communication of data but at creating in its readers a particular kind of existence. Only uses of the biblical text that arise out of a divinely authored existence via an appropriation of the divinely authored text by faith are true to the Bible; only explanations that arise in just this same way are true to its meaning. This extends to other uses of the text, too—only those quotations, for example, that arise out of the unique particularities of Christian existence are true to the text.<sup>30</sup> Meaning, then, can be described, but only to a certain point. A complete explanation or exegesis must be lived and then testified to by the one who is living it and knows it not from a distance but from within. Hence Kierkegaard's stress upon the requirement of personal appropriation in reading is not a license for readers to use the words of the Bible to perform their own authorial acts. On the contrary, it is a demand that exegetes live out in their personal existence the existence the author intends to communicate. Because it is impossible to communicate existence or a way of life in just the same way that data can be communicated, the author is dependent upon the reader's subjective appropriation of the message by faith for the communicative act to achieve its ultimate intended efficacy. But again, this is not to empower or license readers to put the text to whatever use seems best to them or their community.

The biblical text counts as divine discourse such that what is promised, God has promised; what is commanded, God has commanded; what is reported, God testifies to; and

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<sup>30</sup> Kierkegaard seems to make this point with great irony in *Repetition* where "the young man" refuses to quote Job despite the great amount of energy, attention, and affection he devotes to Job in his study because to do so "would be wanting to put in my own pittance, wanting to make his words my own in the presence of another," FT, 204 (III 238). The young man is clearly not worried about plagiarism but about his own inability to speak these words with the same meaning as Job—to repeat or reproduce them in such a way that he is actually quoting Job and not counterfeiting him.

so on.<sup>31</sup> For Kierkegaard, the Bible is God's word and is designed by God to function as a kind of mirror reflecting the reader's self *coram Deo*. Yet this function of the Bible is part of a larger complex authorial intention ultimately aimed at the reader's salvation that can only be realized in and through the subjectivity of the reader who appropriates its message by faith. The one who does this will be saved; all others will fall away in offense and perish. The Bible as God's word is always efficacious to one of these two ends: offense or salvation. Salvation, however, can only be realized through the personal appropriation of the gospel message by faith (see chapter five).

The main point here is this: the communication of Christian existence can only be realized through a text if that text is appropriated by the reader through faith. The result of such an appropriation of the text with and in one's life by faith is not, however, a Bible determined by the reader but a reader whose life is determined by the Bible, or by the divine author of the Bible.

#### ***4.4 On Authority***

Kierkegaard identified "insubordination to the authority of the religious" as a crucial issue in Christendom in his generation.<sup>32</sup> For him and most of the Christian exegetical

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<sup>31</sup> Some qualification is in order here. There are promises, commands, narratives and so on in the Bible that are not intended to be attributed directly, as promises, commands, narratives, and so on, to God. It is not uncommon for characters to offer promises God does not endorse, issue commands God opposes, or tell stories for which God does not vouch. It is usually quite obvious from the context, however, that these do not function as divine discourse just as promises, commands, stories, etc. They are always nested in larger contexts or literary units (usually narratives), that do count as divine discourse authored by a "deputized" spokesperson for God and belong to such units as mere reports.

<sup>32</sup> BA, 5.

tradition, this authority inherently resides in the Bible due to its divine authorship. “In contrast to dominant modes of thought in both modern and postmodern philosophy,” Evans writes, “Kierkegaard considers the religious authority inherent in a special revelation from God the fundamental source of religious truth.”<sup>33</sup> The Bible is just such “a special revelation from God” and for all those who live downstream from the ascension it is “the fundamental source of religious truth.” Yet Polk denies that the authority of the biblical writings is properly derived from “any inherent property they may have, such as being . . . inspired.” He insists their authority is derived exclusively from the “function they fill in the life of the Christian community,” which is determined by the imaginative construal that community adopts.<sup>34</sup> To his credit Polk neither denies the possibility that there are privileged points of view (he believes the prophets and apostles were “privileged . . . witnesses”) nor promotes an anti-authoritarian position (though construal-relative, authority remains an important category).<sup>35</sup> He readily admits that Kierkegaard “matter-of-factly

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<sup>33</sup> C. Stephen Evans, “Kierkegaard on Religious Authority: The Problem of the Criterion,” *Faith and Philosophy* 17.1 (January 2000), 48.

<sup>34</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 75.

<sup>35</sup> Evans, “Kierkegaard on Religious Authority,” 49-50, “takes John Caputo as a representative postmodern thinker” who rejects both privileged points of view and all claims to authority. Caputo may mean that all claims to transcendent or universally privileged perspectives and authority are local, relative claims that only work, if they work at all, within particular communities. Either way, Caputo dares to spin a “postmetaphysical” metanarrative that he hopes will resonate persuasively with his readers. He appeals to Kierkegaard as one who embraces “the flux” of meaning, truth, and authority in a “postmetaphysical” world. Such “flux” is grounded in Derrida’s hermeneutic “undecidability” that permeates every attempt to determine and articulate meaning. This does not prevent Caputo or anyone else from making judgments or pronouncements about meaning—we cannot avoid doing so. It does seem to impose a universal obligation to hold to and explain our beliefs loosely so that we avoid the intolerable intolerance of “dangerous dogmatism,” *Radical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 272.

assumes”<sup>36</sup> the Bible is God’s word and functions with divine authority for the Christian community. Occupying, even if only imaginatively and occasionally, a position within the Christian community, Polk argues that Kierkegaard naturally imagined and spoke of this authority as if it had universal force because this is the way things look from within the community of faith. But in sharp contrast to Kierkegaard, Polk denies that this authority has any force for the unbeliever who does not see or imagine the Bible in this way. The authority Christians imagine the Bible possessing is not based on anything inherent within it. From a Kierkegaardian perspective Polk’s construal regime, though still retaining authority as a functional category, looks like a way to license exegetical insubordination.

As Kierkegaard makes clear in the *Book on Adler*, the divine authority of revelation is grounded in the identity of the revealer and not in the content revealed or any effect derived from this content. We are to obey Jesus, in other words, not because he teaches noble, lovely, or useful things but because he is God incarnate. We can think here of the knight of faith in *Fear and Trembling*. The crisis of faith is rooted in the fact that it is God who has commanded Abraham to perform this terrible deed. The issue is one of authority. As Norman Lillegard summarizes the point Kierkegaard makes in the *Book on Adler*, “the issue is not *what* Jesus commanded or asserted but rather *that* Jesus commanded or asserted.”<sup>37</sup> Likewise, we are to obey the Bible because it is God’s word, not because it tells of divine love or speaks of Christ, even though it does these things too and these things are essential

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<sup>36</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 74.

<sup>37</sup> Norman Lillegard, “(Revelation, Interpretation) Authority: Kierkegaard’s *Book on Adler*,” in *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer, James K. A. Smith, and Bruce Ellis Benson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 225-39.



to what the Bible is as God's word of good news. Yet Polk argues that the "scriptures are scripture," meaning they are authoritative for the Christian community, "because they speak of Christ, are a unique witness to Christ." He continues: "But as I have been arguing, this subject matter can only be said to 'inhere' in scripture insofar as the reader is equipped to 'see' it there in a way that seems to him or her virtually self-evidential, indeed to see it as the literal sense of the text."<sup>38</sup> To "see," remember, is to imaginatively construe.

Prophetic and apostolic authority is fully implicated in Polk's construal of the divine authority of Scripture. Conceiving of the "prophets and apostles" as merely "privileged . . . witnesses"<sup>39</sup> rather than peculiar, divinely-authorized spokespersons and authors, Polk reduces apostolic authority to a matter of "the shape of the life that authored the words."<sup>40</sup> As such, to ascribe apostolicity to a text is to ascribe to the author of that text a kind of moral authority that belongs to a true witness. Such authority *is* essential to anyone who would claim to be a true Christian witness. It is vital to any preacher or exegete and yet the very thing Kierkegaard paradoxically balks at claiming for himself. But this authority, though ordinarily exemplified by the prophets and apostles, still falls short of the kind of official, divine authority essential to Kierkegaard's concept of apostolicity. For Kierkegaard the issue of apostolic authority is not whether the prophets and apostles were true witnesses—a true witness is not an apostle on account of being a true witness; neither is it a matter of being privileged witnesses—not just any kind of privilege suffices; it is a matter of

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<sup>38</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 75-76.

<sup>39</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, viii.

<sup>40</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 130.

“God having made this individual God’s own spokesperson.”<sup>41</sup> On Polk’s analysis, however, even this more robust concept of apostolic authority is just another imaginative construal—and so he misreads Kierkegaard. The authority of the author of these words “does not . . . dictate how they must be heard” but “only suggests certain possibilities, likely construals, by modeling a set of purposes and practices that constitute a use.”<sup>42</sup> Ultimately, whatever one’s concept of apostolic authority, it is a function of our imaginative construal of the text and not determinate of meaning inherent in the text as authored.

Polk explicitly denies the position Kierkegaard occupies in the *Book on Adler*. He admits that Kierkegaard “matter-of-factly assumes the [divine] authority of scripture,”<sup>43</sup> but “to assert scripture’s authority because it is the Word of God,” he concludes, is an option “Kierkegaard rejects.”<sup>44</sup> Kierkegaard’s assumption of biblical authority, he argues, is “analytic” in his application of the rule of faith—it is authoritative because he belongs to a community which receives it as such because they believe it speaks of the love of God.<sup>45</sup> Contrary to Polk, however, it is not “the explanation” that “is decisive” for authority even if it may hide a neighbor’s sins. “It does not depend,” Kierkegaard insists, “as is taught in the

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<sup>41</sup> C. Stephen Evans, “Canonicity, Apostolicity, and Biblical Authority: Some Kierkegaardian Reflections,” in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew, Scott Hahn, Robin Parry, Christopher Seitz, and Al Wolters (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 148.

<sup>42</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 130.

<sup>43</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 74-75.

<sup>44</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 74-75.

<sup>45</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 74-75.

confused philosophy of our age, upon the content of the teaching, but the revelation fact and the divine authority that follows from it are what is decisive.”<sup>46</sup>

Although Polk denies the divine authority of the Bible follows “the revelation fact” or its “inspiredness,” as Kelsey puts it, he does expound reading by the rule of faith in terms of divine inspiration. Following James Kugel,<sup>47</sup> he finds biblical precedent for “interpretation as inspiration” in Daniel 2 and 5, in which Daniel interprets Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and the writing on the wall of Belshazzar’s banquet hall, respectively. The point of application Polk draws is that to see the Bible as God’s word one must be helped by God to overlook, explain away, and forgive its offensiveness. The ability to do so “is a capacity for imaginative construal with which humans find themselves marvelously **‘endowed’**.” He continues: “It is only a short step from Daniel to a full blown notion of inspired interpretation.” This is because “God is the agent of insight. It remains only for Qumran literature and the New Testament to specify that agency in terms of the **‘Spirit’**.”<sup>48</sup> He concludes that “the imagination is a gift of God, it remains under God’s

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<sup>46</sup> BA, 32. Despite the criticisms of Polk’s read of Kierkegaard offered here, there is some support for this read in the primary literature and a growing body of secondary literature that interprets Kierkegaard in a similar way (see chapter one for a survey of this material). Much of what Kierkegaard does say about Scripture and biblical exegesis can be plausibly construed along the lines Polk adopts. Some comments Kierkegaard makes are quite suggestive in this direction. Furthermore, it should be remembered that Polk’s proposal stands within a well-established post-liberal theological camp on the American scene. His account of biblical authority, for example, is in line with the account offered by David Kelsey as noted elsewhere in this dissertation. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Polk’s proposal is very compelling as a description of how the Bible is treated across the diversity of Bible-using communities on the contemporary scene. In many ways Polk’s proposal represents a sophisticated contemporary description of the phenomenon Kierkegaard also described, though Kierkegaard sought to undermine this phenomenon through the application of his depth psychology within a hermeneutic of suspicion (see chapter five).

<sup>47</sup> James Kugel, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986).

<sup>48</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 65-66 (emphasis original).

sovereignty” and that “Kierkegaard was entirely in tune with scripture and the early church in representing the human imagination as a prime locus for the work of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>49</sup> In this rather Romantic view,<sup>50</sup> the imagination is the locus of the Spirit’s activity who helps the reader perform the “strenuous exertions of will and discernment” required to construe this guilty, barbaric text as God’s word of love to us.<sup>51</sup> God must help us hide, explain away, and forgive the Bible’s “manifold” sins in order for us to imagine this text as sacred scripture. Only then does it appear to be such and actually become such for readers.

In sum, under Polk’s proposed construal regime the readers’ use of the Bible determines its meaning and potential efficacy, not the author’s. Polk denies that biblical authority follows from the supposed divine authorship or inspiration of the text and instead speaks of “inspired” and “authoritative interpretation.”<sup>52</sup> The authors of the Bible, human or divine, do not determine the meaning or literal sense and intended efficacy of Scripture. The construal regime instead licenses a plurality of imaginative construals and ways of reading funded by the indeterminacy of textual meaning. Polk’s proposal brilliantly describes the way the Bible is used and treated by its diversity of readers and reading communities. It represents a sophisticated account of how Kierkegaard believes the Bible is treated by exegetes in Christendom. But it also licenses the kind of exegetical relativism it so

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<sup>49</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 204.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Sandra M. Levy, *Imagination and the Journey of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), who links the role of the imagination conceived along broadly post-liberal lines with classic nineteenth-century Romanticism. For her discussion of the Bible in this framework see 95-100.

<sup>51</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 204.

<sup>52</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 69.

insightfully describes. On Polk's proposal some readers may be "inspired" to imagine and read the Bible "as scripture"—that is, as God's authoritative word—but there are many other ways to imagine and read the Bible in which it has no special authority for the reading community and possibly radically different meanings.

Kierkegaard holds a different opinion: There is an authority structure to communicative acts maintained and emphasized by him that Polk's proposal turns on its head. Authors possess and exercise authority—they have a legitimate, if limited, right to determine certain things such as the content and meaning of the text and the use to which they put it. This authority belongs to the author *as* author. Of course it is common for authors to exercise other kinds of authority, too. When someone in a position of official authority writes as an exercise of that authority (Kierkegaard takes the example of a king who issues a royal decree) the text is authoritative in virtue of the official authority the author exercises. This authority, however, supervenes upon and is extrinsic to the authorial act itself. The authority that belongs to and is exercised by an author simply as an author is an authority that is intrinsic to the authorial act.

As noted above, this intrinsic authorial authority minimally includes the right to author a text with a definite meaning put to a particular use. But it seems that every authorial act claims greater authority than just this: authors of imperatives, for example, claim the authority to command or right to be obeyed; authors of historical narratives claim the right to testify and be believed; authors of promises claim the right to perform what is promised and be trusted to do so; and so on. Even authors of petitions exercise authority,

claiming the right to be heard and to receive what has been requested.<sup>53</sup> Thus authors claim certain kinds of *de jure* authority not just over their text, but over their readers. At times, of course, readers are warranted to deny these claims to authority: the command may be devious; the narrative dubious, the promise deceitful, the petition detrimental, and so on. But even under these circumstances reading still involves a voluntary submission on the part of the reader to the authority of an author, even if that authority only extends so far as recognizing and respecting the author's right to determine the content and meaning of the text. Thus reading acts are acts of submission to the *de facto* authority of the author over the text and by extension over the reader. Even in cases of devious commands, dubious reports, deceitful promises, and the like, cases that Kierkegaard would insist do not apply to the Bible since it is God's word, the reader submits to the author's request for an audience and to the author's authority *as* author of the text. Reading acts are intrinsically acts of submission to the *de facto* authority of an author *as* author.<sup>54</sup>

In Polk's proposal this authority structure is turned on its head by positing the reading act as an exercise of authority that subjects the text to the will or intention of the reader or reading community. It is not authors but readers who have a right to determine the meaning of the text and to put it to whatever use they want. This usurpation of authors' rights by readers might initially seem liberating to those who find the apparent tyranny of

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<sup>53</sup> A petition differs from a demand at least in regard to the strength of the right being claimed. The person who demands claims that the other is obligated to grant what is being demanded whereas the person making a petition only claims that it would be permissible, so far as the petitioner knows.

<sup>54</sup> If we assume a parallel structure of authority for speaking acts this magnifies the graciousness of God hearing our prayers.

authors over their texts and the claim of authority they make over their readers unwelcome. Authorial acts can be plausibly deconstructed as power-plays in which authors attempt to exercise authority over their readers. But the authority structure of authorial acts does not appear, in itself, to be a cause for alarm for readers; trouble comes only when authors abuse their authority or readers refuse to respect the author's rights.

Kierkegaard is fully aware of the authority structure intrinsic in authorial and reading acts and how this authority structure shapes the interpersonal dynamic involved in authorial and reading acts. He assumes that authors own their discourse. True, authors do not ordinarily travel with their texts and cannot control what readers do with them once they release them. At the same time, texts continue to belong to their authors and are rightly treated as their words and referred back to them in a direct and personal manner. Likewise, authors are rightly held accountable for the meaning of the texts they produce. Significantly, how we treat a text is how we treat its author—not in an overly simplistic sense, as though to burn a book is to burn the author, but in the sense that if burning the book counts as an act of contempt it is to hold the author in contempt.

Such a rich interpersonal dynamic and intimate relationship between author and reader via a text is on prominent display throughout Kierkegaard's authorship. His sensitivity to this seems to be a large motivator for his use of pseudonyms as indicators of distance between author and text. This distance is not, as some suppose, meant to confuse readers or hide the author but rather to protect the author-reader relation by signifying that the pseudonymous texts do not represent Kierkegaard's own positions. To allow such a misconception would undermine critical elements of the author-reader relationship. Of

course the fictitious aspect of pseudonyms plays powerfully into Kierkegaard's larger project since all but one of his pseudonyms represent positions that, no matter how much truth and insight they offer, are ultimately in "untruth." The one exception, Anti-Climacus, represents a rarely realized ideal that Kierkegaard denies he has attained. Either way, one point of Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms is to preserve the author-reader relationship between himself and his readers.

Another place where we see Kierkegaard's sensitivity to the interpersonal dynamic between author and reader is between God and sinner *coram Scriptura*. The Bible is God's word: this text belongs to him, is claimed by him as his own discourse. As such, to read the Bible is to enter into an interpersonal relationship with God who is its author. Therefore the reader of the Bible encounters none other than God when he or she takes up the Bible. To read the Bible, then, one must submit to the *de facto* authority of its author to determine the text and its meaning and, because God does not issue devious commands, dubious testimony, and so on, to make certain claims upon the reader.

Supervening on this intrinsic authority, however, is the sovereign authority of God whose authorial act is executed as an exercise of his divine authority. That is, when God performs the authorial act or acts that render the Bible his written word, he does so as God.<sup>55</sup> For this reason the Bible, as God's word, is divinely authoritative and must be

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<sup>55</sup> Lutheran orthodoxy maintains a distinction within God's acts that is relevant to this discussion. They hold that the efficacy of Scripture is resistible because in it God acts through means whereas the efficacy of God's word in creation or final judgment is irresistible because God acts in "uncovered majesty." Even if we do not accept the distinction just as it stands there is no reason to suppose that all the acts God performs as God and through the agency of his word are of one simple kind. For an attempt to distinguish between God's person and office consider Nelson Pike, "Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (July 1969): 208-16.



received and read or heard as such by its readers and auditors. God's divine authority, which is extrinsic to the authorial act itself, becomes intrinsic in the text since God's authorship of it is an exercise of his divine authority as God. God's authority, which is intrinsic in the text, is also intrinsic in the author-reader relationship one enters when one takes up the Bible and begins to read it or hears it read.

Kierkegaard emphasizes the structure of authority in reading the Bible by drawing an analogy between the Bible and a royal decree. He chooses a royal decree to make authority a central issue and then seeks to show how disrespectfully we treat God and despise his authority in and through our exegetical methods and practices. Our celebrated ways of reading the Bible would come off as ludicrous if applied to other texts, he is convinced. Would we ever imagine that a construal regime along the lines of Polk's proposal would be necessary in order to read a love letter *as* a letter from one's lover or a royal decree *as* an authoritative text? It seems that the construal regime is designed to allow us to construe a text as something other than what it is. Though this impression is quite strong at times, especially given Polk's remarks on the numerous "barbarisms" of the Bible and the "strenuous exertions of will and discernment"<sup>56</sup> it takes to see it as God's word, Polk denies that this is in fact the case. He insists that we can only "see" what is somehow already present to be seen. What is present to be seen is so ambiguous, though, that it is capable of being seen as many different kinds of texts. Readers, as we have seen, are free to imagine it and put it to a variety of different uses. The point added here is that an exegetical strategy

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<sup>56</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 204.

that may at first seem to liberate readers from the tyranny of authors turns out to alienate readers from authors and even other readers or communities of readers.<sup>57</sup>

#### ***4.5 The Many Reasons for Reading***

Authors, of course, are not always successful in realizing their intended effect. Readers may not grasp the author's intended meaning or, understanding, they may disregard the author's intention. A reader may be right or wrong to do so depending on what the author has written and what the author intends to effect. On the other hand, authors may succeed in realizing their intended effect without their readers becoming aware of what they are up to or trying to accomplish. The most obvious example is when an author intends to confuse a reader. The reader may very well become confused and remain confused, never realizing that *to confuse* is the author's intention. In such cases authors might accomplish exactly what they intend without readers ever realizing it. Such texts—texts intended to confuse—do not lack meaning even if their sentences are semantically impenetrable or incoherent. Even a text we may declare “nonsense” may still be meaningful because its nonsensical content is put to a particular use aimed at generating a particular effect. So long as there is an authorial intent behind a text and its use there is a meaning that is capable of being explained whether or not that meaning is in fact comprehended by any reader. If an

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<sup>57</sup> Granted, the kind of authority an author assumes to himself and how an author exercises that authority can be at least as problematic as the way readers treat texts. Authors not only enjoy certain rights but are also obligated to fulfill certain responsibilities that attend these rights. No doubt authors can act rather subtly and be quite crafty at times. Kierkegaard believes that much biblical scholarship is abusive on both sides of the equation. Academic biblical scholarship frequently reflects abusive ways of handling the Bible. See, for example, FSE, 25-26 (XII 315-16). It also tends to abuse authorial authority by claiming to be a true exegesis of Scripture when in fact it is aimed at defending itself against God's word. See, for example, FSE, 33, 34 (XII 322, 323).

author intends to confuse the reader by a text the meaning of the text is *to confuse*. This is the intention that governs both the semantic content the author employs and the use to which the author puts the text.

The semantic content or grammatical meaning of the text, considered as a syntactic structure of lexical units, roughly corresponds to what has traditionally been labeled the “letter” of the text. This is sometimes taken to be synonymous with the meaning of the text but questions about what someone or some text means seldom inquire about this level of meaning unless the text lacks lucidity. More often the inquiry into textual meaning is aimed at the author’s perlocutionary intent—that is, what the author wants of his or her readers by way of authoring this text. Likewise, the meaning of the text that is the object of exegesis is not merely a restatement of the semantic content of the text but an account of the author’s intentions as indicated by a combination of the text’s semantic content and authorial use. In order to avoid equivocation this dissertation will restrict the term “meaning” to that which I take to be the object of the exegetical task and use “semantic content” or just “content” to refer to the grammatical meaning of the text.

This broader concept of textual meaning is supported by Wolterstorff’s convincing demonstration that an authorial act is not to be reduced to an act generative of a text. It consists in adopting a certain normative position vis-à-vis a text such that the text counts as one’s discourse.<sup>58</sup> This relationship can come about through inscribing or dictating but it may also come about through a variety of other acts, too, including acts of appropriating an

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<sup>58</sup> Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 75-94.

already written text.<sup>59</sup> The point here is that authoring a text is better conceived in terms of employing a text or particular semantic content in such a way that an authorial act has been performed than in terms of inscribing or creating semantic content from scratch. If this is true then it appears that use is a constituent element of textual meaning. Though we can clearly distinguish between the semantic content of a text and the use to which the author puts it, textual meaning is best conceived as a factor of both components.

To return to the example above, it is possible for a reader to understand that the author's intent is to confuse but it is not necessary for a reader to understand this for the author to accomplish the *raison d'écrire* or intended effect—it is only necessary for the reader to actually become confused in the intended way.<sup>60</sup> It would not be difficult to come up with other examples in which authors may want to conceal their intended effect from their readers. Authors may be able to accomplish their *raison d'écrire* even if their readers remain unaware of what that intention may be. It is not necessary, then, that authors *intentionally* disclose their perlocutionary intention in order to accomplish their intended effect, even if that intent may be necessarily betrayed in or through the authorial act itself.<sup>61</sup> It is helpful, then, to also distinguish between the authorial act, authorial intention, and meaning, even

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<sup>59</sup> Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 37-57.

<sup>60</sup> Although understanding that the reader's intent is to confuse may actually remove some confusion a reader may have over a text it may not remove the relevant level of confusion the author intends. A fugitive may leave a note intended to confuse a pursuer as to the fugitive's location or plans. The pursuer may come to realize that the fugitive intended *to confuse* but still may be confused as to where the fugitive is or what the fugitive plans.

<sup>61</sup> It may be impossible for an author to be successful in accomplishing their intended effect and to entirely conceal their intention even if they might be able to hide their intention so well that it is very difficult for readers to discern.

though these three are intimately related.<sup>62</sup> In the authorial act a person uses a text (of their own creation or not) in order to accomplish some particular end or fulfill some purpose that is the author's *raison d'écrire*.<sup>63</sup> The author's *raison d'écrire* is the intended perlocutionary effect. Generating the intended effect is the text's *raison d'être*. To a large extent the author's intended effect—the efficacy the author intends a text to possess—determines both the semantic content of the text and the use to which the author puts that text.<sup>64</sup> The meaning of a text is a product of at least these two factors: content and use.

Content alone is insufficient to determine or fully account for textual meaning. It may be that the use of a text is so conventional that we almost effortlessly grasp it upon reading the text. But this does not mean that authorial use plays an inconsequential role in determining the meaning of the text or can be safely ignored in trying to understand the meaning of a text; it only means that use is often obvious. An authorial use is always present, decisively informing the meaning of any given text, even if that use is now archaic or our interests in reading the text are no longer connected with the author's use (a point I

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<sup>62</sup> Vanhoozer makes further useful distinctions between various kinds of authorial intentions and between meaning and significance that I consider below and in chapter five.

<sup>63</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, in analyzing the claim that God speaks, demonstrates that there are many ways to speak without the speaker performing the locutionary acts that one may initially think constitute a speech act. A similar analysis applies to authorial acts: there are many ways to perform authorial acts or become an author of a text that do not necessitate performing the acts of inscription that one may initially think constitutive of an authorial act. Not all acts of inscribing count as authoring and not all acts of authoring involve inscribing. In this sense I do not intend *d'écrire* in a narrow sense as if writing were merely inscribing (*s'inscrire*) but in a more comprehensive sense that encompasses all acts that count as authorial acts. For example, wearing a T-shirt with words printed on it or slapping a bumper-sticker on your car may count as an authorial act because this action may establish a relation between the wearer of the T-shirt or owner or driver of the car and the text such that it is properly attributed to that person as their own statement.

<sup>64</sup> There are, of course, many other factors at play. The most obvious relate to the author's limitations: language, vocabulary, skill, circumstances, and so on.

shall return to shortly). The same words with an identical semantic content may be put to different uses and thereby take on different meanings. If a grader were to write “nice job” on an assignment that received an “A” it would mean something very different than if the grader were to use the same words to make a sarcastic comment on a paper that was rejected for plagiarism. The difference would not be in what was written but in the use to which the grader put this same text. Use is ideally obvious from both the textual and extra-textual context. If the grader writes “nice job” on a term paper right under the grade “F” it will be immediately obvious that this is to be taken sarcastically. If, however, the grader writes the same thing on a term paper under the grade “A” it will be taken as a straightforward note of praise. In the former case the author’s intended effect may be to shame the student into doing better next time; in the latter case the author’s intent may be to encourage the student to keep up the good work. Whether the student is shamed or encouraged, it seems obvious that no explanation of meaning would be complete or accurate without accounting for the use to which the author put the text. The clearer the use is indicated the clearer the meaning of the text will be to its readers.

Just as authors may accomplish their intended purpose without readers becoming aware of what that purpose is, so also readers may read texts for purposes other than understanding the author’s meaning. In the former case, a reader may aim at understanding meaning but fail to do so. To the degree that understanding the meaning of the text is necessary to achieve the author’s intended effect, the author would have failed. But some intended effects can be accomplished without readers understanding the meaning. Exegesis, however, is a different matter. To exegete is to explain the meaning of a text and to explain

the meaning of a text one must understand the authorial intent as disclosed through the combination of content and use. It is possible for authors to succeed in accomplishing their intended effect even if readers find it impossible to explain the text's meaning or misunderstand it and exegete it wrongly. This is an important point to keep in mind with regard to biblical efficacy: the Bible may be effective even when not understood or misunderstood.

On this analysis, for exegesis to be correct the exegete must understand the author's intended effect and be able to explain it. Of course a reader may be able to accurately explain the meaning only in part. One of Kierkegaard's central criticisms of exegetical method and practice *coram Scriptura* is that it is not at all aimed at or interested in the divine author's intended effect but wants desperately to defend the reader from this intended effect. This is futile and tragic.

There are several implications of this analysis. First, as already noted, it is entirely possible for a text to be efficacious even if its readers fail to understand its meaning. Interestingly, this phenomenon underlies a somewhat startling biblical theme related both to prophetic and apostolic preaching and the parables of Jesus.<sup>65</sup> In both cases the spoken word is deemed efficacious to accomplish everything God intends even though at times God's intended effects are accomplished through the lack of understanding or misunderstanding of at least some members of the intended audience. God's word, it seems, is always efficacious, accomplishing whatever he intends.<sup>66</sup> Since the Bible is an instance of

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<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Is 6:9-10, 1 Cor 1:18-25, and Mt 13:10-17, respectively.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Is 55:10-11. The efficacy in view here is creative and redemptive.

God's word in written form it is reasonable to ascribe this kind of indefeasible efficacy to Scripture, too. Integral to the point is that an author's intended efficacy, including a divine author's intended efficacy, must not be reduced to the prescriptions contained within the text. Very often the authorial intent will include compliance with the expressed prescriptions. But ordinarily the authorial intent extends beyond the prescribed action and sometimes will be discontinuous with the prescribed action. It is possible, for example, that a mother issues a command just to expose her son's unwillingness to comply. In such a case not only might the mother not really intend whatever she commanded to be performed but her intention would be frustrated if it were performed. She could also issue the command to two sons, fully intending the one to perform the action and the other not to in order, perhaps, to highlight differences between them. This last illustration may not be too far removed from the divinely intended efficacy of the prescriptions contained in the Bible. It at least invites us to consider the complexity of authorial intent that lies behind a text.

An example of this kind of complex efficacy is the offensiveness of the Bible—an offensiveness as we shall see in chapter five that is quite different from the offensiveness Polk envisions. Kierkegaard maintains that the Bible is efficacious unto offense among all people but efficacious unto salvation only for those who read it by faith. Only those who read the Bible by faith will understand the meaning of Scripture and be able to exegete it rightly; all others will take offense and react in self-defense. In self-defense would-be readers will either cease reading the Bible altogether or read it defiantly for some other purpose than for the divine intention.



#### 4.5.1 Reading for Ulterior Ends

In cases where the object of our reading is something other than understanding the authorial intent we are no longer reading for meaning. The practice of reading for meaning is the heart of exegesis. Exegesis is, after all, the attempt to explain the meaning of a text. To read for any other purpose than for meaning is to engage in a practice of reading that is unable to support exegesis. Kierkegaard illustrates this point by drawing out the analogy between God's word and a mirror found in James 1:22-25. "The first requirement," he insists, "is that you must not look at the mirror, observe the mirror, but must see yourself in the mirror."<sup>67</sup> According to Kierkegaard, much biblical scholarship makes the profound mistake of confusing study of the Bible as an object with reading the Bible for meaning. In the case of the Bible the authorial intent is initially to reflect the reader as he or she is *coram Deo*. In other words, Scripture functions as a mirror. Seeing oneself as one is *coram Deo*, according to both the law and the gospel aspects of Scripture, is a prerequisite for salvation. Salvation is the ultimate and proper but not the only divinely intended effect of Scripture. Because the image reflected in the mirror of the word is at first offensive to sinners, readers tend to recoil and try to defend themselves against the efficacy of Scripture. For those who want to persuade themselves or others that they read the Bible while simultaneously defending themselves against its efficacy—and there are many reasons why one might want to at least pretend to read the Bible—reading for some ulterior purpose is substituted for

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<sup>67</sup> FSE, 25 (XII 315).

reading for meaning. This is the great distraction into which biblical studies has fallen: “the error of observing the mirror instead of seeing oneself in the mirror.”<sup>68</sup>

Practices aimed at other objects tend to read the text more like an archeologist “reads” artifacts or a detective “reads” a crime scene than the ordinary way we read texts to understand the author’s meaning.<sup>69</sup> Archeologists are generally not interested in using the pottery they discover according to its natural purpose and function—the purpose and function the artisan intended for his product. They are instead interested in what these artifacts might tell us about other things related to the ancient culture that produced it—what technology did they have, how wealthy were they, with whom did they trade, and so on. Something similar is true of the detective. The detective is not interested in inhabiting the crime scene but rather in studying it for the ulterior purpose of what he can learn about the crime that occurred there. In both cases the object of study is reduced from its natural purpose and function to evidence of other phenomena.

Kierkegaard believes biblical studies has similarly reduced the Bible to an object of study for ulterior purposes alien to its proper purpose and function as intended by God. There is a difference, he insists, “between reading and reading.”<sup>70</sup> Although,

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<sup>68</sup> FSE, 25 (XII 315).

<sup>69</sup> The analogy between reading and archeology or detective work is reflected in the language and metaphors used by theorists to describe certain exegetical approaches: discovering, digging, detecting, gathering of evidence or clues, etc. Robert Alter labels the bulk of modern, critical-era scholarship “excavative” in *The World of Biblical Literature* (London: SPCK, 1992). But the language of archeology (or detective work) seems more appropriate for concepts of reading that are not concerned with meaning as authorial intent or, if concerned with authorial intent, deems that intent archaic.

<sup>70</sup> FSE, 27, 28 (XII 317, 318).

the majority regard God's Word as an obsolete ancient book one puts aside; a minority look upon God's Word as an extremely remarkable ancient book upon which one expends an amazing diligence, acumen, etc.—observing the mirror.<sup>71</sup>

Observing the mirror, however, is not reading for meaning. To read the Bible for meaning,

we should not look at the mirror but see ourselves in the mirror. If you are a scholar, remember that if you do not read God's Word in another way [than as a scholar], it will turn out that after a lifetime of reading God's Word many hours every day, you nevertheless have never read—God's Word. Then make the distinction (in addition to the scholarly reading), so that you will also really begin to read God's Word or at least will confess to yourself that you, despite daily scholarly reading of it, are not reading God's Word, that you do not want anything to do with it at all.<sup>72</sup>

The problem with scholarly reading is at root, on Kierkegaard's analysis, a spiritual problem grounded in sin and common to all people. This problem is by no means peculiar to scholars; hence the majority of people in Christendom simply do not read the Bible. Still, "there is less occasion to be mistaken" in this way for those "who are not a scholar."<sup>73</sup>

To read a text for any other reason than for meaning ordinarily takes on the form of using the text as evidence for understanding other phenomena. Such phenomena may include information about the production and transmission of the text: the use of sources, the possible redaction of the text, the identity, background, and thought life of its author, the historical, social, economic, or cultural situation of the original audience, a data set on the original languages, and so on. Kierkegaard insists that even commendable tasks such as trying to establish the text of the autographs or translating the text into contemporary

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<sup>71</sup> FSE, 33 (XII 322).

<sup>72</sup> FSE, 33 (XII 321).

<sup>73</sup> FSE, 33 (XII 321-22).

vernacular languages do not count as reading for meaning. Possible *raisons pour la lecture* other than for understanding the authorial intent are myriad. Most of the reasons just cited are more purely historical concerns than they are exegetical—and may well be commendable historical projects in their own right. Translating may even be a necessary prerequisite for reading for meaning for those who do not know the original languages. But translating is not to be confused with reading or exegesis.<sup>74</sup> Yet under the critical-era paradigm of Biblical Studies these and other ulterior objects of reading have been taken to be properly exegetical ends. Distinguishing rather sharply between reading and reading—between reading for some ulterior purpose and reading for meaning—Kierkegaard regards any confusion between the two kinds of reading, or reading and non-reading, as a kind of madness.<sup>75</sup>

Many of the *raisons pour la lecture* just cited have been developed into specialized fields of study within contemporary Biblical Studies. Obviously these ulterior *raisons pour la lecture* are thought to be worthwhile enterprises: enormous amounts of scholarly attention have been devoted to them. Kierkegaard explains this phenomenon on psychological-spiritual grounds: readers, as sinners, are offended by the meaning of the text and immediately proceed to defend themselves against the word of God in a variety of ways, including losing oneself in the scholarly way of reading for ulterior ends.

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<sup>74</sup> FSE 26 (XII 315).

<sup>75</sup> FSE, 27 (XII 316).

#### 4.5.2 Reading for Meaning: An Alternative Exegetical Paradigm

I find this account quite compelling and, unfortunately, entirely too familiar on a personal level. Yet it is worth noting that Kierkegaard's critique is not offered in absolute terms. This is wise. He argues not that it is impossible to see oneself in the mirror of the word through a critical approach but "that I *very likely* never come to see myself reflected" in the mirror because it is "so confusing."<sup>76</sup> On one hand the mirror of the word never fails to reflect readers as they stand *coram Deo*; on the other hand readers often fail to see their reflection because they distract themselves with the craftsmanship of the mirror itself. But even this turning away from the meaning of the text—from the reflection of oneself in the mirror—is an accurate reflection of the reader as one who takes offense *coram Deo*, *coram Scriptura*, and *coram se*. But Kierkegaard does not argue that *all* scholarly reading—that is, reading for ulterior reasons—is in error or merely a diversionary strategy. Some scholarship is necessary. "[W]e do not disparage scholarship, no, far from it," Kierkegaard writes, "but do bear this in mind: when you are reading God's Word in a scholarly way, with a dictionary, etc., then you are not reading God's Word."<sup>77</sup> To claim that you are reading God's word is not only a kind of confusion but actually insulting to both the author and the earnest reader—a point he stresses through the analogy of the love letter.

Critical-era biblical scholarship is widely believed to have contributed significantly to our understanding of the Bible. Kierkegaard allows that this may be with regard to our knowledge about the Bible. But this is the confusion: scholarly Bible reading—the use of

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<sup>76</sup> FSE, 25-26 (XII 315), (emphasis mine).

<sup>77</sup> FSE, 28-29 (XII 318).

the Bible to learn about other phenomena or the study of it as an object to acquire knowledge about its craftsmanship, history, and the like—is not reading for meaning. Many contemporary scholars criticize the optimistic and often exaggerated claims historical critics have made throughout the critical-era for their particular exegetical methods and proposals. Yet even some of historical-criticism’s most vocal critics continue to acknowledge a debt to the advances in our knowledge about the Bible achieved through historical-critical methods. Kierkegaard offered a similar critique over a century and a half ago but it generally fell on deaf ears. Today Kierkegaard’s critique still remains more radical than most on the contemporary scene, concluding that the entire critical-era exegetical paradigm is in fact a “mad” confusion of reading for ulterior purposes with reading for meaning.

Historical-critical methods are not the only examples of practices of reading that are aimed at ulterior purposes; they are not even the only family of critical methodologies. In the long twilight of historical-criticism, Bible critics in general have remained committed to the modern, critical-era exegetical paradigm. Indeed, a tradition of criticizing historical-critical methods while continuing to advocate their use and defend the value or even necessity of the critical exegetical paradigm has existed at least since Karl Barth’s *Epistle to the Romans*.<sup>78</sup> As disappointment with historical criticism has grown, commitment to critical approaches to exegesis has remained relatively strong. It is not surprising then that other, supposedly better critical methods have emerged as historical-criticism has retreated—the

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<sup>78</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).

whole family of literary critical approaches, for example, as well as the various particular critical approaches preoccupied with issues of class or sexuality.

This lingering commitment to the critical paradigm is even evident in canon-criticism and the growing, variegated movement toward theological exegesis. Vanhoozer, for example, proposes the phrase “theological criticism” for the task of theological interpretation, which he defines as “biblical interpretation oriented to the knowledge of God.”<sup>79</sup> On these lines theological exegesis could be conceived as just another critical tool available to exegetes who happen to be interested in what the text might say about God. This approach leaves the critical-era exegetical paradigm intact. A more robust and potentially disruptive concept of theological interpretation, also offered by Vanhoozer, is one in which “the ultimate aim of reading” is not just knowledge about God but “to hear the word of God in Scripture and hence to be transformed” by reading it.<sup>80</sup> He hastens to add, as Wolterstorff before him and Barth decades earlier, that such a proposal does not exclude critical-era exegetical methods. Though more radical than either of these three in several crucial points, Kierkegaard’s proposal does not necessarily exclude a constructive role for at least some critical-era methods, either. On the other hand, neither is it compatible with the critical-era paradigm with its priority on human authors, methodological historicism, and ulterior aims for reading.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Introduction,” in *The Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (DTIB), (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), 19-25.

<sup>80</sup> Vanhoozer, “Introduction,” in DTIB, 22.

<sup>81</sup> There are, of course, many popular, less scholarly ulterior *raisons pour la lecture* such as to find money management tips, political rhetoric, or inspirational slogans. Here, however, we are most interested in the methods and practices that belong to the critical paradigm of biblical exegesis. Although I am taking historical-

Critical-era exegetical methods and practices have been defended on the grounds that they are useful or even necessary to understand the Bible rightly (or at least better). If we are interested in understanding authorial intent it seems reasonable to suppose that we would want to know who the author is, to or for whom the author wrote, what occasion moved the author to write, in what historical and socio-historical context the author wrote, what the author actually wrote (as opposed to later redactors, for example), what sources the author drew from, what literary forms the author employed, and so on. Under the critical-era paradigm, however, each of these inquiries have become *raisons pour la lecture* and have, in practice and in the structure of the academy, tended to become autonomous fields pursued as though their objects were self-justifying ends. That is, a discipline has formed around each question and the answers pursued as though this is the primary interest cotemporary exegetes have in the text. The result is that supposedly exegetical scholarship is seldom concerned with the actual reading of the text for meaning.

To Kierkegaard, this appears to be sinfully strategic, an exegetical expression of our nearly instinctive habit of suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. The unrighteousness here is the misrelation between the reader and the truth or true textual meaning, in back of which is the fundamental misrelation of the reader with God and through God with oneself. The idolatry Paul describes in Romans 1:18-23 is expressed exegetically by substituting relatively comfortable, ulterior, objective ends in the place of the scandalous, fundamental, inter-personal meaning God intends. Kierkegaard's critique in "What Is Required" is largely

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critical methods and practices as my primary example Kierkegaard's critique applies quite broadly and was intended by him to extend far beyond historical-criticism.



an elaboration of his suspicion that there are underlying spiritual motives for exegetical methods and practices that, he believes, aim at missing true textual meaning through various ways of improperly objectifying it despite its subjective significance. Describing some of the necessary requirements an alternative exegetical paradigm would include—one aimed at realizing the full subjective significance intended by God—is the heart of his proposal.

The objectification of textual meaning occurs through the strong tendency within critical-era biblical studies, both in its modern and now its postmodern forms, to locate meaning someplace other than in authorial intent. It is also possible to objectify the meaning of Scripture while claiming authorial intent as one's criterion of meaning. But in traditional historical-critical methods and practices meaning is often located in phenomena commonly described as "behind" the text. If, for example, meaning is thought to reside in the sources that lie behind the text in hand, then critical methods aimed at discerning or reconstructing those earlier sources are self-justifying. Of course not every source critic locates meaning *behind* the text but this is a common critique that seems widely applicable. In postmodern critical methods meaning is often said to be located "in front" of the text—in the reader's interpretive act. Polk's imaginative construal regime represents a post-liberal version of this. Others, such as some form critics, look for meaning in the text but still fail to identify meaning with authorial intent. Wherever meaning is not identified with authorial intent the method of reading will obviously and, on its own terms, rightly be aimed at another object of reading. If meaning is determined by authorial intent, then these other approaches are aimed at ulterior ends and do not count as reading for meaning. To mistake reading for ulterior ends with reading for meaning is a central confusion in the critical-era

exegetical paradigm. It is not a necessary or unavoidable confusion but it is a confusion which nonetheless undermines the exegetical usefulness of these various critical methods. Kierkegaard's critique calls for nothing short of an alternative exegetical paradigm. Authorial intent, conceived along Kierkegaardian lines, becomes the point of integration at which all exegetical methods and practices must aim. As such, all critical methods must be reevaluated and, to the degree they still find a place in the exegete's toolbox, they must be reoriented to this single goal under the new exegetical paradigm—which turns out to be a renovation of an ancient, traditional approach to Bible reading.

#### ***4.6 Intentions, Speech Acts, and Textual Meaning***

Some reject authorial intent as the criterion for meaning because it is supposedly present only in the mind of the author and therefore inaccessible to readers.<sup>82</sup> There is some truth to this objection. Some of what an author intends to accomplish via a text may be unavailable to readers or, if available, may turn out to be nearly irrelevant to the meaning of the text. This kind of objection leads Vanhoozer, an advocate for the significance of authorial intent for textual meaning, to distinguish between “‘mapping intentions,’ which have to do with planning or plotting one’s course, and . . . ‘meaning intentions,’ which have to do with deeds and actual destinations.”<sup>83</sup> The former may not be available to readers; the latter are always available to readers and are the only intentions significant for meaning.

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<sup>82</sup> W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, for example, argue this in “The Intentional Fallacy,” in *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1954), 3-18.

<sup>83</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 246.

Drawing heavily from the speech-act theory of J. L. Austin and John Searle and the legal philosophy of R. A. Duff, Vanhoozer further defines a meaning intention “as the intention ‘with which [an] act is performed which makes it the act that it is’.” He continues:

I have argued that there is more to meaning than signs relating to other signs. The “more” is the author’s intention, but this does not refer to hidden mental states so much as to the directedness of the text as a meaningful act. Intention is not something that can be reduced to simpler non-intentional events; it is rather an emergent property that is required to explain what illocutionary act has been performed in a text.<sup>84</sup>

Vanhoozer argues that textual meaning is impossible *sans* authorial intent since the author’s intention intrinsic in the authorial act constitutes that act as an act of commanding, reporting, promising, or as whatever other illocutionary act it may count. Not every intention of the author that is related to the authorial act is intrinsic in the act. In addition to meaning intentions there are also mapping intentions. Mapping intentions are extrinsic to the authorial act and as such often unavailable to readers and always irrelevant to meaning. According to Vanhoozer meaning intentions are intentions that result in action; mapping intentions are “bare intentions . . . never put into action.”<sup>85</sup> Only those intentions that result in and are fulfilled by the authorial act are significant for textual meaning. These intentions are always available to the reader and are identical, he argues, with the illocutionary act performed. On this account it would seem that all textual meaning would necessarily

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<sup>84</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 252.

<sup>85</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 251.

conform to one of the few illocutionary act-types. Both Austin and Searle propose only five basic illocutionary act-types: assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative.<sup>86</sup>

A question of some magnitude remains, however, about whether authorial-intended *effects* of authorial acts—what Vanhoozer helpfully terms “perlocutionary intentions”—enter into the meaning of a text. Kierkegaard takes such intentions to be essential to biblical meaning and, to the degree they are disclosed in and through the content and use of the text, they must be accounted for in exegesis. Even a text whose content is deemed “nonsense” can still be meaningful if it is put to a particular use by the author. If that use is to confuse then this use is decisive for the text’s meaning—that for which any exegesis of this text must account. The text is only effective and the authorial intention is only realized if and when certain readers become confused. Of course an author can write a perfectly coherent text and direct its use toward the same effect such that the meaning of that text appears to be one thing on the surface—according to its semantic content—but is actually also to confuse. Again, the use of the text to confuse is vital to the meaning of the text to be accounted for in the exegetical task. An exegesis of that text’s surface meaning is incomplete and misleading. This is not to argue that semantic content is irrelevant to meaning. The semantic content is ordinarily crucial because not just any content is sufficient to achieve the author’s desired effect. The illocutionary act is, as Vanhoozer insists, essential to textual meaning. But this is in part because, in addition to clarifying the nature of the claim the author is making over the reader, the illocutionary act embodies the perlocutionary intention of the author and conveys

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<sup>86</sup> The taxonomy of illocutionary act-types listed here is from John Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1-29. It is a modification of Austin’s earlier taxonomy.

the perlocutionary force or potential efficacy of the text. Kierkegaard holds that perlocutionary intentions are essential to textual meaning.

Vanhoozer relegates all perlocutionary intentions or authorial intended effects (with the possible exception of understanding) to the realm of “significance” and then sharply distinguishes between meaning and significance. Other defenders of the identity of textual meaning with authorial intent have done likewise, though Vanhoozer’s argument in support of this distinction is one of the most sophisticated versions available. Textual meaning, he argues, has to do with “meaning accomplished” and relates only to the completed illocutionary act the author performed. Significance has to do with the application of this meaning to the reader’s current situation. Significance may be continuous with the author’s perlocutionary intentions or not. Both intended and unintended consequences belong to the domain of “perlocutionary effects” or the significance of the text. Since meaning is identical with authorial intent, unintended consequences cannot belong to the meaning of the text. But Vanhoozer, contrary to Kierkegaard, also excludes perlocutionary intentions from being significant for meaning. It is less clear, however, why he holds that perlocutionary intentions are irrelevant for meaning. (We will return to this question in chapter five.) He does allow that they play a role in indicating the text’s significance and even argues that an interpretation of the text remains incomplete unless it treats both meaning and significance.

Kierkegaard takes perlocutionary intentions to be essential to textual meaning. To deny the significance of perlocutionary intentions for meaning would be to objectify the meaning of the text and miss its literal sense. Pons argues that for Kierkegaard the “literal meaning” or “literal sense” of Scripture “connotes a concrete meaning for the individual”

reader and as such is essentially “spiritual.”<sup>87</sup> Pons uses the term concrete to stress that for Kierkegaard the meaning or literal sense of Scripture is always subjectively significant and actionable. Citing “What Is Required” Pons presses her point:

This is put very well in *For Self-Examination*: “God’s Word is given in order that you should act according to it, not that you shall practice interpreting obscure texts. If you do not read God’s Word in such a way that the least fragment you do understand binds you to act according to it, you are not reading God’s Word.”<sup>88</sup> Reading and action (in the form of imitation) are thus essentially related.<sup>89</sup>

To read the Bible for meaning is to aim at understanding the divine author’s perlocutionary intention in order to “act according to it.”

Kierkegaard is not, as some have supposed, ironing out the multi-textured canonical quilt into a smooth sheet of imperatives. First, such a criticism overlooks the rich complexity of ways Scripture shapes the lives of readers and hearers covered by Kierkegaard’s deceptively simple phrase, “act according to it.” As is clear from his handling of Scripture, all moods of biblical discourse, not just the imperative, bind readers in a diversity of ways to particular kinds of responses. By highlighting what might be best understood as the prophetic aspect of Scripture, he is not thereby reducing it to a set of imperatives. Rather, he appears to be sensitive to what Austin and Searle recognized during the cold-war era: people use words to attempt to bring about certain desired results. Thus texts have illocutionary force serving perlocutionary goals which, for Kierkegaard, are the

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<sup>87</sup> Pons, *Stealing a Gift*, 62.

<sup>88</sup> This quote is taken from FSE, 29 (XII 318-19).

<sup>89</sup> Pons, *Stealing a Gift*, 65-66.

essence of the meaning-significant authorial intent. Second, such a criticism ordinarily fails to appreciate the spirituality of the acts to which Kierkegaard believes God binds readers through the Bible. All biblically demanded acts require faith and insofar as the Bible requires anything other than faith it is always a faith-filled act of obedience *coram Deo* (cf. Rom 14:23). The only other possibility is to take offense, which is also a spiritual act *coram Deo*. Third, the point he makes here is primarily about the divine authority of the Bible and the implications of this authority for reading and for readers. The Bible, as a divinely authoritative word, necessarily binds us absolutely to even the very least thing that is required. To approach the Bible in any other way is a failure to read it according to what it is: God's word.

The larger point Pons highlights is that according to Kierkegaard what we have been calling perlocutionary intentions are essential to the meaning or literal sense of the text. Textual meaning is not, as Vanhoozer maintains, restricted to illocutionary acts already completed by the author. It instead includes perlocutionary intentions the reader must act upon in order for those intentions to be fulfilled. Hence reading and action are, Pons concludes, "essentially related." They are essentially related not just in the sense that to read is to act, though this is certainly true, but in the sense that to fail to fulfill the author's disclosed perlocutionary intentions is somehow to fail to read the Bible rightly—that is, as God's word and for his authorial intent in order to act accordingly. The meaning of a text is not just that the author has, at some point in the past, completed a particular illocutionary act (e.g., asserted) that includes a particular content (e.g., that God created the heavens and the earth). It certainly includes this but it also includes God's perlocutionary intention that the reader, in the moment of reading or hearing this text, is bound to act accordingly. The

assertion that God created the heavens and the earth, then, does not *just* mean that the author has asserted that God created the heavens and the earth; it also means that I should praise God, submit to his authority, depend on him wholly, treat creation properly, and so on. Because it is God himself who speaks, the reader is bound to do everything covered by the phrase “act according to it.”

Vanhoozer is correct to distinguish between illocutionary intentions that are intrinsic in and accomplished by the performance of the authorial act and perlocutionary intentions that are, strictly speaking, extrinsic to the authorial act and unfulfilled until readers “act according to it.” It is also true that not all perlocutionary intentions are available to readers or if available equally clear or relevant to textual meaning. Likewise, he rightly excludes unintended consequences as significant for meaning. But an author’s perlocutionary intent is often available to readers and significant for meaning, not just significance (though, of course, it is always this, too).<sup>90</sup> Meaning-relevant perlocutionary intentions are often clearly disclosed from the content of the text (e.g., “Pick up some bread on your way home, will you?”), and I suspect are always disclosed by the author’s use of the text. The author’s use of a text is ordinarily indicated by and consistent with the illocutionary act the author has performed, though the matter can be greatly complicated by irony. Although perlocutionary intentions are ordinarily clearly disclosed in and through the illocutionary act, they are not completed by the author’s performance of that act, nor need they be, contrary to

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<sup>90</sup> Not everything an author might intend to accomplish via a text is clearly disclosed or even available to readers. Some perlocutionary intentions are quite remote and some may be successfully hidden. But it seems unlikely that authors could perform authorial acts without disclosing at least something about their most relevant and significant perlocutionary intentions to their readers through their use of the text apart from a complete communicative failure.



Vanhoozer's claim, in order to be significant for meaning. All that would seem to be required is that the author has somehow indicated his or her perlocutionary intentions in and through the authorial act. As we will see in chapter five, this appears to satisfy Vanhoozer's major objections against the significance of perlocutionary intentions for textual meaning.

Vanhoozer allows that some perlocutionary intentions may be disclosed in and through the authorial act and thus available to readers. Such perlocutionary intentions, and perhaps other mapping intentions, may prove helpful to readers in applying the "original meaning" of the text to the contemporary situation.

I have argued that the primary object of understanding is not the present significance of a text but a text construed as a past communicative act. But interpretation, I have also suggested, may go beyond understanding. Texts written in the past continue to affect us. . . . Interpretation remains incomplete without an appreciation of a text's significance, its meaningfulness.<sup>91</sup>

Meaning, for Vanhoozer, is entirely historical; significance is derived by applying past meaning to the contemporary context. As such, meaning is singular, objective, and fixed (even if "we need a plurality of descriptive frameworks" to account for it<sup>92</sup>); significance is plural, subjective, and relative. Interpretation must comprehend both to be complete. Interpretation is not just about understanding or explaining meaning but about understanding meaning in order to realize and explain the significance of the text. Intriguingly, Vanhoozer equivocates on the term "meaningfulness." In some places he

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<sup>91</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 422.

<sup>92</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 424.

sharply distinguishes meaningfulness from significance in a manner consistent with this distinction;<sup>93</sup> in other places he uses the two terms as synonyms.<sup>94</sup>

Kierkegaard views the matter differently. Similar to his analysis that there is a *what* and a *how* to Christian faith that corresponds to the objective content of faith and subjective relation of the believer to that content,<sup>95</sup> so also there is a *what* and a *how* to biblical meaning. “Christianity is,” as Climacus constantly reminds us, “an existence-communication,” not merely an information-communication. “The task is to become a Christian or to continue to be a Christian.”<sup>96</sup> Scripture exists to this end and this purpose shapes what it is and how it functions. The Bible has not been written just to inform us about a *what*—though it certainly must do this if it is to communicate an existence; the Bible’s ultimate purpose is to effect a particular kind of human existence in its readers—to transform readers’ way of life by bringing them into a right relation with God, self, and others. Both the *what* and the *how* belong, essentially, to the meaning of the Bible. But the *how* is untouched by the illocutionary act the author has performed except insofar as that act expresses the author’s relevant perlocutionary intent. Meaning, though entirely determined by the author’s intentions (both illocutionary and perlocutionary), is not reducible to those intentions already accomplished in an author’s completion of a particular illocutionary act.

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<sup>93</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 260-61.

<sup>94</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 421.

<sup>95</sup> See David J. Gouwens, *Religious Thinker*, 122-27. “This means,” Gouwens comments, that “while Christianity *is* not a doctrine, Christianity *has* doctrines.” There is “a conceptual content . . . that distinguishes Christian faith” (126), (emphasis original). I have argued for this objectivity elsewhere in this dissertation.

<sup>96</sup> CUP, 608 (VII 530).

What Vanhoozer calls meaning, on Kierkegaardian terms, seems to belong entirely to the objective *what* of biblical meaning. But for Kierkegaard the subjective *how* is as vital as the objective *what*. This *how* has to do with the author-reader relation via the disclosed *what*. Vanhoozer is unwilling to count this interpersonal, subjective aspect of meaning as in any respect proper to meaning; he instead insists that it belongs to significance. Yet Vanhoozer's concept of "significance" as the "meaningfulness" of the text that we alluded to above, and his insistence that interpretation includes an indication of the text's significance, may indicate that Vanhoozer is not as far removed from Kierkegaard as the contrast between their different concepts of textual meaning initially suggests. Vanhoozer even admits that what he treats as significance (and excludes from meaning) has been understood to belong to textual meaning by much of the Christian exegetical tradition: "what was once called the 'spiritual sense' of the text," he declares in one place, "may now be seen to be an expression of the letter's *significance*."<sup>97</sup> On this point Kierkegaard's position appears, on the surface at least, to be in greater continuity with the precritical tradition than Vanhoozer's. This would not be surprising given how much further downstream from the dawn of critical-era exegesis Vanhoozer is than Kierkegaard.

It seems, however, that Vanhoozer treats the pre-critical concept of the *sensus spiritualis* a bit simplistically by reducing it to a matter of pure significance irrelevant to meaning. Though the pre-critical concept of the spiritual sense is far from monolithic, in general it was not conceived strictly as a matter of what we have been calling perlocutionary

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<sup>97</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 422. By "letter" Vanhoozer means something like the semantic content of the text.

intentions. It was often an attempt to correctly account for the possibly complex kind of illocutionary act or acts the divine author may have actually and intentionally performed by way of authoring these particular words. The question of the spiritual sense is not first how we can apply this meaning to our situation but whether the text *is* an allegory, type, trope, and so on—that is, has the divine author intended the things, persons, and events depicted (according to the historical sense) to have a higher (*sublimius*), spiritual meaning by authoring an allegory, type, trope, and so on. True, an allegory was often related to what we should believe, a type perhaps to what we should hope, and a trope to what we should do or love or want. But the particular allegory, type, or trope in itself is not a matter of perlocutionary intent but of a completed illocutionary action directed towards certain respective perlocutionary effects (often along the lines of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love). I do not doubt that some pre-critical exegetes may have practiced a far more liberal spiritual exegesis that was less concerned with whether the author intended to create or establish an allegory, type, trope, and so on. But certainly from the thirteenth century forward there was a growing concern to ground the spiritual sense in the divine author's intended meaning. This is a central concern, for example, in pre-critical Protestant exegesis as is apparent from the Lutheran orthodox concept of the *sensus duplex*.<sup>98</sup> It is just as

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<sup>98</sup> Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism: A Study of Theological Prolegomena* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), 325-29, observes that “the sense of Scripture is the meaning that the Spirit of God intends to be known and understood by those who read it. But often the Spirit intends a higher (*sublimius*) meaning to be understood from the persons or events depicted in a text (*per rem ipsis verbis significatam*) than the reading of the text as a mere history immediately conveys. Thus, not only the history is the sense of the text, but through the history a certain mystery is introduced as the sense of the text” (327). Preus notes that within Lutheran exegesis legitimate allegory is counted merely illustrative as an extended metaphor and thus an application of a text whereas a type is something written into and present in the text according to the intention of the divine author, often operating within a promise-fulfillment dynamic. As such a type belongs to the true sense or meaning of the text and does not violate the principle that *sensus literalis unus est*.

possible, then, to apply the distinction between illocution and perlocution as utilized by Vanhoozer to the spiritual sense or senses of the text as it is to the historical sense. Nevertheless, it is true that the spiritual sense or senses of the biblical text, especially as elaborated through the medieval quadriga, were generally coordinated with particular perlocutionary effects along the lines of faith, hope, and love and that this close coordination tends to involve the perlocutionary intention of the author in meaning in ways that seem to go beyond what Vanhoozer seems willing to allow.

#### ***4.7 Efficacy: Lutheran Orthodoxy as Background to Kierkegaard***

There is an altogether different and much more significant factor to be considered in accounting for the difference between Vanhoozer's and Kierkegaard's concept of textual meaning: Kierkegaard wrote within the Lutheran tradition and Vanhoozer the Reformed tradition. The Lutheran and Reformed branches of Protestantism did not develop identical responses to the various issues at play in the pre-critical exegetical traditions they inherited. One place where orthodox Lutherans distinguish themselves quite sharply from their Reformed counterparts is on the efficacy of Scripture. Lutheran critics of the Reformed position argue that there is a fundamentally different conception of the efficacy of Scripture between the Lutheran and Reformed orthodox and strongly defend a position that they see as uniquely Lutheran.<sup>99</sup> Kierkegaard's concept of biblical efficacy is best accounted for in terms of the classic Lutheran orthodox view. I am not arguing that Kierkegaard is (or is not)

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<sup>99</sup> See Preus, *Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 362-78 and Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the Seventeenth Century Lutheran Dogmaticians* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957), 170-92.

an orthodox Lutheran, only that his concept of biblical efficacy seems richly informed by and best explained in these terms.

The Reformed stressed the instrumentality of Scripture whereas Lutherans tended to stress the inherent efficacy of Scripture as a written form of God's living and active word. To what extent the Lutheran critique of Reformed orthodoxy is accurate and, if accurate, to what extent (a) it represents a substantive divergence between Lutheran and Reformed orthodoxy or (b) exposes an inadequate theological formulation within Reformed theology are important and interesting questions beyond the scope of this dissertation. It is certainly clear that many Lutherans took exception to the view they attribute to the Reformed camp. It is also clear that such a contrast does exist between Kierkegaard and Vanhoozer and the Lutheran critique seems fully applicable to Vanhoozer's position.

Vanhoozer defines efficacy as "the power to produce effects."<sup>100</sup> For him, this power is a potentiality that can only be realized through the agency of the Holy Spirit. Kierkegaard, however, depicts the Bible's efficacy more like a power actually exerted in every reading of Scripture. Vanhoozer believes that the Spirit must use the biblical text in order to render it God's speech act: the Spirit is mute without the word and the word is inactive apart from the Spirit.<sup>101</sup> The Spirit uses, perhaps sporadically, the instrument of the biblical text to speak to readers and hearers. For Kierkegaard, the Bible, just as God's word, is active and effective in itself; for Vanhoozer, the Bible becomes effective as the Spirit uses it to speak.

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<sup>100</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 427.

<sup>101</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 428.

For Kierkegaard, it is intrinsically effective in a way that is impossible for readers to escape. The Bible will, without fail and in itself, either offend or save its readers.

Preus summarizes the orthodox Lutheran take on biblical efficacy—a summary that fits Kierkegaard perfectly:

[I]f a man is converted and saved, the glory is due to God alone, who works through the Word. If a man is lost, it is wholly because of his own stubborn resistance to the Gospel, and it is therefore his fault. Hence, it is never because the Word has no power or because the Spirit chooses not to work through the Word that a sinner is lost. The efficacy of the Word extends to all men everywhere.<sup>102</sup>

Quoting Quenstedt's conclusion, Preus states the Lutheran position this way:

“It is the intrinsic power and natural disposition of the divine Word to persuade people of its truth; and it is never non-persuasive, except when its work is removed and impeded by a person's willful, self-determined stubbornness and natural resistance.”<sup>103</sup>

The Reformed are inclined to reply that resistible efficacy, if it represents efficacy at all, is not an efficacy worthy of an omnipotent and sovereign God. If God intends to save he will save and if he intends the biblical text to effect, instrumentally, that salvation then it will surely be effective to that end. Since not everyone is saved, it must be that God does not use the Bible to that end on every occasion. Therefore the efficacy of Scripture is a matter of the Spirit's use of Scripture in the salvation of the elect. But it is consistent with the Lutheran position and certainly true to Kierkegaard to maintain that a reader's stubborn resistance or self-defense is itself a kind of effect in keeping with the intrinsic efficacy of

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<sup>102</sup> Preus, *Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 376-77.

<sup>103</sup> Preus, *Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 377.

Scripture which is both law and gospel. The gospel may be resisted, they could argue, and yet the law always be effective in its work of offending sinners.

This contrast between Vanhoozer and Kierkegaard highlights a similar contrast between Barth and Kierkegaard—one especially worth pointing out given the influence of Kierkegaard on Barth during his *Römerbrief* years and his subsequent criticisms of Kierkegaard in *Kirchliche Dogmatik*. Barth famously distinguishes between the word of God and the Bible and maintains that the Bible becomes the word of God only when the Spirit uses the text to speak to its readers or auditors. Readers and auditors are supposed to approach the text with the expectation that God will speak to them through it, but God is free to be silent. If he is, then the Bible fails to count as God's word at that moment and is ineffective (at least as divine discourse, though it remains the normative source for the church's proclamation). These features of Barth's view of Scripture are clearly inconsistent with Kierkegaard's depiction of the Bible as the intrinsically efficacious word of God. For Kierkegaard, the Bible *is* God's efficacious word, it does not *become* efficacious.

For both Barth and Vanhoozer, despite significant differences between them, the biblical text is an instrument of and its reading an occasion for God to perform a speech act. Noting this similarity in no way suggests that Vanhoozer agrees with Barth's view of the nature or function of Scripture or even in what this speech act consists. They also differ as to exactly what the Bible is in the absence of this subsequent act of the Spirit. But for both, God must perform an act logically subsequent to the original authorial act in order for Scripture to *become* an effective divine speech-act. Despite their differences both agree that the text, as it stands, is an instrument the Holy Spirit uses (perhaps sporadically) to perform



speech acts. It is necessary for the Spirit to perform such an act for the Bible to *become* God's efficacious word and thereby able to bring about the intended perlocutionary effects.

One of the major points of contrast between Kierkegaard and the Barth-Vanhoozer position is that for both Barth and Vanhoozer the Bible must *become* a divinely *spoken word* (through this subsequent act of the Spirit) in order for it to become efficacious as divine discourse, whereas for Kierkegaard the Bible *is* a divinely *authored text* and as such is inherently efficacious as divine discourse. Consider Vanhoozer's argument:

The Spirit's agency consists, then, in bringing the illocutionary point home to the reader and in achieving the corresponding perlocutionary effect—belief, obedience, praise, and so on. The Word is the indispensable instrument of the Spirit's persuasive (perlocutionary) power. On the one hand the Spirit is mute without the Word; on the other hand, the Word is "inactive" without the Spirit. Word and Spirit together make up God's active speech (speech act). . . . [T]he Word does not work *ex opera operato*. That is the mistake . . . that transfers the life and power of the Spirit to the text itself.<sup>104</sup>

Vanhoozer is primarily speaking of the written word in this passage and arguing that the text does not count as an efficacious divine speech act apart from the Spirit's activity of "bringing the illocutionary point home to the reader" such that he "achiev[es] the corresponding perlocutionary effect." The biblical text as it stands is "inactive" and therefore ineffective apart from *this* distinct, subsequent work of the Spirit. Similarly, Barth argues like this:

[T]he presence of the Word of God itself, the real and present speaking and hearing of it, is not identical with the existence of the book [i.e. the Bible] as such. But in this presence something takes place in and with the book for which the book as such does indeed give the possibility[, and this something is a] free divine decision. . . . It then comes about that the Bible, . . . the Bible as it comes to us in this or that specific measure, is taken and used as an instrument in the hand of God, i.e., it speaks to and is heard by us as the

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<sup>104</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 428.

authentic witness to divine revelation and is therefore present as the Word of God.<sup>105</sup>

Both Vanhoozer and Barth look to a subsequent divine act that renders the biblical text the active and effective speech-act of God. Yet Wolterstorff's analysis of Barth's position leads him to conclude two things: first, Barth's model of speaking is "presentational, rather than authorial, speech"<sup>106</sup> and second, in the final analysis, "a different sort of action than speaking is called for" by Barth.<sup>107</sup> These conclusions apply equally to Vanhoozer's model of Scripture as divine communication. Both criticisms highlight relevant points of contrast between these two versions of the speech-act model of biblical efficacy and a Kierkegaardian authorial-act model of efficacy.

Presentational discourse says "something by *presenting* a text to someone, be it a text that one has oneself authored, or one that someone else has authored."<sup>108</sup> An example of the former might be a poet who reads his poem on multiple occasions before multiple audiences. Perhaps the poem was originally written for his wife and is eventually published and circulated widely. The author may have originally spoken to his wife by way of authoring this poem. On every subsequent occasion, however, the author is speaking by way of presenting the poem. It is quite likely, of course, that he is saying different things to the literary club gathered for a reading of his poetry than he was to his wife. But even if he is

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<sup>105</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I/1: *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 2<sup>d</sup> ed., eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 530.

<sup>106</sup> Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 71.

<sup>107</sup> Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 72.

<sup>108</sup> Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 55.

saying the same things he is saying it by way of presenting a text rather than authoring a text. Presentational discourse is extremely common—we wear T-shirts with sayings, slap bumperstickers on our cars, place ads in magazines and on billboards, and so on. Presentational discourse inherently treats texts instrumentally—it uses already-authored texts to say things. It is unsurprising, then, that both Barth and Vanhoozer, who speak of the biblical text in instrumental terms, operate with an essentially presentational model of divine discourse.

Barth offers little more than a presentational model of how the Bible comes to count as divine discourse. In his view the Bible becomes the word of God in the event of God freely deciding to use it to say something as it is being read or heard. Vanhoozer, in defending his embrace of the identity thesis that the Bible is God's word, sharply criticizes Barth.<sup>109</sup> Yet he continues to insist that the biblical text is inactive and ineffective as divine discourse (being word alone) apart from the Spirit's use of it when it is read or heard. It is in this logically subsequent use of the text—and specifically the presentational act—that the Spirit renders it the efficacious word of God. Only then or under this condition does Scripture become "God's mighty speech act."<sup>110</sup> So this too is a presentational model in which God speaks by way of presenting readers or hearers with an already authored text. For Barth, the text presented was written by others and becomes divine discourse; for Vanhoozer "Scripture *is* the Word of God (in the sense of divine locution and illocution) and . . . it may *become* the Word of God (in the sense of achieving its intended perlocutionary

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<sup>109</sup> Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2002), 130, 148, and, 150-51.

<sup>110</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 428; and *First Theology*, 130-31.

effects).”<sup>111</sup> For both authors the text of Scripture alone is the efficient cause of no divinely-intended perlocutionary effect apart from the direct, non-authorial activity of the Spirit. The presentation of the text becomes the occasion for the Spirit’s speech act.

Wolterstorff points out that the divine act that renders the biblical text, in Vanhoozer’s terms, one of “God’s mighty speech acts” is not itself an act of God speaking. It is instead, he argues, an act in the neighborhood of activation, ratification, and fulfillment as is clear from Barth’s discussion:

To bring it about that the *Deus dixit* is present with the Church in its various times and situations is not in the power of the Bible or proclamation. The *Deus dixit* is true . . . where and when God by His activating, ratifying and fulfilling of the word of the Bible and preaching lets it become true.<sup>112</sup>

After presenting this same quote in a slightly longer form Wolterstorff immediately exclaims “That is it precisely: God speaks in Jesus Christ, and only there; then on multiple occasions, God activates, ratifies, and fulfills in us what God says in Jesus Christ.”<sup>113</sup>

Wolterstorff amends Barth’s sense, however. For Barth God activates, ratifies, and fulfills “the word of the Bible and preaching” and thereby lets it “become true.” Wolterstorff reads this as God activating, ratifying, and fulfilling “in us what God says in Jesus Christ.” Whether this is a fair interpretation of Barth hangs upon what Barth means by the Bible and preaching *becoming true* through God’s activating, ratifying and fulfilling activity. According to Wolterstorff this means that “God must so act on me that I am

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<sup>111</sup> Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 156 (emphasis original).

<sup>112</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, 2<sup>d</sup> edition, 120.

<sup>113</sup> Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 73.

‘grabbed’ by the content of what God has already said” in Jesus Christ, to which the text bears witness. He continues:

I see no reason to call this action “speech.” It happens on the occasion of a human being witnessing, or recalling some witness. But it doesn’t itself consist in God saying something. It consists, instead, in God working on the heart of the auditor to get him or her to acknowledge the “truth” of what the human discourser said.<sup>114</sup>

I think it is possible that Barth intends that God actually does something with or to the text that renders it effective as God’s word rather than merely acting on the reader or hearer to acknowledge its veracity. Barth’s position may, for example, have a little more in common with Wolterstorff’s own model of appropriation than Wolterstorff allows—and Wolterstorff clearly believes appropriation can be a viable model for understanding certain kinds of speech acts. But Wolterstorff’s read is plausible and Barth is not as clear on these matters as one would like.

However Barth conceives this subsequent act God must perform to render the biblical text a divine speech act, it is clear that such an act is necessary for the Bible to be effective as divine discourse. Vanhoozer holds a similar position. Yet his analysis is even more confusing than Barth’s in that he depicts the Spirit as speaking but denies the Spirit is actually saying anything. The Spirit’s act consists in mere illumination and application:

[T]he Spirit renders the Word efficacious by impressing on us the full force of a communicative action: its illocution. In so doing, the Spirit does not alter the literal meaning but brings it home to the reader. . . . The Spirit enables understanding. . . . The Spirit’s work . . . is not to change the sense but to restore us to our senses.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 72-73.

<sup>115</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 427-28. Vanhoozer proposes that it is necessary for God to “restore us to our senses” to enable us to understand the illocutionary act (and thus the meaning) of

Vanhoozer is adamant: “the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of understanding—the Spirit of the letter correctly understood—not a rival author.”<sup>116</sup> So far the Spirit’s activity that renders the Bible God’s efficacious speech act seems to have more to do with the reader than the text and does not seem to consist of the Spirit saying anything at all, certainly not by way of authoring or speaking. If the Spirit does anything to the text it is that he “illuminates it”<sup>117</sup> and if he does anything with the text it is that he applies it to the reader’s particular existence when it is presented to the reader. It is unclear whether he considers illuminating or applying a text to involve performing a speech-act. He seems to deny that it does when he insists that the Spirit’s activity does not alter the meaning of the text. The confusing element, however, is that he straightforwardly and explicitly depicts this subsequent activity of the Spirit as a speech act: the “Spirit *speaks* in and through Scripture precisely by rendering its illocutions . . . perlocutionarily efficacious.”<sup>118</sup> But to perform a speech act is to perform a distinct illocutionary act. Each illocutionary act, however, has its own meaning. So, on his analysis, there is a question as to whether we have one divine speech act or two distinct speech acts: one that renders the Bible, along the lines of dual authorship, a divine illocution and a second that renders the Bible God’s active, efficacious speech act.

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any text, not just the biblical text. “Is the Spirit’s work really necessary,” He imagines readers protesting, “for readers to understand the Bible, much less novels, newspapers, and traffic signs? In response to this objection,” he continues, “we should recall how common it is for readers to let their prejudices or ideologies distort their readings. . . . Interpretation never takes place in a cognitively and spiritually clean environment” (428).

<sup>116</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 427.

<sup>117</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 427.

<sup>118</sup> Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 200 (emphasis added).

Vanhoozer's primary concern is that the Spirit, in performing this subsequent speech act, does not become "a rival author."<sup>119</sup> So he stresses that he "is the Spirit of understanding."<sup>120</sup> But on his analysis, to perform a speech act is just to perform an illocutionary act. If an illocutionary act is not performed then a speech act has not been performed. If the act of the Spirit that renders the Bible the efficacious word of God is a distinct speech act, it must be that the Spirit has performed a distinct illocutionary act which would, by definition, have a distinct meaning. What we seem to have is an original, apparently ineffective authorial act that needs to be activated or rendered effective by a logically subsequent speech act that the Spirit performs when the text is presented to a particular audience. The Spirit is not a second *author*, he is the speaker of these words to the reader or hearer of them. But on Vanhoozer's analysis the conclusion that there are two illocutionary acts being performed—an original authorial act and a subsequent speech act—seems inescapable.

This conclusion is precisely what Vanhoozer wants to deny. If there are two illocutionary acts then there are two meanings: one grounded in the authorial act and another in the speech act. He is committed to arguing for a single meaning wholly determined by the author in the original authorial act that the Spirit subsequently "renders" efficacious: "the one who inspired Scripture cannot contradict himself when he illumines it. A dualism that pits Word against Spirit and Spirit against Word must be avoided at all costs."<sup>121</sup> Leaving the

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<sup>119</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 427.

<sup>120</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 427.

<sup>121</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 427.

question of contradiction or opposition to the side, his analysis seems to entail that the speech act of the Spirit that “renders the Word effective” introduces a second illocutionary act and therewith a second subjectively significant meaning. That no contradiction or opposition can be permitted does not seem to exclude the possibility of two complementary illocutionary acts. He insists on a single determinate meaning, however.

Vanhoozer maintains that it is necessary for the Spirit to perform this subsequent speech act for several reasons. Among these may be concerns related to confessional orthodoxy. He notes that the “*unabbreviated* Protestant principle acknowledges the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture” and he cites the *Westminster Confession of Faith* to this end: that the supreme authority “by which all controversies of religion are to be determined . . . can be none other than the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.”<sup>122</sup> Although Vanhoozer does not do so, it would be easy to develop a biblical case to support Westminster’s position. He seems to believe that it is necessary to posit a distinct speech act in order to account for the efficacy of Scripture that accomplishes God’s perlocutionary intentions. “[W]hereas human discourse relies on rhetoric to achieve the intended perlocutionary effects,” he argues, “Scripture’s perlocutionary effects depend on the Spirit’s agency.”<sup>123</sup> The underlying assumption appears to be that an authorial act is insufficient to accomplish its perlocutionary intentions but the Spirit’s speech act is sufficient to do so, rendering the text “God’s active

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<sup>122</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 427, quoting *Westminster Confession of Faith*, I.10.

<sup>123</sup> Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 155-56.



speech (speech act).”<sup>124</sup> The Spirit must speak the word that has already been authored under divine inspiration in order to render it God’s speech act.

How the Spirit using the Bible to speak to contemporary readers constitutes a true speech act without involving a second illocution is not clear. Even if such an illocution could be identical with the original, which seems unlikely, it would still seem as though a distinct illocutionary act must be performed in order for that act to count as a speech act. This much is clear: apart from this act the Bible does not function as a divine, efficacious speech act.

Vanhoozer attempts to avoid the implications of introducing a second illocution by tentatively proposing that the Bible both *is* and *becomes* a divine speech act:

Is the Bible a divine communicative act, then, if a reader fails to respond to its illocutions? This is a subtle query. . . . The answer to my query depends on whether one includes the reader’s response (the perlocutionary effect) in the definition of “communicative act.” . . . Perhaps the solution is to affirm both that Scripture *is* the word of God (in the sense of divine locution and illocution) and that Scripture may *become* the Word of God (in the sense of achieving its intended perlocutionary effects).<sup>125</sup>

So there are two ways of understanding what belongs to a communicative act: it either excludes or includes the author’s “intended perlocutionary effects.” Meaning is restricted to the first definition. The interpretation of a communicative act, however, must account for both illocution and perlocution. We will examine the relation of perlocutionary effects to meaning and authorial intention in chapter five. However we define communicative action, though, Vanhoozer insists that the “Spirit speaks in and through Scripture precisely by

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<sup>124</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 428.

<sup>125</sup> Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 156.

rendering its illocutions . . . perlocutionarily efficacious.” We see by this how far the Bible is viewed as an inactive or passive instrument for both Barth and Vanhoozer.

Kierkegaard also depicts the Bible as a kind of speech act. His second requirement for reading the Bible rightly or in order to realize its saving efficacy is to “remember to say to yourself incessantly: It is I to whom it is speaking; it is I about whom it is speaking.”<sup>126</sup> But Kierkegaard does not depict the biblical text as something inactive and merely instrumental as do Barth and Vanhoozer. For Kierkegaard, the Bible does not become God’s efficacious speech act only as the Spirit activates it through a non-authorial act. In order to understand Kierkegaard’s concept of Scripture as God’s efficacious word, then, it is first necessary to distinguish between speech acts in the Barthian and Vanhoozerian sense (or senses), in which the biblical text is *rendered* efficacious divine discourse; from the Kierkegaardian sense in which the biblical text *is* inherently God’s efficacious word.

The difference revolves around two different models of efficacy. Barth and Vanhoozer seem to operate with a model of efficacy that requires the written text be transformed into something like direct, personal, oral proclamation in order for it to become efficacious. The Spirit must become the speaker of these words in order to transform it into God’s active speech and thereby render it effective in accomplishing his perlocutionary intentions. It is only through such a transformative act that the passive instrument of the text becomes the active word of God. As we have seen, both Barth and Vanhoozer explicitly speak in terms of the Spirit needing to activate the biblical text in order for it to

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<sup>126</sup> FSE, 35 (XII 324).

become God's efficacious word. There is nothing parallel to this requirement in Kierkegaard; no transformation of the text is necessary for it to become efficacious divine discourse. The biblical text is efficacious as it stands as a result of the authorial act or acts God has performed that constitute him the author of "Holy Scripture."

As noted in chapter two, Kierkegaard does not develop an account of the process or mechanics of divine inspiration; he does not explore what act or set of acts God must have performed in order for him to be the author of Scripture. I argued there that not just any concept of inspiration was sufficient to satisfy the demands of saving faith or the conviction that this text is God's word. But even those accounts of inspiration that do support a claim as robust as the identity thesis that the Bible is God's word do not address the crux of the problem as it presents itself to the contemporary reader. For the contemporary reader the issue is entirely in the present and a matter of faith. It is not an issue of sufficient evidence or plausible reconstructions of historical processes. The problem is simply this: whether to believe that the Bible is God's word. For Kierkegaard, believing the Bible to be so inspired or have God as its author does not render it true but rather conforms to what is already objectively true. Faith brings the believer into a right relationship with truth both in terms of right doctrine and the One who is the truth. A reader is able to realize the *saving* benefit or effect of Scripture only by faith. Though faith may be the result of the Spirit's activity and may ordinarily arise through the instrumentality of Scripture, the Bible is far from ineffective or inactive among readers or hearers who lack faith or in whom faith fails to be formed. The efficacy of the Bible to offend is universal and inescapable. Kierkegaard's concept of biblical efficacy presupposes a textual efficacy grounded in the authorial act of

God which renders this text God's word. It does not require a subsequent, transformative act to render it God's mighty speech act.

Scripture's efficacy is so vivid that it resembles a direct, personal, oral address even though it is written discourse. Hence Kierkegaard's critical counterfactual in this confession:

To be alone with Holy Scripture! I dare not! If I open it—any passage—it traps me at once; it asks me (indeed, it is as though it were God himself who asked me): Have you done what you read there? And then, then—yes, then I am trapped. Then either straightway into action—or immediately a humbling admission.<sup>127</sup>

One way to understand Kierkegaard's parenthetical counterfactual is as though "Holy Scripture" is not in fact God's word but only seems like it or acts like it. But this interpretation contradicts the thrust of Kierkegaard's discourse and his constant references to the Bible as God's word. Central to the point he is making is that the Bible confronts us with divine authority in every passage such that to be alone with God's word is an awesome and even terrifying prospect for sinners—very much like being alone with God himself. His counterfactual indicates a distinction between a kind of oral speech act in which God asks an addressee this question directly and the kind of textual efficacy the Bible has as God's written word. This latter, textual efficacy is so vivid and intense that it is as though God himself were asking the reader this very question in private conversation. Of course neither God nor the text asks this question of the reader in so many words. For Kierkegaard, the question is *implied* in the text as divine discourse; it is the text's intrinsic efficacy to convict the reader of sin—to offend—that Kierkegaard is pointing to here. The Bible does not

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<sup>127</sup> FSE, 31 (XII 320).

require that God somehow act to make the text efficacious in this way: God is saying these things to contemporary readers by way of having authored this text.

This introduces a different dynamic into the analysis of what it means to call the Bible the word of God or to read it as divine discourse. On the surface, Kierkegaard could be read as boldly and deliberately making what Vanhoozer declares to be “the mistake . . . that transfers the life and power of the Spirit to the text itself.”<sup>128</sup> But the Lutheran orthodox, despite all their emphasis on the power of God’s word *in se* and *extra usum* and their “appeal to an inherent *efficacia Scripturae extra usum*” do not understand themselves to be committing this error. Preus helpfully explains the Lutheran position on the relation of the Spirit to God’s written word:

[T]he written . . . Word of God derives its power from the Holy Spirit, who is united with the Word and operative through it. Orthodox Lutheranism . . . emphasiz[es] the perpetual union of the Spirit with the Word of God. This is the reason for the Word always being efficacious. . . . The power of the Word is never independent of the Spirit of God. . . . The work of the Word and the work of the Spirit are not two works, nor are they the union of two distinct operations, but they are one work, a unity of effect and a unity of operation. . . . Lutheran theology never thought of the Spirit of God abdicating His work of saving sinners to the Word, which then takes over God’s soteriological purposes in some sort of automatic fashion. . . . The power and work of the Word is never distinct from the Spirit’s power and work but is His power and work. . . . All Lutheran theologians from the time of the Reformation through the period of orthodoxy taught that the Spirit was the efficient cause of conversion and of all spiritual activity in man and that the Word (and sacraments) was His instrument.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 428.

<sup>129</sup> Preus, *Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 374-76.

The “perpetual union” of the Spirit with God’s word allows Lutherans to attribute the life and power of the Spirit to Scripture without transferring that life and power from God to the text, as though God abdicated his saving work to the Bible *sans* the Spirit.

This view is not identical with Vanhoozer’s. Vanhoozer also envisions a tight relationship between the Spirit and God’s word but declares that Scripture both *is* the word of God and *becomes* the word of God. Scripture’s becoming God’s word is specifically with regard to its becoming efficacious. Apart from a transforming act of the Spirit the Bible is a passive instrument. But the Lutheran orthodox teach that the Bible “is not a passive, inanimate instrument that . . . has no power in itself. No, it is an *instrumentum activum & cooperativum*, like the eye or hand of a living man.”<sup>130</sup> This is not contrary to the Spirit but through the “perpetual union” of the Spirit and God’s word. The word of God, they insist, is inherently powerful “prior to and apart from its use” and thus inescapably efficacious. This does not mean that everyone who reads Scripture will be saved. Scripture is both law and gospel and the efficacy of Scripture unto salvation can be resisted. But Scripture as law and gospel is always effective; God’s word does not require an extrinsic act to render it so.

The origin and basis of the power and efficacy of Scripture as God’s word is explicitly Trinitarian. Not only is the Spirit in “perpetual union” with the word but the Bible has God as its author and Christ as its content.

[T]he written Word of Scripture . . . derive[s its] power from God, who is the author of Scripture. The power of the Word is due to its divine origin (it is inspired by God) and to its divine nature (it is the Word of very God). . . . God cannot be separated from His Word. Any Word that proceeds from

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<sup>130</sup> Preus, *Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 365.

God brings God with it. Therefore, to deny that Scripture is efficacious is to deny that it is God's Word.<sup>131</sup>

It is on this basis—the basis of an authorial act rather than some subsequent use made of the divinely authored text—that “Scripture *is* God's Word, *is* God speaking,” and that a perpetual union exists between the Spirit and God's written word.<sup>132</sup> Understood this way the confessional claim that the Holy Spirit is speaking in Scripture could be understood not so much as a claim that the Spirit is performing some sort of subsequent act that renders this a divine speech act but an affirmation of the original authorial act. On the Lutheran view, to deny the efficacy of Scripture is not just to deny that the Spirit has performed an act that renders the biblical text efficacious but is to deny the text's divine authorship. That a text would need to be transformed through a subsequent act of God in order for it to become efficacious means that it was not God's word to begin with because God's word, whether spoken or authored, is inherently efficacious and united with the Spirit. The implications for reading the Bible this way and basing the efficacy of Scripture in a divine authorial act rather than a subsequent speech act are significant and will be explored more fully in chapter five. The point here is that God's authorial act is the ground of biblical efficacy for Lutheran orthodoxy and Kierkegaard.

The Bible is also efficacious for Lutheran orthodoxy because it proclaims Jesus Christ. Polk argues that “the scriptures are scripture . . . because they speak of Christ, are a unique witness to Christ.” For Polk this represents a mediating position between the claim

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<sup>131</sup> Preus, *Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 371.

<sup>132</sup> Preus, *Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 372.

that “the texts are authoritative . . . in virtue of any inherent property they may have” and a purely functionalist view that maintains that the texts are only authoritative because a particular community deems them to be so. According to Polk, the church wants to maintain that the Bible is Scripture because of its witness to Christ, yet this peculiar content cannot be seen to inhere in the text apart from the church’s construal of the text as a unique witness to Christ.<sup>133</sup> I criticized this position as hardly distinguishable from the purely functionalist view and entangled in many of the same problems. It also represents a significant misreading of Kierkegaard even though Kierkegaard clearly prioritizes the unique content of Scripture in certain ways and takes function as central to meaning and significant for exegetical method and practice. The argument here is that the orthodox Lutheran stance on efficacy is the best background and framework for accounting for Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the function of Scripture and within that discussion his emphasis on Christ as the unique content of Scripture.

Luther and his later, dogmatic disciples in Lutheran orthodoxy diligently maintained that Christ is the scope of the whole of Scripture. Although Scripture in its entirety is both law and gospel, it is especially the proclamation of Christ in the gospel that is the center of the canon’s message. It is helpful here to remember the distinction between God’s alien work through the law (according to its second use) and his proper work of justifying sinners through the gospel. The priority always falls on the gospel where Christ is proclaimed most clearly: “Strictly speaking,” Preus writes, “only the Gospel is a means of grace.”<sup>134</sup> The law,

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<sup>133</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 75.

<sup>134</sup> Preus, *Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 364.



by God's soteriological design, feeds into the gospel by driving sinners to Christ. This is not the only use of the law recognized by Lutherans but it is the use that is emphatically stressed, so much so that the second use of the law sometimes eclipses the third use. The primary, divinely-intended, perlocutionary effect of Scripture is to direct readers to Christ through the law-gospel dialectic that they may be justified *coram Deo*.

For Kierkegaard, the Bible is not just a witness to Christ, as Polk and Barth speak of it and Vanhoozer seems close to proposing. Rather, it "actually brings Christ to those who hear it."<sup>135</sup> This, too, is a standard Lutheran orthodox position on the relationship between Christ the content or scope of Scripture and biblical efficacy:

The Word of God, the Gospel, is powerful to save . . . because it proclaims a message . . . concerning the saving work of Jesus Christ. . . . This is the chief and central message of Scripture. Therefore, if one does not seek in the Word of the Bible the Word that was made flesh [one might as well] . . . spend one's time reading adventure stories. . . . But the Gospel not merely preaches Christ in a meaningful and moving way—its power is more than moral suasion, as we have heard—it actually brings Christ to those who hear it. . . . [T]he written . . . Word is dynamic and effective by virtue of its union with the hypostatic Word. The saving power of the Word is the power of the risen and victorious Christ. . . . When Scripture speaks, therefore, Christ speaks. When Scripture judges, Christ judges. When Scripture pledges forgiveness and salvation, Christ bestows forgiveness and salvation. And so for orthodox Lutheranism Christ is not merely the subject matter of the Scriptures, He is not in the Scriptures merely significatively as the one to whom the Scriptures point . . . ; but Christ confronts us in the Word, the Word truly brings Christ to us.<sup>136</sup>

Preus adds that "Lutheran theologians refuse to debate about how Christ is present in the Word of Scripture and how Scripture brings Christ to us," observing that for them this is "a

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<sup>135</sup> Preus, *Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 373.

<sup>136</sup> Preus, *Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 373.

mystery” we are unable to probe.<sup>137</sup> Muller notes that there is, in Luther, “a dynamic, existential encounter with ‘Word’ that defies dogmatic codification.” He quickly notes that “Luther clearly identifies Scripture itself, in the words of the text, as the authoritative Word of God, making no distinction like that found in the neoorthodox writers . . . between Christ alone as Word and Scripture as derived Word or witness to the Word.”<sup>138</sup> On the Lutheran view these two themes—the identity of Scripture as God’s written word and the existential encounter with Christ to which it leads—are inseparably bound together. If Scripture did not have God as its author it would not enjoy a perpetual union with the Spirit nor be a true means of grace that brings readers to Christ and Christ to readers.

Not all readers of the gospel are saved. This is why it is necessary for Kierkegaard to provide instructions on what is required to read the Bible as a means of saving grace. The failure of some readers to come to saving faith in Christ is not a sign of biblical ineffectiveness; it is instead directly and entirely attributable to the resistibility of saving grace by readers of God’s word. God creates and strengthens saving faith through the means of his word. But Lutherans hold that because God works through means it is possible for sinners to resist his saving grace: “God, working through means, can be resisted; God, working in uncovered majesty, cannot be resisted.”<sup>139</sup> This represents no diminishment of biblical efficacy or reduction of it to a mere potentiality. There are at least two reasons for

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<sup>137</sup> Preus, *Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 374.

<sup>138</sup> Muller, PRRD, vol. 2, 66.

<sup>139</sup> Francis Pieper, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), 465, summarizing Luther’s position.

this worth further consideration in view of Kierkegaard's comments on exegetical method and practice: first, because the non-saving, paradoxical efficacy of the law is inescapable and, second, because even the resister is forced to react in self-defensiveness to the presentation—indeed, presence—of Christ in the gospel proclaimed in Scripture. It is precisely the saving *efficacy* of the gospel as proclaimed in Scripture that stubborn sinners must react and defend themselves against; no resistance would be required if the gospel were not efficacious. In at least these two ways, then, we see that biblical efficacy is an inescapable reality for Bible readers. A reader will either be saved through faith or take offense and resist in the face of biblical efficacy.

#### ***4.8 Conclusion***

Though Kierkegaard's view of Scripture in general and biblical efficacy in particular is not worked out with the kind of nuance and precision one finds in the highly refined scholastic treatises of Lutheran orthodoxy, it is clear that his concept of biblical efficacy is developed within an orthodox Lutheran framework. For him, Scripture is inescapably effective along the lines of the law-gospel dialectic. The divine power of Scripture is inherent in the written word due to its divine authorship. As such, it is absolutely authoritative, binding its readers completely to the slightest demand or expectation it expresses or implies. The Bible is always efficacious—offending sinners who in despair react to defend themselves against the potency of God's word or effecting salvation through faith. Because Scripture is efficacious unto salvation it is possible to read "fear and

trembling into your soul” unto “salvation.”<sup>140</sup> Hence Kierkegaard outlines what he takes to be several basic requirements for doing so in “What Is Required.” Yet it is also possible to turn away offended, refusing to believe the gospel, and resisting the saving benefit of God’s word unto one’s ruination. Much of his critique of exegetical method and practice can be understood as an application of the manifold of despair presented in *Sickness Unto Death* to Bible reading as an existential phenomenon. In doing so, Kierkegaard seeks to account for the variety of ways readers defend themselves against the efficacy of Scripture.

As is the case for many orthodox Lutherans, Kierkegaard’s much preferred term when discussing Scripture is “God’s Word” or the “Word of God.” It is only insofar as this text is God’s word that it is efficacious as discussed above: God’s word is always efficacious whatever its form (written, spoken, or meditated upon). It is not the physicality of the Bible—the linguistic signs and figures printed on pages—that is efficacious. Such a view would reduce biblical efficacy to a magical spell or superstitious incantation. The Bible is only efficacious on account of it being God’s written word—the same word that can be preached, believed, and meditated upon. God’s word transcends every particular text (or utterance or thought), yet the Bible is God’s word. The Bible is not just a witness to this word or derivative of God’s word; it is fully and efficaciously God’s very word.

Setting Kierkegaard’s view against the backdrop of Lutheran orthodoxy also provides valuable insight into his concept of contemporaneity with Christ *coram Scriptura*. In Lutheran orthodoxy Christ is, in a mysterious and difficult to codify manner, brought to

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<sup>140</sup> FSE, 43 (XII 331).

readers such that in the reading of Scripture the reader encounters not just a divine message, as it were, but the hypostatic Word, and second person of the Trinity. In this way readers become contemporaries with Christ in and through the reading of Scripture. In the moment of reading, Scripture, operating according to the essential law-gospel dialectic, effects an encounter between the reader and the Son, preeminently, though not exclusively, through the apostolic eyewitness testimonies to the Son's incarnation in Jesus Christ. This existential encounter achieves a kind of contemporaneity with the Incarnate that parallels what the eyewitnesses themselves enjoyed and is the occasion for either faith or offense.

In the next chapter I will argue that, given Kierkegaard's priority on the efficacy of Scripture operating along the essential law-gospel dialectic, perlocutionary intentions and effects are, for him, vital to biblical meaning and, by extension, exegetical method and practice. This carries us into a closer analysis of the nature of offense *coram Scripture* and how it must be overcome by faith. Only faith is able to penetrate the law to lay hold of the gospel and thus realize the saving benefit of Scripture.

## CHAPTER 5

### EXEGETICAL DESPAIR

#### *5.1 Introduction*

That Kierkegaard takes the Bible to be God's efficacious written word along the lines developed within Lutheran orthodoxy is of enormous exegetical consequence. Unlike Vanhoozer, Kierkegaard believes this author-intended, perlocutionary efficacy of the biblical text is essential to its meaning or message—what God is saying to us as author of this text. Since this efficacy enters into and is in fact the essence of the biblical text's meaning it is only natural that it becomes the central concern of the exegete. Even Vanhoozer, despite his strong distinction between meaning and significance, argues that an interpretation of a text must indicate its significance for contemporary readers in order to be complete. Of course his concept of significance includes more than the author's perlocutionary intentions. It is possible, for example, for a text to be significant for contemporary readers in a way that the author never envisioned or intended. Vanhoozer's concept of significance, then, is not limited by authorial intent. To be clear, I am not arguing that everything included in Vanhoozer's concept of textual significance belongs to Kierkegaardian meaning, but only that part of significance that is determined by the author's perlocutionary intentions *and* identical with the text's divinely-intended efficacy. This last qualification is quite restrictive, and may be more restrictive than Kierkegaard would affirm. This restriction holds that only

the subset of perlocutiouary intentions that determine the Bible's efficacy is significant for meaning. I suspect Kierkegaard would maintain that the perlocutionary intentions behind his own authorship, though not rendering his texts efficacious in just the same way the Bible is efficacious, are just as vital to the meaning of his works as God's perlocutionary intentions are for biblical meaning. Either way, this much is clear: for Kierkegaard, the efficacy of Scripture is vital to its meaning and therefore a central exegetical concern. This chapter explores the exegetical implications of this concept of biblical efficacy.

As we explored in the previous chapter, the efficacy of Scripture operates according to the traditional Lutheran law-gospel dialectic. The Bible is always effective in its law aspect unto offense; it is also effective in its gospel aspect unto salvation under certain conditions. These conditions concern a work of grace in the life of the reader which can be successfully resisted or otherwise obstructed by the rebellious reader. Thus all readers are offended *coram Scriptura* but only some are saved. Just as law precedes gospel so also offense precedes salvation as a necessary precondition or even first moment in salvation. Salvation is reached only through offense or at least the possibility of offense. Any attempt to avoid the possibility of offense or defend oneself against offense is to resist or obstruct the saving efficacy of Scripture. Yet such resistance is always reactionary—a response to the offensiveness of the law to despairing sinners.

This analysis of biblical efficacy raises the central issues that structure this chapter. The issue of the relation of this efficacy to meaning as conceived by Kierkegaard will be considered first (section 5.2). I will argue (5.2.1) that for Kierkegaard the efficacy of Scripture as determined by the divine author's perlocutionary intentions belongs to the meaning of the text. I will also argue that Kierkegaard's concept of meaning appears to

avoid Vanhoozer's major objections against the significance of perlocutionary intentions for textual meaning. As we shall see (5.2.2), for Kierkegaard the meaning of the biblical text is wrapped up in the mirror-like function of the law-gospel dialectic. Of course the analogy between Scripture and a mirror features prominently in "What Is Required." This will lead us into an exploration of Kierkegaard's depth psychology (5.3), which in turn prepares the way for the analysis of the place of the exegete *coram Scriptura/coram Deo* in terms drawn heavily from *Sickness Unto Death* (5.4). The thrust of this analysis is that exegetical methods and practices frequently represent various strategies for coping with offense in despair (5.5). We will conclude this lengthy chapter by clarifying the nature of biblical offense and the demand for faith in biblical exegesis (5.6). In many ways, this chapter represents the heart of this dissertation and sketches the alternate exegetical paradigm Kierkegaard advances.

### ***5.2 Perlocutionary Intentions and Meaning***

That the Bible is inherently and inescapably efficacious is a critical point to establish in order to understand Kierkegaard's critique of exegetical methods and practices. True, biblical efficacy *unto salvation* is resistible. But even if a reader can rebel against the call of God to believe and be saved, this resistance is a self-defensive reaction to a prior efficacy of God's word. The reader's resistance or rebellion *coram Scriptura* exposes the reader as a despairing sinner *coram Deo*. This exposure of the reader's self is an effect of God's word. Indeed, this effect results from the inherent offensiveness of the word of God to sinners; it is not just an anticipated effect of Scripture but a divinely-intended effect of the promulgation of the law in Scripture aimed at carrying out the alien but paradoxically



necessary work of God. In this way God's word proves inescapably efficacious even though God's word does not always effect the salvation of its readers or hearers.

Even when it does effect the reader's salvation it does so, according to the law-gospel dialectic central to both Lutheran orthodoxy and Kierkegaard's thought, by first effecting offense and exposing despair. Offense, however, is not the ultimate aim of the divine author but is intended to serve the end of salvation:

[W]hen the orthodox Lutheran theologians speak of the power of the Word, they have in mind the Gospel Word. Strictly speaking, not the Scriptures as a whole but only the Gospel is a means of grace. . . . This does not imply that the Law of God has no power. On the contrary, its power is a consuming and inexorable power . . . its power is only to threaten and to judge and to kill. This is always the function of the Law and its chief function. . . . The Law does not lead the sinner to Christ—it knows nothing of Christ—but away from Him. And yet, paradoxically, by showing the sinner his lost condition (Rom 3:20), by working wrath (Rom. 4:15) and “only wrath,” the Law compels the sinner to seek Christ.<sup>1</sup>

These are strong words that draw a sharp contrast between law and gospel. It is imperative to remember that however sharp the contrast between law and gospel—they are held to be “absolute opposites, ‘*plus quam contradictoria*’” in Lutheran orthodoxy<sup>2</sup>—they also belong together and are dialectically bound to one another in practice.

The main point here, however, is to highlight the paradoxical, mirror-like efficacy of the legal aspect of God's word—that the law reflects the reader's reality *coram Deo* and thereby compels the reader to seek Christ in the gospel by faith. All readers will either do this unto salvation or else turn away in despair, offended. This is exactly the kind of efficacious dynamic we find at work in Kierkegaard's treatise “What Is Required.” It should

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<sup>1</sup> Preus, *Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 364.

<sup>2</sup> Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 78. Here Pieper quotes Luther (taken from IX:447 of the St. Louis edition of his works).

not surprise us that he stresses the law-like efficacy of Scripture to offend: the preaching of the law is exactly the antidote Lutherans would prescribe to instill a proper sense of fear and trembling into the souls of the secure, self-righteous, comfortable sinners Kierkegaard is convinced fill mid-nineteenth century Danish Christendom.

### 5.2.1. *The Self in the Mirror and the Meaning of the Text*

Seeing one's reflection in the mirror of God's word as one is *coram Deo* is the occasion for that terrible moment of coming to oneself that necessarily precedes repentance and faith. It is the moment the prodigal reached in the troughs of the swine lot in the far country (Luke 15:17). The purpose and efficacy of Scripture is, through the law aspect of the law-gospel dialectic, to bring readers to this moment. Reading the Bible is the occasion for coming to oneself as one is *coram Deo*, and this is the occasion for coming to Christ in the gospel for salvation. To read the Bible, then, is to stare into the spiritual mirror of God's law—"the ministry of condemnation" (2 Cor. 3:9). Most revealing of all, however, is not how we judge ourselves before God's law but how we react to the offensiveness of the law as we stand convicted of our sin and need for a Savior. In that moment do we take offense and resist the verdict or, moved to fear and trembling, do we seek saving grace? This moment is inescapable *coram Scriptura* due to its inherent efficacy as law and gospel.

The mirror-like reflection of oneself *coram Scriptura* as one is *coram Deo* is both the divine author's perlocutionary intention and essential to the meaning of the text. The meaning of the biblical text is a message about the individual reader in relation to God. Meaning is not determined by the readers of the text in the sense that they are free to impose meaning upon the text. Fear of falling into this error appears to be the primary reason why

Vanhoozer excludes perlocutionary intentions from meaning: it would seem to make textual meaning dependent upon readers' responses.

Vanhoozer finds it necessary to exclude perlocutionary intentions from meaning because he ultimately locates meaning in action and not desires, motives, or intentions. Intentions, for him, may constitute a particular act as a certain kind of illocutionary action but only acts are meaningful, not bare intentions. Perlocutionary intentions, then, cannot have any meaning apart from perlocutionary effects. But perlocutionary effects are not within the control of the author. They rather belong to the textual significance. Therefore, because perlocutionary effects are excluded from textual meaning so also are perlocutionary intentions, on the grounds that intentions alone have no meaning and the acts that complete such intentions lie outside the author's control.

Suspending meaning on readers' responses is a grave error, I do not believe that taking perlocutionary intentions to be significant for meaning necessarily falls into this error. Even a proposal as radical as Kierkegaard's successfully avoids Vanhoozer's dreaded "hermeneutic anti-realism" and is able to satisfy what appears to be his main objection to taking perlocutionary intentions to be significant for meaning. First, however, we need to clarify exactly how perlocutionary intentions enter into the meaning of the biblical text.

To reflect the reality of the reader *coram Deo* for the ultimate purpose of saving that reader is both the perlocutiouary intention of God its author and the efficacy of the text. Because this efficacy is inherent within the text—a power the text possesses in virtue of being God's word—there is no appeal away from the text to a non-authorial act to account for its ability to accomplish the author's intended effect or effects. The meaning and meaningfulness of the biblical text for the reader is determined by the divine author and not

by any extrinsic act performed by any other agent. Perhaps the best way to conceive of this author's relationship to this text is one of having claimed this text as his own word and assuming all of the rights and responsibilities of authorship that attend this stance in the public domain.<sup>3</sup> God has not just taken up this stance once at some point now in the past but has taken it up and maintains it. The point here is that God's perlocutionary intentions determine the efficacy or meaningfulness of the text even if that efficacy does not extend as far as determining or guaranteeing a reader's response of saving faith.

The orthodox Lutheran position on this point is admittedly difficult to maintain: they insist on the resistibility of saving grace and on salvation *sola gratia* while ruling out both Reformed particularity and every appearance of synergism in their soteriological system. They want to maintain that God, though he works the salvation of sinners through his word, can nevertheless be prevented from saving an individual reader precisely because he works through means. No doubt Lutherans believe that their account alone does full justice to the biblical testimony on these matters and, so long as they are convinced of this, are content to rest in whatever mystery or apparent paradox remains. Just how God's use of means renders his gracious work resistible is not clear to me. Yet it is clear that these tensions frame their concept of biblical efficacy and describe the razor's edge they are convinced one must walk. Whether walking this line is necessary or even possible can be left to one side; Kierkegaard clearly operates with a concept of the inherent efficacy of God's word and yet finds it necessary to urge his readers to allow "God's Word [to] have power over oneself."<sup>4</sup> The bottom line is that the text is conceived as intrinsically efficacious and this efficacy,

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 75-113, discusses speaking in terms of assuming, in the public domain, the normative rights and responsibilities of a speaker as it applies to divine discourse.

<sup>4</sup> FSE, 36 (XII 324).

determined entirely by the divine author, belongs essentially to the meaning of the text and not just to some subsequent application of its meaning to other readers and contexts.

To claim that biblical efficacy belongs to the meaning of the text is to claim that the meaning of the text is profoundly subjective. The claim is not that an objective description of the author's perlocutionary intentions in the text belongs to the meaning of the text but that the effects the text produces in readers as they read it belong to the meaning of the text. There is, as we have seen, an objective aspect to textual meaning that can be described independent of the effects the text produces in or upon readers. This would be the kind of account of meaning for which Vanhoozer argues, an objective meaning based upon the illocutionary act or acts the author has performed. But Vanhoozer admits that interpretation is incomplete apart from an account of the significance of the text. Significance, for Vanhoozer, includes more than the author's intended perlocutionary effects. But the only role that the author's perlocutionary intentions are allotted in Vanhoozer's scheme is here: as a set of intentions that potentially inform some effects a text may produce as part of its significance. As such, perlocutionary intentions do not factor into meaning. Meaning is rather something wholly objective and capable of a purely objective description. From a Kierkegaardian point of view, such objective description is valid on its own terms but remains incomplete. The subjectivity of meaning continues to escape the exegete.

In one sense, an objective description of meaning is what an exegesis is. No exegete can package the subjective aspect of meaning and hand it off to another person as a finished product. Each one must appropriate the meaning of the text for oneself. But this is neither an argument for abandoning the exegetical project as inadequate to express the full meaning of the text nor for setting the subjective aspect of meaning aside in despair over conveying it.

Modern or critical-era exegetical methods and practices have attempted to do this very thing—to bracket the subjectivity of the reader as though it were irrelevant or even somehow corrupting to the exegetical enterprise of reading-for-meaning. One does not have to be a higher-critic to fall into this error, however: pious lay people can be just as guilty of forgetting themselves in reading the Bible as the erudite scholar:

Do not let yourself be deceived—or do not yourself be cunning. In relation to God and God’s Word—oh, we humans are so sly, even the most stupid of us. . . . [W]e have fabricated the notion (we do not say that it is in order to defend ourselves against God’s Word—we are not that crazy—if we said that, we would of course have no profit from our sagacious fabrication), we have fabricated the notion that to think of oneself is—just imagine how sly!—vanity, morbid vanity (which it may indeed be in many cases, but not when it is a matter of letting God’s Word have power over oneself). . . . To think about oneself and to say “It is I” is, as we scholars say, the subjective, and the subjective is vanity, this vanity of not being able to read a book—God’s Word!—without thinking that it is about me. Should I not abhor being vain! Should I be so stupid as not to abhor it when I thereby also make sure that God’s Word cannot take hold of me because I do not place myself in any personal (subjective) relation to the Word, but on the contrary—ah, what earnestness, for which I am then so highly commended by men—change the Word into an impersonal something (the objective, an objective doctrine, etc.), to which I—both earnest and cultured!—relate myself objectively. . . . No, no, no! When you read God’s Word, in everything you read, continually say to yourself: It is I to whom it is speaking, it is I about whom it is speaking—this is earnestness, precisely this is earnestness. Not a single one of those to whom the cause of Christianity in the higher sense has been entrusted forgot to urge this again and again as most crucial, as unconditionally the condition if you are to come to see yourself in the mirror. Consequently, this is what you have to do; while you are reading you must incessantly say to yourself: It is I to whom it is speaking, it is I about whom it is speaking.<sup>5</sup>

In some ways the remainder of this chapter is a commentary on this and similar lines of argument taken up by Kierkegaard in “What Is Required.” The main point at present, however, is that the error of bracketing one’s self or subjectivity—an attempt to defend

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<sup>5</sup> FSE, 36-37 (XII 324-325).

oneself against the interpersonal dynamic between the divine author and the reader via the text—is common to all kinds of people because it is rooted in the spiritual problem of being a sinner *coram Deo*. The difference between critical-era exegetical method and practice and the habits of non-professional exegetes is that professional scholars have systematized and now institutionalized this sterile exegetical methodology within the academy.

Despite the exegete's inability to package personal appropriation, the subjective significance of the text determined by the author's perlocutionary intentions is central to reading-for-meaning and by extension to the exegetical task. The question becomes how subjectivity enters into the exegetical task. There are at least three ways: first, a proper exegesis will, necessarily, aim at producing in the reader of the exegetical account the effect or effects the divine author intended to effect through the biblical text; second, only that exegesis which comes out of one's subjective or personal appropriation of the text is able to explain the meaning rightly; and third, the meaning of the text involves a kind of higher-order subjectivity to be explained shortly.

The first way has to do with the need to represent the subjective force or significance of the text's meaning in order to fully account for the meaning of the text. Since the text aims at effecting a particular kind of existence in the life of the reader, in order to faithfully explicate the meaning of the text exegetes must not only describe this intended effect but must direct their exegesis at realizing the same subjective effect. Otherwise, the exegete falsifies the meaning by turning what is essentially subjective into something merely objective. The actual exegesis of the text will be, if it is true to the meaning of the text, prophetic or sermoniac in nature, directed to the same end as the divinely-intended effect of the text. This is why preaching, rather than the production of commentaries and other

materials we tend to consider as more purely exegetical, is the biblically prescribed method for handling the word of God. The sermon, perhaps more purely than any other genre, is truly exegetical because it aims at using the objective meaning to the proper subjective end and thereby is able to be a truly faithful rendering of the full meaning of the biblical text.

It is to this end, as Pons argues in *Stealing a Gift*, that the imagination of the exegete may prove to be a powerful exegetical tool. The imagination can help clarify and press home the subjective aspect of textual meaning.<sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard's authorship manifests this kind of creative endeavor to clarify the meaning of Scripture by functioning in a parallel mirror-like manner. In fact, Kierkegaard's entire corpus can be viewed as an exegetical product in the sense that it is aimed at using the law-gospel dialectical dynamic of Scripture in a variety of highly imaginative ways to the same subjective end. As Kierkegaard states repeatedly, his primary goal through the entirety of his authorship was to clarify the demands of Christianity as revealed in the canon and especially as depicted in the pages of the New Testament. His method was selected to be the most effective manner he could devise, given his situation and audience, to faithfully capture and render the biblical message.

As for the second way, the reader's subjectivity enters into the exegetical task, only that exegete whose existence has been decisively shaped by the meaning of the text is able to explicate that meaning without falsifying it. In order to describe the meaning of the text rightly exegetes must first have appropriated that meaning for themselves because that meaning is essentially subjective. Any would-be exegete who objectifies the meaning of Scripture by resisting its subjective force will inevitably describe the text's meaning as something merely objective. A true witness, we must remember, must first become a martyr

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<sup>6</sup> Jolita Pons, *Stealing a Gift*, 98-99.



in order to bear true testimony; a preacher must first live the life of faith in order to preach the faith; and an exegete must realize the meaning of the text through personal appropriation in order to faithfully explicate that meaning to others. Otherwise both the exegete and the exegesis will fall short of the biblical meaning.

These two ways a reader's subjectivity enters into the exegetical task have already been noted elsewhere in this dissertation. Both are grounded in the fact that meaning has an essential subjective aspect in addition to its objective aspect. The third way—that the meaning of the text involves a kind of higher-order subjectivity—has not been treated and is central to the argument of this chapter. This higher-order subjectivity is also deeply ironic in its structure. It comes about through the mirror-like, paradoxical efficacy of the law within the larger context of the law-gospel dialectic. At the heart of the matter is a peculiar kind of “redoubling.” The meaning of the text is not just subjectively significant. Rather, the meaning of the text is wrapped up in the subjectivity of the reader whose image is reflected in the text. The reflection of the reader's subjectivity *coram Scriptura* as he or she is *coram Deo* belongs to the meaning of the biblical text. Therefore any exegesis of the text must move beyond mere objectivity to account for the essential subjective aspect of meaning. This subjective aspect is to confront readers with the reality of who they are *coram Deo*. Any attempt to explicate or clarify biblical meaning must reflect this mirror-like quality and function of it without reducing it to a mere objective description.

As a reader reading for the meaning determined by the divine author one must read the Bible in such a way that one sees oneself in the mirror of the word. Only then will one come to know the meaning of the text. Wanting to find a comfortably objective message in Scripture one instead finds oneself exegeted by the text. It is not just that Scripture, by

God's authorial design, reflects readers' images back to themselves that they might come to see themselves as they really are *coram Deo*, but that readers' own responses to this message—either of faith or despair—will be reflected as part of their image of themselves *coram Deo*. It is precisely in this realized efficacy of either offense or appropriation by faith that the reader is exegeted. In this way, though the Bible is one word by one divine author (albeit through the agency of many human authors) with a fixed semantic content of law and gospel in dialectical relation to each other, it can come to mean different things to different people. This is not to say that the content of the law or the gospel changes or that the divine judgment pronounced or call to repentance and faith issued changes—the objectivity of the Bible is fixed and not subject to being construed by readers in various ways. But it does mean that the image reflected in the mirror changes as one stands in differing relationships to the objective realities presented in the biblical text. The reader's reaction to God's word as law unto offense and perhaps, paradoxically, unto salvation through the gospel, belongs to the meaning of the text. It is God's design that the Bible functions as a kind of literary mirror whose meaning is located in the reflection of the reader *coram Deo*. It is not that the reader thereby determines the meaning of the text but that the meaning of the text is geared to the subjectivity of the reader in such a way that the divinely intended perlocutionary effect of the text enters into the meaning of the text. The text exegetes the reader to the reader as he or she is *coram Deo*. Anyone who reads Scripture and does not see oneself *coram Deo* reflected in the text has missed its meaning and will fail to realize its saving efficacy.

There are several significant points of interest in the vicinity that we will explore at length later in this chapter including Kierkegaard's depth psychology (5.3), his mirror analogy (5.4), the varieties of despair *coram Scripture* (5.5), and the nature of offense *coram*

*Scriptura* (5.6). Before turning to each of these points of interest in turn, however, I want to consider whether Vanhoozer's objections to the significance of perlocutionary effects for meaning represent a fatal problem for Kierkegaard's profoundly subjective concept of biblical meaning or necessarily relegate Kierkegaard's proposal to the dreaded domain of "hermeneutic anti-realism" as a kind of reader-response approach to interpretation.

### *5.2.2 Vanhoozer's Objection Satisfied?*

Returning to the contrast between Kierkegaard and Vanhoozer, we also find that the efficacious power of Scripture is not to produce any kind of effect. Vanhoozer's definition of efficacy intentionally allows for a great diversity of effects so that it may be broad enough to comprehend everything he includes in significance. For Kierkegaard the effects that the Bible inescapably produces, either offense through unbelief or salvation through faith, are the divinely intended effects the authorial act aims at. It seems entirely congruent with Kierkegaard, then, to define biblical efficacy as the exercise of divine power to accomplish God's perlocutionary intentions. This definition of biblical efficacy is explicitly tied to the author's perlocutionary intentions, which is a significant difference from Vanhoozer's broader definition of efficacy that theoretically includes any and all effects a text has the power to bring about, whether intended by the author or not. It also ties efficacy to the authorial act and not to some subsequent, non-authorial act.

Vanhoozer's openness to other kinds of effects—effects or consequences not intended by the author—as properly belonging to the significance of the text along with author-intended effects results in a much looser relationship between meaning and significance as well as between authorial intention and textual efficacy. According to

Vanhoozer, both significance and efficacy generally comprehend the author's perlocutionary intentions but only to the extent that those intentions have any enduring relevance to the present reader or community of readers. Both significance and efficacy may also include many effects never envisioned or desired by the author. On the other hand, whatever perlocutionary intentions the author may have had that go unrealized are likewise excluded from consideration as insignificant. Textual significance takes on a life of its own. For all of Vanhoozer's emphasis on authorial control it turns out that authors have minimal to no control over the significance or efficacy of the text they author, only over its meaning narrowly conceived as the illocutionary act performed by way of writing this text. That act, as Vanhoozer repeatedly reminds us, is a past completed action—an historical fact.

To overcome the problems this detachment of textual significance from the author's perlocutionary intentions creates for biblical efficacy Vanhoozer appeals to the ministry of the Holy Spirit: "the Spirit renders the Word *effective*."<sup>7</sup> According to Vanhoozer the Spirit of God both inspires and illumines the biblical text. What has been inspired, however, is an instrument whose power is only an unrealized potential until the Spirit renders it effective through illumination. Consistency between the author's perlocutionary intentions and significance is secured through the agency of the Spirit who is both inspirer and illuminator. As illuminator, the Spirit guides readers into understanding the completed illocutionary act and realizing its contemporary application. Vanhoozer concludes that "the one who inspired Scripture cannot contradict himself when he illumines it."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 427 (emphasis original).

<sup>8</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 427.

For this reason, the Spirit's use of the text as his "instrument of . . . persuasive power"<sup>9</sup> does not constitute him as "a rival author."<sup>10</sup>

The Spirit's agency consists, then, in bringing the illocutionary point home to the reader and in achieving the corresponding perlocutionary effect—belief, obedience, praise, and so on. The Word is the indispensable instrument of the Spirit's persuasive (perlocutionary) power. On the one hand the Spirit is mute without the Word; on the other hand, the Word is "inactive" without the Spirit. Word and Spirit together make up God's active speech (speech act). . . . [T]he Word does not work *ex opera operato*. That is the mistake . . . that transfers the life and power of the Spirit to the text itself.<sup>11</sup>

Presumably Hebrews 4:12, that "the word of God is living and active," must not refer to God's written word in itself but only the Spirit's efficacious speech-act performed with that word. Technically, on Vanhoozer's analysis, it would be improper to assert that Scripture is living and active and able to produce any perlocutionary effects in itself or apart from some subsequent act of the Spirit. Instead, Scripture is merely a passive instrument that can be put to powerful use in the hands of the Spirit.

Though he could subscribe to much of what Vanhoozer argues, Kierkegaard appears to hold word and Spirit together in a tighter relation along the lines indicated in Lutheran orthodoxy. This has noticeable effects on his depiction of biblical efficacy. For Vanhoozer, the text must become a divine speech-act in order for it to become God's efficacious word for the contemporary reader; for Kierkegaard, it is already efficacious and thus significant and meaningful for the reader as a divine authorial act. An authorial act, of course, is very similar to a speech act in numerous ways but is not identical with a speech act. Kierkegaard signifies both the remarkable similarity and clear distinction between oral speech act and

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<sup>9</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 429.

<sup>10</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 427.

<sup>11</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 428.

written authorial act when he depicts the Bible as an oral, divine speech act in counterfactual terms.<sup>12</sup>

Kierkegaard nowhere denies the Spirit's instrumental use of Scripture and strongly affirms the soteriological ministry of the Spirit. Kierkegaard maintains, for example, that "the life-giving Spirit is the very one who slays you."<sup>13</sup> Presumably one instrument the Spirit employs to put sinners to death is God's word and especially the law that drives us to despair of ourselves and to "die to every merely earthly hope, to every merely human confidence."<sup>14</sup> Likewise, it is "the Spirit that brings *faith, the faith*—that is, faith in the strictest sense of the word, this gift of the Holy Spirit . . . in the stricter Christian sense."<sup>15</sup> With faith the Spirit also brings and creates within the believer the other two theological virtues, hope and love.<sup>16</sup> Apart from the gift and ministry of the Spirit, then, there is no faith in this strict Christian sense in the reader and thus no way for a reader to *realize* the saving efficacy of Scripture which Scripture has, as God's word, objectively or in itself, apart from the reader's faith.<sup>17</sup> Regeneration evidently must precede conversion but this does not mean that regeneration must precede reading or recognition that what is being read is God's word.

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<sup>12</sup> FSE 31 (XII 320).

<sup>13</sup> FSE 76 (XII 360).

<sup>14</sup> FSE 77 (XII 361).

<sup>15</sup> FSE 81 (XII 365).

<sup>16</sup> FSE 82-84 (XII 365-67).

<sup>17</sup> See Matthew J. Frawley, "The Essential Role of the Holy Spirit in Kierkegaard's Biblical Hermeneutic," in *Søren Kierkegaard and the Word(s): Essays on Hermeneutics and Communication*, eds. Paul Houe and Gordon D. Marino (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 2003), 93-104, who argues quite strongly for necessity of "the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit working within" readers "to enable us to see . . . the Bible as God's Word" (98).

Just as the encounter between the eyewitnesses and Christ is the occasion for either offense or faith so also the encounter with Scripture *coram Deo* is the occasion for either offense or faith today.<sup>18</sup> For faith rather than offense to be the outcome of this encounter with God's word the Spirit must give it or at least the condition for it.<sup>19</sup> But faith arises in individuals by means of hearing or reading God's word and doing so in a particular way—the way advocated by Kierkegaard in which one actually reads the Bible for meaning rather than for some ulterior purpose ultimately aimed at defending oneself against God's word. In one sense Kierkegaard is calling his readers to read their Bible by faith and describing for them what reading by faith involves or looks like.

That the Spirit's regeneration of the reader is necessary in order to read the Bible for saving benefit does not imply that the Bible, apart from the activity of the Spirit, is ineffective. The Bible's efficacy for a particular reader may be decisively determined by this operation of the Spirit in or upon the reader but the Bible is efficacious to the end of either offense or salvation in itself. The efficacy of Scripture is intrinsic to Scripture as God's word due to the perpetual union between Spirit and God's word posited within Lutheran orthodoxy.<sup>20</sup> Not all readers are regenerated by the Scripture but all readers must pass

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<sup>18</sup> Climacus argues that the encounter with Christ must be more than a mere occasion since we begin in untruth and as must be given the condition for understanding the truth.

<sup>19</sup> There is, as noted elsewhere in this dissertation, a significant disagreement within the secondary literature over Kierkegaard's concept of faith. According to David Wisdo, "Kierkegaard on Belief, Faith, and Explanation," *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 21 (1987): 95-114, Kierkegaard finds faith to be something impossible to describe philosophically; according to Louis Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity*, faith is simply a willed decision; according to C. Stephen Evans, *Passionate Reason: Making Sense of Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), faith is not an act of will but a necessary condition given by God that enables the individual to perform willed acts of faith; and according to Jamie Ferreira, *Transforming Vision: Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), faith can be willful and yet not be reduced to a mere act of will since the will itself extends to our imaginative self-understanding.

<sup>20</sup> The Bible is perhaps a special case because it is written, but it is not uniquely efficacious in the way described here since God's word may also take on visible and oral forms according to Lutheran orthodoxy.

through the possibility of offense in which they will either take offense or through which they will arrive at faith. Either way, all readers are affected by Scripture according to its intrinsic efficacy. Even the efficacy to save or regenerate the reader is intrinsic in the Bible as God's word and is realized as soon as the natural resistance of the reader is overcome through the biblical efficacy to so offend the reader that he or she is driven to the kind of despair that leads to faith—despair that drives sinners to “die to every merely earthly hope, to every merely human confidence.”<sup>21</sup> Yet even here offense does not always serve the saving end of driving the reader or hearer to abandon all merely earthly hope and confidence. Many offended readers simply stop reading the Bible; some of these will go on to pretend to read the Bible while in fact defending themselves against it in various ways.

Vanhoozer appears to argue for only an extrinsic use of Scripture by the Spirit that potentiates the Bible's efficacy. Kierkegaard does not suspend biblical efficacy upon an act of the Spirit subsequent to his authorial act. The Spirit's subsequent activity in which he employs Scripture as his tool relates to the *kind* of effect Scripture will produce according to its intrinsic efficacy. For Kierkegaard, the Bible is an efficacious instrument already put to use by God through his authorial act. This speaks to a central difference between a speech act that terminates in a locution and an authorial act that terminates in a text: a text ordinarily endures and is able to extend the force and significance of the authorial act far beyond the immediacy that ordinarily attends an oral utterance. This allows authors to assume an enduring normative stance in the public domain.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> FSF, 77 (XII 361).

<sup>22</sup> See Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 75-113.



The intrinsic efficacy of Scripture includes the power to offend or to save, the difference between these two effects being the faith (or lack of it) of the reader. This faith, or at least the condition for it, must be given from above through a gracious act of the Spirit and may come through the Spirit's instrumental use of Scripture. But the fact that the Bible does not always effect salvation is no sign of textual impotency. True, the Bible is properly and ultimately aimed at the salvation of its reader and hearers, but salvation lies beyond the possibility of offense and can only be reached through offense for fallen readers. The authorial intent to offend is not ultimate even though the possibility of offense is a necessary condition for salvation. It is in fact both universal to all readers of the Bible and the first moment on the way to salvation for those who will be saved by reading "fear and trembling" into their souls. To offend, then, is God's perlocutionary intention even if not his entire or ultimate perlocutionary intention. The Bible does not require an act of God subsequent to the authorial act in order to become efficacious because it already is God's efficacious act to offend all readers in order to save some.

We find, then, that Vanhoozer and Kierkegaard offer two different answers to the question of whether perlocutionary intentions are significant for meaning—though the question is, of course, anachronistic when put to Kierkegaard in these terms. One reason Vanhoozer finds it necessary to deny that textual significance belongs to textual meaning (but then argues that interpretation must account for significance in order to be complete), is to guard the objectivity of a singular, fixed meaning of the text.<sup>23</sup> If textual meaning includes significance it would either render meaning as variegated, diverse, and relative as he envisions significance or else require significance to be construed as objective, singular, and

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<sup>23</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 425-426.

fixed as he insists meaning is. Neither of these options is acceptable for Vanhoozer. Therefore, as we have seen, he attempts to carefully and sharply distinguish between meaning and significance. In order to insulate meaning from significance, however, he also finds it necessary to deny that perlocutionary intentions, which have to do with author-intended effects and by extension textual efficacy, are significant for meaning. In order not to kill the author and destroy the communicative character of textual meaning he defends the traditional identification of textual meaning with authorial intentions. But he also restricts meaning-significant authorial intentions to those illocutionary intentions which are fully realized in the performance of the illocutionary act. This means that the perlocutionary intentions of the author—those intentions the illocutionary act is performed in order to accomplish—are excluded from textual meaning.

Vanhoozer's main objection against the significance of perlocutionary intentions for textual meaning revolves around his claim that they are not in the control of the author but depend upon the response of readers. Control, he argues, is a decisive criterion for distinguishing between meaning and significance:

Intention, as I have defined it, should not be confused with “planning.” Yet authors may have a plan for what consequences, other than understanding, they want to bring off by their communicative acts, though ultimately authors cannot control how people receive their texts. To produce a text that will be not only meaningful but significant requires not only communicative but *strategic* actions. Whereas communicative action brings about results—warning, promising, stating—regardless of the reader's response and aims only at achieving understanding, the consequences of a strategic action are not intrinsic to the action itself. As a first approximation, then, I suggest that meaning is a matter of illocutions, while significance concerns perlocutions.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 260-261 (emphasis original).

Vanhoozer repeatedly returns to the criterion of authorial control throughout his discussion of the relation of authorial intention to textual meaning and it seems to be the primary grounds for his denial of perlocutionary intentions as significant for meaning. The reason is simple: in order for meaning to be “what the author intended”<sup>25</sup> it is necessary, he presumes, that only those intentions that the author has complete control over are relevant for textual meaning. Thus, only those intentions that the author has already fulfilled, having already been completed in the performance of the authorial act, are relevant to meaning. Those intentions relevant to meaning are comprehended by the authorial act generative of the text. As such, meaning can only be articulated in terms of illocutionary acts.

Perlocutionary intentions must be excluded from meaning because meaning is ultimately located in actions, not intentions, according to Vanhoozer. Even though the author’s intentions constitute a particular illocutionary act the kind of act it is, a command, report, or whatever else it may count as, only those intentions related to an act the author has complete control over and has already performed, are permitted to be significant for meaning. All other intentions, aimed at acts the author does not control, are insignificant for meaning. This class includes perlocutionary intentions since they relate to perlocutionary effects over which the author presumably has no control. To allow perlocutionary intentions to be significant for meaning would, as he sees it, suspend meaning upon readers’ responses. So, the exclusion of perlocutionary effects entails the exclusion of perlocutionary intentions. Bare intentions are meaningless.

To adopt a model that would permit the significance of perlocutionary intentions for textual meaning would be to fall into the error of hermeneutic non-realism in which the text

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<sup>25</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 253.

becomes something like a blank canvas upon which readers project their own meaning. For Vanhoozer, there very definitely is meaning in the text and that meaning is singular, fixed by the author, knowable by readers, and identical to the author's illocutionary act.

On this analysis, Matthew 9:38, in which it is reported that Jesus instructed his disciples to "pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest," does not *mean* that contemporary readers are supposed to pray earnestly for this or that Jesus wants readers to pray earnestly for this or even that Jesus' disciples are suppose to pray earnestly for this. It does not even mean that readers are supposed to believe that Jesus said these things. All of these conclusions speak to the possible perlocutionary intention of the author not the illocutionary act he performed. Instead this text can only mean that the author (whether taken to be divine or human) *has asserted* that Jesus instructed those disciples to act this way. Meaning only relates to the completed illocutionary act of the author.

This seems deeply counterintuitive on several relevant counts. Surely the author did not *mean* only this. This may have been all that the author actually accomplished in writing this line but surely the text reflects a larger set of authorial intentions operative in the authorial act that must be accounted for in order to understand what the author means his readers to understand. These intentions—intentions related to what readers ought to believe and do in light of this report—are the particular perlocutionary intentions of the author that the text exists to serve and effect. They represent not just the act performed but the author's motive and aim in performing the authorial act—what Vanhoozer labels his plan or strategic action. They are the vital context for properly understanding the illocutionary act the author performed. Even Vanhoozer finds it necessary to propose "understanding" as a kind of minimal, universal "presumption." But understanding is a perlocutionary effect over which

the author has no control but at which readers must assume authors aim in order to make sense of the text. The problem here is that Vanhoozer casts this perlocutionary intent as the one exception to the exclusion of all other perlocutionary intentions, classifying it instead as an “illocutionary intention.”<sup>26</sup> But it is not at all clear why this intention is exceptional just because it must be presupposed in order to make sense of any particular text. It seems more likely that this necessary presupposition highlights the vital role perlocutionary intentions play in defining textual meaning rather than demonstrating the exceptional status of this one perlocutionary intention. Besides, authors presumably want readers to understand more than just what kind of act they have just performed in authoring a given text.

It may be necessary to correctly identify the illocutionary act performed by an author to rightly understand or explain the author’s meaning, but this by itself seems to be a very thin account of textual meaning. Ordinarily authors want readers to respond to their illocutionary acts in various ways. As we noted above in the discussion on authorial authority, illocutionary acts make just such a claim upon their readers—a right to be believed, obeyed, answered, and so on. If Vanhoozer intends to deny these claims, which are nothing other than the author’s perlocutionary intentions, as proper to textual meaning then it is difficult to see how his concept of meaning can even do justice to the illocutionary act performed. Illocutionary acts imply perlocutionary intentions that cannot be reduced to the illocutionary act performed but which nevertheless belong to the meaning of the text.

The presence of perlocutionary intentions would seem necessary for a text to be a subjectively significant interpersonal communication. Vanhoozer recognizes this but wants to isolate significance from meaning by distinguishing between merely communicative

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<sup>26</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 427-26.

actions and strategic actions: “To produce a text that will be not only meaningful but significant,” he maintains, “requires not only communicative but *strategic* actions.”<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, Vanhoozer elsewhere uses significance and meaningfulness as synonyms.<sup>28</sup> Here, however, he entertains a distinction consistent with his argument that the “*meaning/ significance distinction is fundamentally a distinction between a completed action and its ongoing intentional or unintentional consequences.*”<sup>29</sup> Intentional consequences are the object of strategic actions—strategic actions are actions motivated by and directed toward realizing perlocutionary intentions. Because “the consequences of a strategic action”—that is, an action aimed at effecting some perlocutionary intentions—“are not intrinsic to the action itself” they are not taken to be significant for meaning. It is, however, difficult to imagine an illocutionary act like “warning, promising, [or] stating”<sup>30</sup> that is not also a strategic act—just as difficult as imagining a meaningful but insignificant illocutionary act. On Vanhoozer’s own analysis written communication requires the readers’ understanding to be completed. Authors, therefore, do not have power in themselves to complete a communicative act because the reader’s understanding lies beyond their control. So it would seem that a communicative action is by definition, on Vanhoozer’s own analysis, always also a strategic act. It is certainly the case that it must be such to be a significant act.

It turns out that Vanhoozer fails to maintain an adequate distinction between intentions and actions and consequently locates textual meaning in authorial action rather than in authorial intentions. In Vanhoozer’s analysis authorial intent only enters into

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<sup>27</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 260-261 (emphasis original).

<sup>28</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 421.

<sup>29</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 262 (emphasis original).

<sup>30</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 260-261 (emphasis original).

meaning insofar as it constitutes the authorial act a particular kind of illocutionary act. An author may write, for example, “Close the door.” Whether this authorial act counts as an act of commanding, requesting, or even joking, is determined by the author’s intention. This is the only role Vanhoozer allows authorial intent to play in determining meaning. But this intention relates only to the historical act the author performed. Ultimately the locus of meaning is in the completed historical act not in the abiding, significance of that act. The text becomes a trace of this past authorial act—evidence available to the contemporary reader that some author performed an illocutionary act at some time in the past. Of course the author’s intended act is only available to contemporary readers insofar as it is somehow evident to the reader through the traces of intention left in the text.

In his discussion of the concept of intentionality Vanhoozer, quoting R. A. Duff, “defines intention as ‘acting to bring about a result.’ . . . Intention is . . . ‘acting in order to.’”<sup>31</sup> On the surface this would seem to support the significance of perlocutionary intentions for meaning. Vanhoozer, however, understands “result” strictly in terms of the illocutionary act the author intended to complete: “the author’s intention is not a matter of what the author wanted to do, nor of what the author believed might happen as a consequence, but rather of what the author was doing and actually did. The link between intentions and illocutions . . . remains firm.”<sup>32</sup> Vanhoozer continues: “As Duff rightly observes, ‘I “intend” what I have decided to bring about; but I cannot intend a result which is “wholly beyond” my control.’”<sup>33</sup> Since perlocutionary intentions “are aimed at producing

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<sup>31</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 251.

<sup>32</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 251.

<sup>33</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 251.

consequences” and consequences “fall outside the purview of intended action” they do not enter into the meaning of the act.<sup>34</sup> The reason for this, according to Vanhoozer, is that meaning intentions always relate to and result in performed acts, not desired consequences.

To illustrate his point Vanhoozer takes the example of eating:

As a consequence of my swallowing, I may appease my hunger. Then again I may not (I may want seconds). Consequences are not tied to actions as closely as are results. Consequences are not intrinsic, but extrinsic, to actions. Consequences have to do with ulterior, perlocutionary purposes. As such they fall outside the purview of intended actions.<sup>35</sup>

It seems odd to deny that the perlocutionary intention of satisfying my hunger is not an acceptable account of the meaning of my eating (or swallowing)—that the only permissible account of the meaning of my swallowing is that my swallowing counts as eating. Satisfying my hunger may be my motive and eating may be my strategy for achieving this desired goal and it might be certain to be effective to that end (even if I must swallow more than I initially planned), yet according to Vanhoozer it cannot be the meaning of my act of eating.

No doubt, acts are meaningful and there is a very close relationship between the authorial act performed and the meaning of the text. But the contemporary reader’s only access to the authorial act is through the text and what seems decisive for meaning is not the past completed act but the clear indication of the author’s intention in and through the text. It is not the action performed but the clear expression of the author’s intention that is decisive for textual meaning. It is not enough, in other words, that the author performed a command at some time in the past by authoring this text. That his intention was to perform a command must be indicated in some sufficiently clear way in order to enter into the text’s

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<sup>34</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 251.

<sup>35</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 251.



meaning. Otherwise the text is ambiguous. (Ambiguity may be intentional and should not be conceived as the antithesis of meaning.) Textual meaning is not comprehended by the authorial act. The authorial act is decisive for establishing meaning and is the means by which the author controls meaning but is not the locus of meaning.

If it is true that authorial meaning, conceived in terms of authorial intent, is located in the sufficiently clear expression or indication of authorial intent then there is no obvious reason why perlocutionary intentions might not be just as clearly expressed or indicated as illocutionary intentions and thus just as significant for meaning. Assuming that an author fully controls the expression or indication of intention through the authorial act, it does not seem necessary to exclude perlocutionary intentions from meaning just because they remain unrealized at the time of writing. The only reason for excluding perlocutionary intentions is if meaning is located in action rather than in intention. If meaning is located in action then perlocutionary intentions will only become meaningful when realized as perlocutionary actions performed by the intended addressees. But if meaning is located in authorial intent then it is sufficient for authors to clearly express or indicate their perlocutionary intentions for such intentions to become meaning-significant. Though intentions can only be indicated through action—and authorial intentions through authorial actions—it does not follow that only those intentions which are fully realized in the authorial act enter into the meaning of that act. It suffices if the author has simply made their intentions, realized or merely desired, clear. Since authors have full control over the expression of such intentions there seems to be no reason to exclude perlocutionary intentions from textual meaning on this count.

Though the above point of critique applies to the structure of textual meaning in general, Scripture is God's written word and thus an exceptional text, able to effect its

author's perlocutionary intentions. God, through his authorial act, is not only able to control the expression of his perlocutionary intentions but also the realization of these intentions. It is, of course, not necessary that God determines all the reactions of his addressees to his written word but only that he authors a text that is efficacious to produce a particular effect to raise the possibility that this effect may also enter into the meaning of Scripture without threatening authorial control over the meaning of the text. Kierkegaard appears to have in view something very much like this analysis: the message is from God and yet the meaning of this message includes the disclosure of the reader's personal, subjective relationship to God and self. Hence the Bible, as God's word, has a distinct mirror-like quality. Other, non-divine words may aspire to this with more or less success but God's word always, without fail, achieves this perlocutionary efficacy. When reading is an act of faith the gospel will be understood and salvation will be the effect; when reading is an act of unbelief the entire meaning will seem offensive and the reader will take offense and persevere in despair.

I see no reason why Kierkegaard would object to calling these perlocutionary intentions and effects the significance of the text. For him, however, at least this much of the significance of the biblical text belongs to its meaning. Because these intentions, and at least some of the perlocutionary effects, are certain and under the control of God, who has determined to bring them about in the readers and hearers of Scripture by means of this text, there is no danger of falling into hermeneutic anti-realism. The meaning is "in the text" just as is the efficacy of Scripture. Meaning does not break apart on the rocks of relativism. Neither is the author or the message of the text eclipsed by readers' imaginations or projections (such responses are self-defensive reactions). To read for meaning is to read for the purpose of understanding the author's intent as clearly expressed in and through the text.

This is the same as to read Scripture for the purpose of understanding the claims and demands God through this text makes upon us his readers—what he wants us to believe, to want, and to do. The answers to these questions will be objectively constant even though they may also subjectively vary from reader to reader depending on how the reader is related to that objective meaning and to the author. This does not imply that the objective *what* of textual meaning is swallowed up in the subjective *how*—far from it. The subjective *how* concerns the way the reader relates to the objective *what*. But the objective *what*, for Kierkegaard, is not restricted to the illocutionary act already performed but includes those perlocutionary authorial intentions disclosed in and through the illocutionary act. Reading, then, is not just a matter of understanding what the author has done, as Vanhoozer maintains; it is a matter of understanding what the author is indicating he wants of his addressees and, in the case of God’s written word, of understanding how I am presently related to this disclosure of God’s will. This leads us to Kierkegaard’s use of his analysis of despair and sin in *Sickness Unto Death* as the framework for understanding his critique of exegetical methods and practices.

### ***5.3 Sickness Unto Death Coram Scriptura: Toward Kierkegaard’s Depth Psychology***

Because Kierkegaard understands his authorship, at least from the perspective represented in *Point of View*, as serving the same end God’s word is intended to serve, he is ever ready to yield to Scripture. He sees himself as an aspiring witness to Christ, at best; Scripture, on the other hand, is the testimony of true witnesses. It is more than this—though it is certainly not less than this, either; it has God as its author and is his word to us for our salvation. Kierkegaard confesses that his own works are guided by “Governance”

and serve a divine purpose, a purpose that may have been unknown to him when he began his career as an author. Yet Kierkegaard never confuses his own authorship with Scripture and claims for his own corpus only a providential influence and design; he claims nothing like the kind of divine inspiration Christian faith confesses of Scripture.

Scripture, as both the eyewitness accounts of the God-man (Gospels) or more broadly the testimony of true witnesses to the God-man and the word of God (prophets and apostles), functions as the occasion for both offense and faith and plays a crucial, though not altogether unique or exclusive, role in Kierkegaard's soteriology. Forms of the word of God and human testimony other than Scripture can fulfill this salvific role. The necessary and efficacious element here is, strictly speaking, the word of God of which Scripture is only one form. We would not expect Kierkegaard to maintain anything to the contrary. The word of God is present in other forms and modes of discourse according to both Lutheran orthodoxy and Scripture, which points to the form of preaching (Rom 10:14-17) as well as the sacred writings (2 Tim 3:14-17). The argument here is not that Kierkegaard believed that only Scripture could play this role in the economy of salvation but that Scripture's purpose is to fill this role alongside other forms of God's word. Indeed, Kierkegaard does not reject Adler's claim to divine revelation on the *a priori* grounds that Scripture alone is God's revelation to us or that God is no longer revealing himself. He rather argues on the *a posteriori* grounds that Adler does not speak or act as a spokesperson of God speaks or acts in relation to the divinely revealed message. Still, the priority of Scripture for Kierkegaard is abundantly clear from his corpus and especially the role of Scripture in his signed works.

What is of decisive significance for exegetical method and practice, however, is not whether there are other discourses that count as God's word or function in a similar manner

as Scripture but that Scripture is God's word and functions in this way. One implication of this is that the exegetical method and practice Kierkegaard advocates for *coram Scriptura* may apply to other instances of divine discourse, too. The heart of the argument of this dissertation, however, is that to understand both Kierkegaard's critique of exegetical methods and practices and the particular method and practice of reading he is convinced the text demands it is necessary to understand the situation of the would-be reader or exegete of Scripture as conceived by Kierkegaard and the spiritual dynamics at work in biblical exegesis. Kierkegaard's concept of the situation of the individual *coram Scriptura* is set by his anthropology, hamartology, and soteriology and the vital role Scripture plays in Kierkegaard's concept of what is required in order to become a true self *coram Deo*.

### 5.3.1 *To Be a Self: Relevant Aspects of Kierkegaard's Anthropology*

Anti-Climacus opens *Sickness Unto Death* (1849) with perhaps the clearest statement from an explicitly Christian perspective on what it is to be a human being to be found in Kierkegaard's corpus. The oft-cited and much-discussed formula reads like this:

A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself.<sup>36</sup>

This formula is the basis of Kierkegaard's analysis of despair throughout *Sickness Unto Death*. This analysis of despair, or sin when despair is considered *coram Deo*, shapes Kierkegaard's thoughts about the situation of the reader *coram Scriptura*. This formula is the proper starting point for considering the role of Scripture in the life and salvation of the reading subject.

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<sup>36</sup> SUD, 13 (XI 127).

Anti-Climacus's formulaic description of the self requires some unpacking for it to become a workable paradigm for understanding the role of Scripture in Kierkegaard's soteriology. First, there are two poles which are brought together in a synthetic relation: a "human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis."<sup>37</sup> One pole consists of all that relates to the "psychical" dimension of human being and the other to the "physical" dimension. Anti-Climacus places eternity, infinity, and freedom on the psychical side of the synthetic relation and temporality, finitude, and necessity on the physical side. Climacus also places language and ideality on the psychical side and immediacy and reality on the physical.<sup>38</sup>

As a synthesis, we are essentially a psychosomatic unity. Such a unity is purely negative and is not yet a sufficient description of the human self. Still, to posit that humans are such a synthetic relation or psychosomatic unity is to affirm that we are composite beings that are inherently dialectical.<sup>39</sup> To be or become oneself is to walk a razor's edge: it is necessary that these two poles be kept in their proper dialectical relationship throughout the process of becoming. This turns out to be impossible apart from faith.

On the physical side we are, of course, bodily creatures conditioned by time, finitude, and necessity such that our existence is always, we might say, in the imperfect tense—an existence of becoming. But, we are not merely animal-like because we also have a psychical side through which we are also conditioned by eternity, infinity, and freedom. Through the psychical we are able to imagine possibilities (and obligations) and then, through the will, to

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<sup>37</sup> SUD, 13 (XI 127).

<sup>38</sup> See especially "What Is It To Doubt?" in *Johannes Climacus, or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, 166-172 (IV 144-150) and related supplemental material 250-256.

<sup>39</sup> SUD, 30 (XI 143).

strive to actualize these possibilities in our life. Thus humans not only come into existence but also possess a degree of self-determination in that we are able to reduplicate the eternal and infinite in our temporal and finite existence. Evans concisely summarizes this capacity:

Though human beings by no means have the power to create themselves out of nothing . . . they nevertheless have the ability to shape their own development by exercising free choices. By becoming self-conscious and by imaginatively considering possibilities that are not actual, human life can achieve the dignity of a process that is to a certain degree, but only to a certain degree, self-conscious and self-directed.<sup>40</sup>

Unlike animal existence, humans are linguistic beings that think abstractly, dream of possibilities, and value ideals. Yet humans are not merely intellectual or ideational beings. We not only experience duration or continuity, but are subject to succession and change.

Human existence involves much more than being a mere psychosomatic synthesis. Anti-Climacus insists that there is a crucial distinction between being human in the sense of a mere synthetic relation and being a self: “a human being is still not a self.”<sup>41</sup> Without grasping something about the distinction between being merely human and being a self it will be impossible to develop a proper account of Kierkegaard’s understanding of sin and salvation since both sin and salvation relate to the potential within every human being for becoming oneself (as opposed to merely having a self). Sin is treated by Kierkegaard as “a sickness . . . of the self”<sup>42</sup>; salvation is the radical curing of this sickness unto death.

The synthesis between the two poles is a relation that, as constituted in the human being, is capable of relating itself to itself. As such, this reflexive relation constitutes the third component of Kierkegaard’s understanding of human being—the spirit.

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<sup>40</sup> Evans, *Fragments and Postscript*, 37.

<sup>41</sup> SUD, 13 (XI 127).

<sup>42</sup> SUD, 13 (XI 127). For the identity of sin and despair see SUD, 77 (XI 189)

(Kierkegaard's anthropology may be trichotomous, positing a distinct body, soul, and spirit, though spirit may refer only to a dynamic relation within the human constitution and not an elemental substance. On the other hand, this dynamic relation seems to function much like an immaterial substance essential to the structure of human being.)<sup>43</sup> Without the reflexive relation of the self—which includes the capacity for self-consciousness—the synthetic relation remains a “negative unity” in which the two poles are merely brought into relation:

A synthesis is a relation between two [and] the relation between the two is the third as a negative unity, and the two relate to the relation and in the relation to the relation; thus under the qualification of the psychical the relation between the psychical and the physical is a relation.<sup>44</sup>

As such there is no positivity in this relation. The positivity of this third component—the psychosomatic union—enters only in that the synthetic relation is able to relate itself to itself. It is not sufficient for self-consciousness if the relation of the relation to itself is the rather trivial one of “self-related immediacy.” This is nothing more than the “negative unity.”<sup>45</sup> In order for one to become conscious of having a self one must be able to relate to oneself as an object. To be able to do this, it is necessary that the relation of the self to itself be a mediated relation. Only with such mediation does the possibility for differentiation arise in which it is possible to recognize oneself as a self or to relate to oneself as an object.

Only with the differentiation made possible through this mediated reflexive relation comes the capacity for the particular kind of self-consciousness humans are able to enjoy in which “the self relates itself to itself not only in its awareness of itself, but also in its

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<sup>43</sup> See Arnold B. Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist: Discovering My Self* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), 18-45 for an analysis of various descriptive “dyads.”

<sup>44</sup> SUD, 13 (XI 127).

<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth A. Morelli, “The Existence of the Self before God in Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*,” *The Heythrop Journal* XXXVI (1995), 19.



presiding over itself.”<sup>46</sup> The self’s relating itself to itself is an act of will and thus human existence is fundamentally and inescapably a morally significant existence. Any failure to will to be oneself is a moral failure. As Arnold Come notes, and argues at length, this willing-to-be-oneself is the task of human existence that is given with the gift of existence:

the task set for every human being is to become a self. In this deceptively plain word “task” (*Opgave*), he concentrates all the complexities of his understanding of the human self. . . . [T]his term runs throughout the authorship. In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard has Judge William use it as a key way of distinguishing the ethical from the aesthetic. . . . In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* . . . Kierkegaard says that “becoming subjective is the task, the highest task, set for every human being,” and “becoming subjective gives a human being fully enough to do as long as one lives.” In *Sickness Unto Death* Kierkegaard says that when a human being comes to the ultimate form of despair, viz. defiance, “one does not want to put on one’s own self, does not want to see one’s task in that self given to him/her.” . . . In other words, to be my self is to possess something, but this self is also something that I still have to do or accomplish.<sup>47</sup>

Julia Watkin summarizes the central point: “Kierkegaard believes that the individual . . . has primarily him or herself as a task for personal ethical and religious development.”<sup>48</sup> In Kierkegaard’s own words, “Existence itself, existing, is a striving.”<sup>49</sup> Striving is understood to be the process of willfully becoming oneself or whatever else one strives to become. “[A]s long as he is in existence,” Kierkegaard declares, “he is in the process of becoming.”<sup>50</sup>

It is in the dynamic of this higher-order, mediated relation that the possibility of “misrelation” arises. Any misrelation here means that the subject, in his or her willing-to-be

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<sup>46</sup> Westphal, “Kierkegaard’s Psychology,” 42.

<sup>47</sup> Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, 46-47. Come cites his own translations of CUP, 158 (VII 130) and SUD, 68 (VII 179), respectively.

<sup>48</sup> Julia Watkin, “Søren Kierkegaard’s Psychology of the Self,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 17.4 (1998), 362.

<sup>49</sup> CUP, 92 (VII 72).

<sup>50</sup> CUP, 92 (VII 72).

misses the mark of actually becoming or being his or her self. This, in turn, opens up myriad existential possibilities organized into a diagnostic typology by Anti-Climacus and treated under the heading “despair” in *Sickness Unto Death*.

In one sense every human being has a self even though it is not the case that every human being successfully becomes or realizes his or her self. The mediated reflexivity of the self that allows for differentiation and thereby self-consciousness involves a doubling of the self. This doubling of the self consists of the actual self that is relating itself to itself and the potential self which is the object of the willing-to-be oneself (or not) operative in the dynamic of the self's relating itself to itself. The potential self is the ideal one aims at and strives to actualize in existence:

The ideal consists of motivation towards a goal that in one sense is outside the self (for example, moral values encoded in a society), but in another since is within, in that the individual has internalized the values as motivators in daily life. . . . This idea or ideal of the self is inside a person in that it is grasped by the imagination as a real possibility, but it is outside a person in that it is derived from an ideal of moral and religious personhood that does not (usually) originate from the person in question.<sup>51</sup>

It is in this sense that Christ is *the* prototype: the only individual who has “fulfilled” the “unconditioned requirement.”<sup>52</sup> This unconditioned requirement can be described in various ways including in terms of the law, love, and lordship—of having only one master “before God.”<sup>53</sup> Jesus Christ is the only one who has perfectly fulfilled this requirement. This is why he is the prototype, the only true model of the ideal human self or existence.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Watkin, “Psychology of the Self,” 363-364.

<sup>52</sup> JFY, 159 (XII 432).

<sup>53</sup> JFY, 152 (XII 426).

<sup>54</sup> JFY, 159 (XII 432).

Kierkegaard hastens to add that Jesus is more than merely a prototype or role model for us to imitate, a kind of lived law or ideality who stands over against us, condemning us. Jesus is also the redeemer who has made atonement for sin. The proclamation of atonement in Christ is the center of the gospel. Without the gospel of atonement Jesus' example would be cruel—a constant reminder of our condemnation and hopelessness. Of course this is exactly what unbelief finds in him, and takes offense. Because there is atonement for sin through the death of Christ there is good news to be proclaimed and believed. There is hope and this hope of the gospel renders the proclamation of the law not cruel but merciful—indeed the failure to proclaim the law is now a cruel act.

Ponder this carefully: is it not cruel to be silent about it [i.e. “the Law”] to you? Moreover do you not believe that the Gospel knows what it is to be a human being, knows our frailty, knows how infinitely far every human being is from truly serving only one master? But, says the Gospel, that is precisely why I proclaim an Atonement: is this not good news? But, the Gospel goes on to say, if my first pronouncement [i.e. “the Law”] were not true and did not stand eternally fixed, that “No one can serve two masters,” then in the deeper sense there would be no need for an Atonement, and this good news would never be heard. So, then, it is not good news after all, this “No one can serve two masters,” when I, the Gospel, say it, I who by saying “No one can serve two masters” denounce everyone, unconditionally everyone, and yet in the same breath call everyone, unconditionally everyone, to me, proclaim that God wants that all should be saved, and that this is the Gospel? But how could everyone possibly be saved if not everyone needed to be saved, and how could everyone need to be saved if the requirement were not such that no one fulfilled it?<sup>55</sup>

Here is the relationship between law and gospel, between Christ the prototype and Christ the savior, as envisioned by Kierkegaard. The law is foundational to the gospel and yet the gospel comprehends the proclamation of the law in such a way that the proclamation of the law and universal condemnation of all people before the

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<sup>55</sup> JFY, 151-52 (XII 426).

law, becomes the first and necessary pronouncement of the gospel. Kierkegaard concludes: “‘No one can serve two masters.’ These are the words of the Gospel.”<sup>56</sup>

The gospel includes the offensive preaching of the law that condemns all people in order to save some and in doing so transforms the law into good news by paradoxically driving us to Christ as our redeemer. This is commonly referred to in Lutheran and Reformed theology as the second use of the law. Set in the context of the gospel the law becomes a description of a self that, in Christ and through faith, is now a live option for us in our striving. In hope, the ideal described in the law can now become an object of our will—a description of the ideal we strive to actualize through faith in our existence. This use of the law, commonly referred to as the third use of the law, transcends the law’s natural offensiveness to despairing sinners who see only a description of the kind of existence we must but are unable to realize. This use also functions dialectically, however, by continuously driving us back to the grace of God in Christ according to the second use of the law. Through this dialectical operation we are perfected in our dependence upon God and begin to actualize the kind of self described in the law and exemplified in Christ.

It is in these two regards—to clarify the unconditioned requirement in order to drive us to God and to be imitated by us, adopted by us as a model of our ideal self we strive to realize in our existence—that Kierkegaard focuses our attention on Christ as the prototype. The presentation of Christ as our prototype apart from God’s redeeming grace in Christ only drives us to a “point of despair” beyond all

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<sup>56</sup> JFY, 152 (XII 426).

hope of salvation as we come to realize our sin before God.<sup>57</sup> But there is hope, for Kierkegaard, because with God, for whom all things are possible, there is “an Atonement” for sin and grace sufficient for the salvation of all who believe, no matter how heinous their offense *coram Deo*. The form of life made possible through the atoning work of Christ is Christ-likeness. Christ-likeness is the form of Christian existence depicted in the New Testament, he insists. To be saved is to live a life of becoming oneself *coram Deo* by transparently resting in God who is the other to whom we are essentially related and through whom the self must relate itself to itself.

The situation of the contemporary believer, however, is not just like the situation of the eyewitnesses of Christ: the contemporary believer only has access to Christ the prototype through the eyewitness reports or testimonies of true witnesses. By true witnesses, we must remember, Kierkegaard means witnesses who believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God and have found salvation in him through faith. Many eyewitnesses of Jesus’ life and ministry do not, then, qualify as true witnesses; many who were not eyewitnesses, however, do. Ultimately such disciples at second hand are dependent upon the faith-full testimonies of eyewitnesses (and other believers who have believed before them). In the case of the apostles these eyewitnesses have also been deputized, we might say, to testify to the Incarnate and exegete the meaning of his coming and activity as God’s official spokesmen.<sup>58</sup> For the disciple at second hand Scripture (and perhaps other, non-canonical testimonies by true witnesses) stands in for the visible form of the Incarnate. Thus the contemporary

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<sup>57</sup> JFY, 152 (XII 426).

<sup>58</sup> Regarding the possibility of speaking via deputized agents and the possible exegetical significance such a phenomenon might have see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 37-57.

source for the vital Christian ideal of selfhood whose adoption and realization in one's existence is the essence of Christian existence is, above all else, Scripture.

One implication of Kierkegaard's analysis, scandalous as it may be to the American impulse to accommodate religious pluralism, is that it is impossible to will to be oneself *coram Deo*, which, as we shall see, is the necessary condition for being oneself, apart from explicitly *Christian* faith. Such faith submits to the verdict of the law and yet overcomes despair through faith in the hope-filled proclamation of the atonement in the gospel. Such faith no longer takes offense before the law or before Christ the prototype but rather adopts Jesus Christ's existence as a model of the human existence now made possible for oneself. Of course no one except Jesus fulfills the unconditioned requirement: the ideal Christ exemplifies—the ideal of fully human or Christian existence—is not actualized in the existence of any disciple in this present, temporal life. Thus Christian existence consists of striving toward self-realization in Christ. Becoming oneself *coram Deo* is, for Kierkegaard, the task assigned to every individual and the substance of Christian existence. For Kierkegaard there is no salvation outside of explicitly Christian faith.<sup>59</sup> Every other form of life or existence is not just a failure to realize this ideal for oneself (a failure of all people except Jesus), but is a failure of willing the ideal exemplified in Christ for oneself. As such every non-Christian existence represents a falling away into untruth and despair. Even if that

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<sup>59</sup> Some have misread Climacus's comment that the idolater who prays with "the passion of infinity" may be in "more truth" than the passionless person who has "knowledge of the true idea of God" as though faith is a mere passion and indifferent towards its object (CUP, 201). Matthew Gerhard Jacoby, however, has demonstrated the error of this common post-liberal misreading of Kierkegaard in "Kierkegaard on Truth," *Religious Studies* 38.1 (2002), 27-44. Placing Kierkegaard in his proper Lutheran context and reading the *Postscript* in light of the full sweep of his authorship, including both his pseudonymous and veronymous works, Jacoby argues explicitly against Stephen Emmanuel, Timothy Houston Polk, Louis Mackey, and Christopher Hamilton, that "the subjectivity that Kierkegaard defines as truth is entirely conditioned by its relation to a specific revelation of eternal truth. In line with this we will also interpret the passage at the centre of the controversy as an 'impossible hypothetical' used for the sake of making a provocation" (27).

person were to gain the whole world, Kierkegaard reminds us he would nevertheless lose his own soul or self and ultimately have nothing.

Because each individual human being begins in untruth—that is, suffers from a fundamental misrelation in the dynamic structure of the self, a profound corruption in our will that permeates our entire existence—conversion is necessary. This conversion from untruth to being in truth, though involving the imagination,<sup>60</sup> is dependent upon divine revelation. Divine revelation functions as a mirror of the self, disclosing simultaneously one's current existence and condition as one of despairing to be oneself *coram Deo* (the work of the law), and one's potential or ideal self *coram Deo* (proclamation of the gospel), which is nothing other than Christ-likeness. Apart from divine revelation it is impossible for the self who exists in untruth to find his or her way into truth or even imagine an existence discontinuous with being in untruth. If this were possible, Climacus argues in *Philosophical Fragments*, the individual would not really be in untruth but in truth. As such we would have no need of a savior or a gospel, regeneration or conversion.

There are many opportunities for failure or misrelation in the dynamic of the self's mediated reflexive relation. It is even possible that a person fails to become conscious of having a self even though it is impossible for a person to fail to have a self. In other words there is not only the possibility of misrelation but there is also the possibility of what we may call spiritual blindness. The self is a gift to be received as well as a task to be accomplished. But even among those who become conscious of having a self—of the given-ness of the self—none can will to be themselves *coram Deo* apart from faith. They will instead adopt some other object as the ideal self they strive to realize; they will, in despair over being

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<sup>60</sup> Cf. Jamie Ferreira, *Transforming Vision*.

themselves *coram Deo*, refuse to will to be themselves *coram Deo*. This, too, is a failure to receive the gift of being a self and thus a failure to take up the central task of existence.

Although Anti-Climacus develops a typology of the possibilities of misrelation under the term despair in *Sickness Unto Death* we should be careful not to take Kierkegaard's "architectonic" descriptive typology too rigidly. Kierkegaard deals with the types as illuminating ideals; actual human existence is typically far more fluid than the description of the various fixed types may seem to suggest. These slightly idealized types of despair function in a similar manner to the similarly idealized types of existence-spheres famously developed throughout his pseudonymous authorship (aesthetic, ethical, and the two forms of the religious). The types of despair play an important structural role in Kierkegaard's thinking and authorship similar to the grand framing device of the spheres of existence.<sup>61</sup> His analysis of despair and the existence spheres are intimately related to each other both conceptually and structurally such that, by definition, every non-Christian sphere of existence is an existence in despair. Despair is inescapable apart from explicitly Christian faith.<sup>62</sup> The main point for us to observe here, however, is that Kierkegaard's typology of despair or the stages ought not to be taken too rigidly or simplistically since the dynamic between both the stages and types of despair is actually quite complex and very fluid in the narrative of the individual's existence. One person can actualize various stages in succession

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<sup>61</sup> Howard Hong, "Historical Introduction," in SUD, xiv, notes that Upon completing "the draft of *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard . . . [noted in] a journal entry from May 13, 1848," that "it is enriched with an excellent plan which always can be used, but less explicitly, in discourses." The problem, he goes on to explain, is that the "dialectical algebra" of the typology of despair presented in SUD does not lend itself to the rhetorical style of discourses. Still, this dialectical algebra stands behind his discourses, framing them to some extent and richly informing the development of the dialectical thought that enters into them either by way of analysis or rhetoric.

<sup>62</sup> See Gouwens, *Religious Thinker*, 60-61.



or with respect to various aspects of one's existence in the narrative of the self that is their life, marked by both the continuity of duration and the changeableness of succession.<sup>63</sup>

A further clarification on the relationship of the types of despair and spheres of existence is in order: it is not the case that there is an "aesthetic self" or "mere human being" who lacks the capacity of relating itself to itself.<sup>64</sup> There is no such thing as a mere human being who nevertheless lacks this second order, reflexive relation. Nor is it possible for a person to fail to relate oneself to oneself even if the individual may be unconscious of doing so or of even having a self. Ontologically all humans are so constituted and structured. Indeed, to even claim that there is such a thing as an "aesthetic self" that lacks this second-order, reflexive relation is nonsense from the Anti-Climacian point of view. A self is just this: a relation that relates itself to itself. The differences between the aesthetic, ethical, and religious spheres can be clarified and described in terms of Kierkegaard's description of the human self and through employing categories like despair but there is no simplistic correspondence between the existence-spheres and the various types of despair Anti-Climacus diagnoses in *Sickness Unto Death*.

Every sphere or mode of human existence presupposes the existence of the human self. Thus every sphere either includes or is itself an actualization of the possibility of despair as a misrelation within the dynamic of the self. This is a fact of freedom or human being. With the self comes the possibility of despair. That all people have a self, whether they are conscious of this fact or not, belongs to the glory of being human: "The possibility

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<sup>63</sup> See Gouwens, *Religious Thinker*, 60-61.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Greg Beabout, "Kierkegaard on the Self and Despair: An Interpretation of the Opening Passage of *The Sickness Unto Death*," in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, vol. 62 (1988): 106-115.

of this sickness [i.e. despair] is man's superiority over the animal."<sup>65</sup> It is also, upon being actualized, the tragedy of missing the mark of becoming oneself: "Consequently, to be able to despair is an infinite advantage, and yet to be in despair is not only the worst misfortune and misery—no, it is ruination."<sup>66</sup> That one can have a self and yet fail to be conscious of having a self does not negate the self but raises the prospect of unconscious despair *coram Deo*. This is explored in Kierkegaard's depth psychology as developed in *Sickness Unto Death*, which richly informs his thoughts on reading God's word in "What Is Required."

### 5.3.2 Kierkegaard's Depth Psychology

As Evans notes, Kierkegaard was convinced that "we theorize as whole persons, not detached egos."<sup>67</sup> The problem this raises is not how to bracket one's self or subjectivity, in imitation of some non-human ideal of "detached egos" capable of pure objectivity, but how one can be true to one's fully human identity. This is the problem of how we might become whole persons rightly related to God, others, ourselves, and the rest of reality. Just as we theorize as whole persons we ought also to theorize for the whole person. The realization that we are not detached egos but whole persons is a call to self-examination in our theorizing and other endeavors. It is also a call to subject "everything, indeed everything," apparently including all scientific and scholarly activity, "to serve for upbuilding"—or so "the Christian point of view" demands.<sup>68</sup> Anything else neglects or harms the self *coram Deo*.

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<sup>65</sup> SUD, 15 (XI 129).

<sup>66</sup> SUD, 15 (XI 129).

<sup>67</sup> Evans, *Søren Kierkegaard's Christian Psychology: Insight for Counseling and Pastoral Care* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 13.

<sup>68</sup> SUD, 5 (XI 117). Anti-Climacus claims that what does not serve this end cannot count as Christian. Yet he also implies that everything, including "all scholarliness and scientificity," ought to be Christian

Given this understanding of what it is to be human and to think humanly and for the edification of humanity it is not surprising that Kierkegaard intentionally develops a kind of “clinical psychology” aimed at “upbuilding and awakening,” as the subtitle of *Sickness Unto Death* states.<sup>69</sup> As Westphal puts it, Kierkegaard’s psychology, and certainly his concept of the self as presented in the opening passage of *Sickness Unto Death*, may strike one as quite theoretical, but “it is theory for the sake of therapy.”<sup>70</sup> By calling Kierkegaard’s psychology a “clinical psychology” Westphal intends to highlight that his “starting point is sickness” and that his “goal [is] diagnosis and healing.” Westphal also contends that Kierkegaard’s concept of health (and sickness) is broadly Aristotelian in that “the well being of a human person is to be found in activity. . . . [Human well being] is not something that happens to us but something that we do.”<sup>71</sup> As such “we must speak of will and responsibility” when we speak of spiritual sickness and health. The ethical and spiritual are inseparable:

This emphasis on health and illness as modes of activity is intended to take the interpretation of human well-being beyond what Kierkegaard calls the “sensate-psychical” categories which treat persons as less than spirit.<sup>72</sup>

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in this sense, arguing that “everything, indeed everything, ought to serve for upbuilding.” This is true, he argues, even if most people cannot realize the edifying value of, say, a report on medical research. Whatever is not at least potentially edifying and aimed at edification he dismisses as “inhuman curiosity.”

<sup>69</sup> The full title is *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*. As Hong notes, “Historical Introduction,” SUD, xiii, Kierkegaard sketched his plan for SUD and PC like this in a Journal entry from February 1848. In this outline he conceives of a single project under the heading “Thoughts that Cure Radically, Christian Healing” divided into two or three parts. The first part was to be “Thoughts that wound from behind—for upbuilding” which is also described as “On the consciousness of sin, *The Sickness Unto Death*,” under which “Christian Discourses” were also listed. The Second part, which became PC, was listed as “Radical Cure” and further divided into “Christian Healing” and “The Atonement.”

<sup>70</sup> Merold Westphal, “Kierkegaard’s Psychology and Unconscious Despair,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Sickness Unto Death*, vol 19, ed. by Robert L. Perkins (Macon: Macon University Press, 1987), 40.

<sup>71</sup> Westphal, “Kierkegaard’s Psychology,” 40.

<sup>72</sup> Westphal, “Kierkegaard’s Psychology,” 40-41.

Kierkegaard's emphasis on the ethical dimension is grounded in his concept of the human self as both gift and task in which human existence is conceived as responsible striving and health-full existence as striving to realize Christ-likeness through faith.

Human responsibility is not just to oneself. Ultimately and decisively we are responsible to God who establishes the human self. Human existence is essentially and necessarily existence *coram Deo*. This decisive theological dimension of Kierkegaard's anthropology decisively conditions his clinical psychology. This is perhaps the most significant reason why Kierkegaard's psychology has not been received well within a field anxious to project itself as scientifically *bona fide* through, in part, a commitment to methodological naturalism. On the other hand, pastors would seem ideally placed to take advantage of Kierkegaard's clinical psychology.<sup>73</sup> More important to the present dissertation, however, is how this theological dimension conditions Kierkegaard's concept of health-full existence. For Kierkegaard spiritual health can only be realized or enjoyed through faith where faith is defined as "the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God."<sup>74</sup> It is difficult to underestimate the significance of this formulation for Kierkegaard. Its deep anthropological structure hardly needs elaborated. Human existence, by the divine design-plan, demands faith. Faith strictly defined in this way is basic to health-full human existence: faith is both the means of receiving the self as a gift from God and the activity of the will we are assigned as our task.

It is not surprising that faith's antithesis, despair (*fortvivelse*, which is built around *tvivle*, the Danish word for doubt or unbelief), is the comprehensive psychological term

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<sup>73</sup> See Evans, *Søren Kierkegaard's Christian Psychology: Insight for Counseling and Pastoral Care*.

<sup>74</sup> SUD, 82 (XI 194).

Kierkegaard uses for sin. Sin is simply despair considered under the qualification *coram Deo*: “Sin is: before God in despair not to will to be oneself, or before God in despair to will to be oneself.” Thus, “despair is sin” and “sin is despair.”<sup>75</sup> Anti-Climacus is satisfied with this definition of sin in every regard. First, “it is the only Scriptural definition, for Scripture always defines sin as disobedience.”<sup>76</sup> Second, it is sufficiently comprehensive:

the definition embraces every imaginable and every actual form of sin; indeed, it rightly stresses the crucial point that sin is despair (for sin is not the turbulence of flesh and blood but the spirit’s consent to it) and is: before God.<sup>77</sup>

Third, it is explicit spiritual. “A definition of sin can never be too spiritual (unless it becomes so spiritual that it abolishes sin), for sin is specifically a qualification of spirit.”<sup>78</sup>

As Westphal points out, it is here that Kierkegaard’s concept of the self’s health diverges from Aristotle. For Aristotle health was construed in terms of happiness but Kierkegaard rejects this on at least two counts: first, “happiness is not a qualification of spirit” and second, happiness hides anxiety<sup>79</sup>—something he elsewhere illustrates by the close proximity of laughing to crying.<sup>80</sup> But to say that despair inhabits happiness, especially the kind of robust or sophisticated happiness one encounters in many eudaemonist ethical theories, is a counterintuitive claim given that happiness and despair are often taken to be mutually exclusive. Anti-Climacus counters that in truth happiness and despair belong to

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<sup>75</sup> SUD, 81 (XI 193).

<sup>76</sup> SUD, 81 (XI 193).

<sup>77</sup> SUD, 82 (XI 194).

<sup>78</sup> SUD, 82 (XI 194).

<sup>79</sup> SUD, 25 (XI 139).

<sup>80</sup> See Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard’s Thought*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 40f.

two different planes of human existence. Happiness is a psychosomatic condition grounded in one's immediate relation to various physical and psychical circumstances whereas despair is a spiritual condition grounded in one's relation to God and through God to oneself. It is, therefore, entirely possible for a person to be happy and in despair. Of course the person who is happy and yet in despair can presumably be happy in despair only because he or she is unconscious of being in despair. (I suppose one could be so evil as to delight in one's own despair, but this would not seem to count as happiness but as some sort of demonic perversion.<sup>81</sup>) Ironically, then, for this person his or her happiness is itself despair, and a despair of the most tragic kind: despair that is not conscious of being despair.

That despair can be unconscious of being despair points to the reality of the unconscious and the need to develop and apply the above mentioned depth psychology to the human subject. Kierkegaard develops and applies such a depth psychology through his various psychological experimentations and expositions. His analysis of despair via this depth psychology establishes the framework for his critique of exegetical methods and practices in "What Is Required." It is also why his critique is concerned with both methods *and* practices. Likewise, his prescription of faith as the antidote for despair is the centerpiece of his constructive proposals for how to read Scripture rightly—as a means of grace.

For Kierkegaard, consistent with his claim that "everything . . . ought to serve for upbuilding,"<sup>82</sup> psychology is a tool of Christian pastoral ministry that is aimed at the spiritual formation or health of the individual. In an appropriately dialectical manner that corresponds in many ways to the Lutheran law-gospel dialectic, for sinners (i.e. despairing

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<sup>81</sup> See, for example, Pap. XI<sup>1</sup> A 270, 1854.

<sup>82</sup> SUD, 5 (XI 117).

subjects) it is necessary to first be disabused of our illusions and idols, which may in fact be the source of our temporal happiness. This will lead us into “fear and trembling” *coram Deo* which is “the first requirement” and necessary “condition of salvation.”<sup>83</sup> This necessity is not surprising given the above distinction between psychosomatic happiness and spiritual health and his analysis of the former as itself a kind of despair. Nevertheless, it is often deeply offensive to the sinner and therefore a stumbling block to many.

### 5.3.3 *Law and Gospel in Kierkegaard's Psychology*

As I have already mentioned, for Kierkegaard “Christianity is the solution to the problem of human existence” properly understood.<sup>84</sup> Likewise, I have noted that Christianity also establishes the necessary framework for properly understanding the problem of human existence including those problems that arise from our present fallen condition.<sup>85</sup> Kierkegaard does not deny that other perspectives are possible or possibly even edifying. But even if some limited measure of edification can be realized through alternative, non-Christian perspectives the measure of what counts as edifying remains the explicitly Christian criterion exemplified in Christ the prototype. Whatever edification can be derived from alternative perspectives is limited by and subservient to this explicitly Christian end and

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<sup>83</sup> FSE, 43 (XII 331).

<sup>84</sup> Evans, *Psychology*, 21. See also Alastair Hannay, “Refuge and Religion,” in *Faith, Knowledge, and Action: Essays to Niels Thulstrup*, ed. by George L Stengren (Copenhagen: Reitzels Forlag, 1984), who argues a similar proposal but sees himself as admittedly “pushing the religious framework of Kierkegaard’s writings further along in the logical order than their author has it. . . . I try to make room for a problem for which the framework is a solution,” 43.

<sup>85</sup> Alastair Hannay suggests that “the alternative to seeing Kierkegaard . . . uncritically presupposing Christian belief is to see him proposing Christianity as a solution to the universal spiritual malady of anxiety and despair.” Gouwens, *Religious Thinker*, 74, notes, however, that “it is Kierkegaard’s frankly dogmatic standpoint that confessionally posits this fittingness between malady and cure”—a point Hannay recognizes in “Refuge and Religion,” 43-44. See also Evans, *Psychology*, 29-30.

criterion. Furthermore, what edification can be derived from alternative perspectives tends to work paradoxically through despair. Since non-Christian perspectives are not, by definition, aimed at effecting Christ-likeness they cannot be edifying in any direct or proper sense as is Scripture, for example. Whatever edifying effect is derived from alternative sources operates in a law-like manner by driving us to despair and through despair to Christ.

Leaving to the side non-Christian perspectives that although potentially edifying are nevertheless limited and edify only paradoxically at best, I want to consider the explicitly “Christian psychological exposition for upbuilding and awakening” that Kierkegaard pursues in his authorship within which Christianity is both presupposed and prescribed.<sup>86</sup> Within such Christian exposition one must grasp something of the objective or dogmatic structure of Christianity in order to offer a proper psychological diagnosis of the problem of human existence. At the same time, the more fully one appreciates the problem of human existence the more clearly one can discern that Christianity is the solution to this problem.

In Lutheran orthodoxy this same dynamic between diagnosis and cure is more familiarly represented in terms of the law-gospel dialectic. I have already touched upon this in the previous chapter and it turns out to be a crucial theme in this chapter too. In this dialectic the law’s proper work is to awaken us to the fact that we are sinners and as such are in a profoundly desperate condition. The aim, of course, is not destructive, though some tearing down in order to build up is necessary. The object is to awaken the spiritually dead and instill “fear and trembling” into the individual who is, in and through the law,

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<sup>86</sup> This, of course, is no more problematic as a psychological-exegetical perspective than it is as a biblical-exegetical perspective. The only difference may be that the epistemic warrant for assuming this perspective in psychology is derived from the warrant enjoyed by the reader of Scripture, whereas the reader of Scripture enjoys an epistemic warrant as something properly basic on the basis of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, or some similar model. See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 167-353.



confronted with his or her actual self *coram Deo*. Having been awakened to the reality of one's condition *coram Deo*, the gospel presents the only sufficient solution. Law and gospel are interdependent and contextualize each other in their dialectic relation.

Kierkegaard affirms the law-gospel dialectic as something vital in the economy of salvation: becoming conscious of being in despair or sin, which is the same condition considered under two different qualifications, is a necessary first moment in becoming a Christian. Christianity is the mode of existence in which despair is overcome through a faith that receives the gift of atonement and strives to realize Christ-likeness. In a sermonistic discourse on 2 Timothy 2:12-13<sup>87</sup> Kierkegaard presents this law-gospel dialectic in a clear and entirely orthodox Lutheran statement worth quoting at some length:

The Holy Word just read might seem to contain a contradiction, . . . The one clause is rigorous, the other lenient—in fact, here this is Law and Gospel, but both clauses are the truth. There is no duplexity in the verse, but it is one and the same word of truth. . . . It is just as is told in the sacred narratives, that not until the Pharisee had departed did Christ begin to speak intimately with the disciples; in the same way the first words remove, send away—alas, as if to the left side—those who deny him, whom he also will deny; the latter words, the gentle words of comfort, are spoken as to those on the right side. He bade his disciples not to cast their pearls before swine, and his love, even if it wants to save all, is not a weakness that plaintively stands in need of those who should be saved.

He continues,

Therefore, even though it can be beneficial that the rigorous words are brought to recollection, are heard simultaneously, just as they inseparably belong together so that we at no time separate what God has joined together in Christ, neither add anything nor subtract anything, do not subtract the rigorousness from the leniency that is in them, do not subtract from the Gospel the Law that is in it. . . . We let the terrifying thought pass by, not as something that does not pertain to us—oh, no, in that way no one is saved; as long as one lives it is still possible that one could be lost. As long as there

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<sup>87</sup> Which Kierkegaard cites as this: "If we deny, he also will deny us; if we are faithless, he still remains faithful; he cannot deny himself."

is life there is hope—but as long as there is life there certainly is also the possibility of danger, consequently of fear, and consequently there will also be a fear and trembling just as long. We let the terrifying thought pass by, but then we trust to God that we dare to let it pass by and to cross over as we take comfort in the Gospel's gentle word.<sup>88</sup>

Kierkegaard affirms both the necessity of the law and yet the ultimacy of the gospel. The law, though not saving in itself, paradoxically serves a salvific end under the gospel. Set in its proper context, the law is comprehended by the gospel. Law and gospel are interdependent. This is why, in classic Lutheran fashion, Kierkegaard recognizes the entire canon is animated by this law-gospel dialectic. The law is one pole within this dialectical dynamic that is vital to Christian faith considered both in the objective sense of Christianity's content or proclamation and in the subjective sense of its form of life or peculiar mode of existence.

The law does not merely consist of the Mosaic legislation but of every expression or glimpse of the "infinite requirement" *coram Deo* that is the foundation and need for the gospel. Christianity can be described as the impossibility of an infinite requirement made possible in and through Jesus Christ the God-man. As such the law functions to awaken and stir up "fear and trembling" in the subject who is confronted by this "infinitely high" and thus unreachable standard.<sup>89</sup> The result is that the law, ideally, drives sinners to confront and embrace their absolute dependence upon God. According to Kierkegaard the human being's "highest perfection" is absolute dependence upon God.<sup>90</sup> Crucially, the God to whom the sinner is driven is the God-man Jesus Christ, the lowly crucified one. This in itself is an occasion of offense to sinners on several counts Kierkegaard explores this offense

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<sup>88</sup> *Christian Discourses*, 282-283 (X 295-296).

<sup>89</sup> PV, 16 (XIII 506).

<sup>90</sup> See Kierkegaard's discourse entitled "To Need God Is a Human Beings Highest Perfection," in EUD, 297-326 (V 81-105).

at length in *Practice in Christianity* and elsewhere. Yet this occasion of offense is precisely the good news of the gospel and the basis of the free offer of grace.

So, the law, whose purpose is to awaken “fear and trembling” in sinners, is the necessary first moment in a dialectic of which the gospel is the second:

When the infinite requirement is heard and affirmed, is heard and affirmed in all its infinitude, then *grace* is offered, or grace offers itself, to which the single individual, each one individually, can then have recourse as I do; and then it works out all right. Yet it is certainly no exaggeration for infinity’s requirement, the *infinite* requirement, to be presented—*infinitely* (it is indeed also in the very interest of *grace*). In another sense it is an exaggeration only when the requirement alone is presented and grace is not introduced at all. Christianity is taken in vain, however, when the *infinite* requirement is either made finite . . . or it is left out completely and *grace* is introduced *as a matter of course*, which, after all, means that it is taken in vain.<sup>91</sup>

Kierkegaard contends that the law belongs to the gospel and cannot be properly excluded from it. Grace offered prior to or apart from the law can only be received in vain. In some sense the gospel is dependent upon the law. Yet to proclaim the law alone is improper because the law exists to serve the end of grace as presented in the gospel. The structure is thoroughly Lutheran and, from the Lutheran point of view, derived from the internal dynamic of Scripture. The exegetical implications are significant: Scripture not only proclaims both law and gospel but effectively operates along the lines of this dialectic in the subjectivity of all who read it. The law-gospel dialectic operative in the task of reading gives his critique of exegetical methods and practices a decidedly psychological accent just as his psychology has a decidedly theological context. Yet his understanding of psychology, including his depth psychology, is itself decisively spiritual. Biblical exegesis is a spiritual exercise in which one’s spiritual condition or subjectivity *coram Deo* is crucially important.

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<sup>91</sup> “On My Work as an Author,” in PV, 16 (XIII 506).

For Kierkegaard, to “read a fear and trembling into your soul” by reading “God’s Word” is a necessary “condition of salvation.”<sup>92</sup> This is parallel to the necessity of becoming conscious of being in despair. Just as the law functions to create fear and trembling so Kierkegaard’s psychological exposition in *Sickness Unto Death* (and elsewhere) is intended to create consciousness of being in despair—not for the sake of this consciousness alone but as a first, necessary moment of awakening leading ideally to the gospel and one’s personal salvation through faith in Christ. Once awakened by the law, the despairing subject may react in a variety of ways. Every alternative but explicitly Christian faith that recognizes and embraces the God of the gospel as one’s ground of being and only hope is a form of despair issuing from offense. Consciousness of despair, just like consciousness of sin, may lead to defiant rebellion or even demonic reactions. In the demonic response to despair one begins to defend oneself against the good as though the good, in whatever form it presents itself, is a threat. More often the despairing subject will respond by taking offense and defiantly willing to be oneself without resting transparently in God. Many will simply refuse to will to be themselves at all. Yet others will resort to God as offered in the gospel and will to be themselves by resting transparently in him. These alone are being saved.

The benefits of the reading or hearing the law do not expire in the moment of awakening for there is much of which despairing subjects must be disabused. Likewise, neither do the benefits of Kierkegaard’s psychological exposition of despair expire in the moment of awakening. Instead, both the law and his psychological exposition play an important role in the ongoing edification of the subject who, as one never perfect in faith,

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<sup>92</sup> FSE, 43 (XII 331). Again, there may be other ways to enter into fear and trembling *coram Deo* but we are primarily concerned here with the exegetical implications of his depth psychology worked out along the lines of the law-gospel dialectic.

remains in sin or despair and in need of being disabused of remaining idols and perfected in faith. The usefulness of the law in one's sanctification as a Christian is, in Kierkegaard, parallel to the continued usefulness of his psychological exposition which is for upbuilding as well as awakening, wherein upbuilding is understood as progress in the task of existence: becoming oneself *coram Deo* by grace and through faith.

As for the ongoing role of the law in the life of the believer, we have already observed that it parallels the role of Christ the prototype in that the example of Christ functions as the law in both its negative work of driving sinners to despair and in its positive work of presenting the ideal we seek to reproduce in our willed existence. For this reason Kierkegaard often treats the law under the terms "requirement" and "ideality." In commenting under his own name on Anti-Climacus's *Practice in Christianity*, for example, Kierkegaard remarks that "the requirement for being a Christian is forced up by the pseudonymous author to a supreme ideality." This requirement is the law-aspect of the law-gospel dialectic and is placed in dialectical relationship to grace:

Yet the requirement should indeed be stated, presented, and heard. From the Christian point of view, there ought to be no scaling down of the requirement, nor suppression of it—instead of a personal admission and confession.<sup>93</sup>

The call to confession and repentance is not just to unbelievers who must be taught to flee to grace but also for those who have already resorted to grace by faith:

The requirement should be heard . . . so that I might learn not only to resort to *grace* but to resort to it in relation to the use of *grace*.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> PC, 7 (XII, xv).

<sup>94</sup> PC, 7 (XII, xv).

As Hong points out, this comment is Kierkegaard's own commentary on Anti-Climacus's explicit aim in *Practice in Christianity*—another work that belongs to his psychological writings “For Awakening and Inward Deepening.”

C. Stephen Evans explicates this aspect of the function of psychology in Kierkegaard's authorship in terms of evangelism. Evans argues that “Kierkegaard viewed psychology as an essential tool for evangelism, or what might be termed pre-evangelism” and notes that “this is a stance that seems far removed from the value-neutral stance of contemporary academic psychology.”<sup>95</sup> Evans is certainly correct as far as he goes but construing Kierkegaard's use of psychology primarily in terms of evangelism or pre-evangelism is not ideal on several counts. Evans admits as much:

I do not mean to imply that Kierkegaard was interested in psychology solely as a kind of pre-evangelistic aid. In fact, even to describe the matter in such a way presupposes a view of psychology and the spiritual as unrelated, a view of the psychological Kierkegaard firmly rejected. Like contemporary psychologists, Kierkegaard was interested in why people behave as they do, how they achieve their fulfillment, and how they go wrong in their lives. And he was interested in these issues for their own sakes.<sup>96</sup>

My concern is related but somewhat different: I am not as concerned with any wider interest in psychology Kierkegaard may have had as I am that “pre-evangelism” is too narrow for understanding his explicitly Christian use of psychology for awakening and upbuilding.

Kierkegaard clearly had precedent for thinking in terms of law and gospel and displays this throughout his works. So far as I know the only precedent for thinking in terms of pre-evangelism might be varieties of more or less classical apologetics which Kierkegaard himself viewed unfavorably. Indeed, with respect to historical arguments that

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<sup>95</sup> Evans, *Psychology*, 25.

<sup>96</sup> Evans, *Psychology*, 22.

functioned apologetically, Anti-Climacus goes so far as to reject them as “blasphemy.”<sup>97</sup> Still, part of the work of the law was along the lines of the pre-evangelism as laid out by Evans. Yet “pre-evangelism” is too narrow a concept for understanding his Christian use of psychology. Pre-evangelism suggests awakening but fails to accommodate the much expanded function of Kierkegaard’s psychology within an awakened person’s continuing spiritual growth or sanctification evidenced in his authorship. No doubt awakening is one of the most important features of his use of psychology and his understanding of the work of the law in the law-gospel dialectic. The issue before us, however, is of the continuing function of both the law and his psychological expositions within the life of the Christian that Kierkegaard envisions. We have, for example, just noted that the requirement is not to be passed over but must be continually read and heard not only to teach us “to resort to *grace*” in the first place but to teach us “to resort to it in relation to the use of *grace*” throughout our lives of faith. Resorting to grace is not a one-time event at the end of some evangelistic process but a form of life—the form of a truly Christian existence.

Explicating the function of Kierkegaard’s psychological exposition in terms of the law-gospel dialectic is more accurate, comprehensive, and historically appropriate. The law-gospel dialectic captures not only a basic structural element of Lutheran orthodoxy but also a basic structural element in his authorship: it reflects the way he, like Luther and many Lutheran orthodox before him, understood the structure of Scripture and the Christian life.

Kierkegaard’s authorship reflects both of these dimensions: he clearly understands Scripture in terms of the law-gospel dialectic and embraced this dialectic as, in many ways, the central component of his authorial strategy:

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<sup>97</sup> PC, 29 (XII 27).

My strategy was: with the help of God to utilize everything to make clear what in truth Christianity's requirement is—even if not one single person would accept it, even if I myself might have to give up being a Christian, which in that case I would have felt obliged to acknowledge publicly.<sup>98</sup>

In other words, central to Kierkegaard's strategy is to clarify the demands of the law.

But this must not be forgotten either. Christianity is just as gentle as it is rigorous, just as gentle, that is, infinitely gentle. When the infinite requirement is heard and affirmed, . . . then grace is offered, or grace offers itself, to which the single individual, each one individually, can have recourse as I do; and then it works out all right. Yet it is no exaggeration for infinity's requirement, the infinite requirement, to be presented—infinity (it is indeed also in the very interest of grace). . . . I have wanted to prevent people in "Christendom" from existentially taking in vain Luther and the significance of Luther's life—I have wished, if possible, to contribute to preventing this.<sup>99</sup>

This strategy itself is drawn straight from Scripture's internal, law-gospel dialectic.

Kierkegaard intends his authorship to function as a mirror, reflecting the "ideal" or "true form"<sup>100</sup> of Christianity as exemplified by Christ into the faces of those who dwell in the untruth of Christendom. Kierkegaard's project, in one sense, can be understood as an attempt to circle around in front of a population where all count themselves as Christian and yet are going away from Christianity and have turned their backs on it. He wants to hold up a mirror before them that reflects both their present condition as being in untruth and moving away from the truth and also the truth itself and the infinite requirement it contains that clarifies, instantly, their true relation to that truth. This mirror is designed to reflect the image of who they are and what they have become *coram Deo*. This is exactly the function of the law in Scripture: the mirror of God's Word. But Kierkegaard also wants to hold up before his readers—and especially before "that single individual"—the ideal, as actualized in

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<sup>98</sup> "On My Work as an Author," in PV, 16-17 (XIII 506).

<sup>99</sup> "On My Work as an Author," in PV, 16-17 (XIII 506).

<sup>100</sup> "Armed Neutrality," in PV, 129 (X<sup>5</sup> B 107 288).



Christ, as a promise of what we can be by grace. Kierkegaard maintains the same ideal in both cases, but it relates to the individual first as law and then as gospel.

Kierkegaard's use of psychology in the grand project of his authorship is, from at least one perspective, an exploration of the psychical dimension of the law-gospel dialectic that is central both to becoming a Christian and to being a Christian. This is clearly seen in his psychological exposition of despair as developed in *Sickness Unto Death*. This exposition has a direct application to the exegetical methods and practices criticized and advocated by Kierkegaard in "What Is Required." The content of Kirkegaard's psychological exposition of despair, therefore, merits closer attention.

#### 5.3.4 *The Psychological Exposition of Despair Under the Law*

The work of the law parallels Kierkegaard's (or Anti-Climacus's) psychological exposition of despair in *Sickness Unto Death* in function, purpose, and even content. First, both the law and Kierkegaard's psychological exposition function diagnostically or clinically. Both the law and Kierkegaard's psychology begin with a sick subject and establish a framework for analyzing the precise nature of this sickness—whether construed in theological terms as sin or psychical terms as despair. Second, both the law and Kierkegaard's psychological exposition are ultimately aimed at healing or salvation directing subjects to a cure. The law, of course, has the same soteriological end that Kierkegaard envisions his psychological exposition serving. For him, becoming a healthy or whole person in the psychical sense is to be saved in the explicitly theological and Christian sense. No doubt Christian salvation includes much more than psychical health. At the same time, psychical health is only possible under the conditions that accompany salvation as defined

and effected by the gospel. Here, again, Kierkegaard's psychology and the law have a parallel function or purpose that can only be realized through the gospel.

Both the law and Kierkegaard's psychological exposition are parallel in content, too. Kierkegaard clarifies this relation and makes it explicit in the second part of *Sickness Unto Death* where despair is identified with unbelief and sin is defined as despair *coram Deo*. Sin is despair considered under the qualification "before God" and not merely considered "within the category of the human self, or the self whose criterion is man."<sup>101</sup> As we shall see below, the qualification "before God" or *coram Deo* is crucial to overcoming despair due to the structure of the self. On this point he is thoroughly Augustinian: humans are so structured that we will be restless (and despairing) until we rest transparently in him. According to Kierkegaard we are created by God and for God and exist *coram Deo*. Grasping this helps us appreciate the profound relationship between spirituality and psychology that he insists upon.<sup>102</sup> One implication is that if psychology is going to deal with basic or fundamental as opposed to superficial concerns it must trade in Christian truth and adhere to Christian categories and criteria. For Kierkegaard, in classic Lutheran form, this means becoming a master law-gospel dialectician. Psychology, if it is to diagnose and cure the basic psychical problem involved in the human condition, must treat sin and unbelief (i.e. despair). The only cure for sin, considered psychologically, is the right application of the law (as an exploratory and diagnostic instrument) and the gospel (as a curative measure).

There are only two other alternatives: either a superficial, symptom-management psychology or a false psychology. The former alternative arises when one fails to grasp the

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<sup>101</sup> SUD, 79 (XI 191).

<sup>102</sup> Evans, *Psychology*, 22.

true depth of the problem or, discerning something of the depth and proportions of the problem, despairs of a cure and treats only the surfacing symptoms. Kierkegaard, however, believes that the law, rightly applied, yields the correct diagnosis and the gospel offers the only radical cure available. Kierkegaard is convinced that the root of the problem lies in a perversity at the very core of the self that can only be overcome by receiving the radical cure of the gospel through faith. Of course psychology is free to concern itself with non-ultimate or non-basic concerns. But even here these matters must be worked out within the context of these ultimate and basic concerns as defined within Christianity. To trade in any other content than the explicitly Christian content outlined in the law-gospel dialectic, in whatever terms that content may be depicted, is to practice a false psychology of possibly diabolical dimensions. This occurs when someone offers an alternative diagnosis of the root problem or an alternative cure. False psychologies arise out of despair over one's true condition *coram Deo*; they either deny the true problem or defiantly seek a different cure. Kierkegaard suggests that Christendom had lost sight of the radical cure of the gospel prior to the Reformation but now, in his generation, has lost sight of the proper diagnosis. Just as Luther had to emphasize the clarity of radical cure in his generation so now Kierkegaard must emphasize the true diagnosis in his own generation. In both cases the truth about sin and salvation is obscured, leading to the rise of an essentially non-Christian religion within the ranks of establishment Christendom that must be exposed as ultimately antichrist.<sup>103</sup>

The parallel relation between the law and Kierkegaard's psychological exposition in *Sickness Unto Death*, in function, purpose, and even content, illuminates and is illuminated by the dialectical relation Kierkegaard envisions between the two Anti-Climacus volumes.

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<sup>103</sup> See, for example, JFY, 192-194 (XII 460-462).

*Sickness Unto Death* stresses the diagnostic or law-aspect of the dialectic in its “psychological exposition for upbuilding and awakening” whereas *Practice in Christianity* emphasizes the curative or gospel-aspect of the dialectic:

Retrospectively, *Practice* is related . . . directly to the theme of the first Anti-Climacus volume *Sickness Unto Death*. In the first half of that work the various aspects of despair in itself are analyzed and described. The second half of the volume is an analysis of despair as sin and of the despairing self before God. *Practice* constitutes the third part of the sequence, the healing of the sin-conscious self and the indicative ethics gratefully expressive of the redemptive gift.<sup>104</sup>

As noted above, Kierkegaard considered publishing both volumes under a single title: “Thoughts That Cure Radically, Christian Healing” in which “The Sickness Unto Death” would be followed by “Radical Cure.” He instead opted to publish these as two separate volumes (though both were written in 1848 along with *Point of View*, *Armed Neutrality*, and several shorter pieces), the latter released just over a year after the first and renamed *Practice in Christianity*.<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, the conceptual distinction and dialectical relation mirroring law and gospel that Kierkegaard envisioned for the two Anti-Climacus volumes remains.

We should, however, be careful to heed Kierkegaard’s admonition not to “separate what God has joined together in Christ”—namely, law and gospel, requirement and grace, diagnosis and cure.<sup>106</sup> The interdependency of law and gospel runs throughout the two Anti-Climacian volumes and is reflected in this: that *Sickness Unto Death* presents faith as the condition of health over against all forms of despair just as *Practice in Christianity* offers a lengthy consideration of the ground and nature of offense that fails to receive the cure for

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<sup>104</sup> Hong, “Historical Introduction,” in PC, xiii.

<sup>105</sup> Hong, “Historical Introduction,” in PC, xiii-xiv.

<sup>106</sup> CD, 283 (X 296).

the spiritually terminal disease of despair or sin. The diagnosis of the law always points to the cure of the gospel and the cure of the gospel always implies the diagnosis of the law. This psychological diagnostic-curative dialectic runs through Kierkegaard's entire authorship just as the law-gospel dialectic runs through the entirety of Scripture.

Kierkegaard's psychological interest runs throughout his elaborate and evangelistically oriented authorship as does the diagnostic-curative or law-gospel dialectic. Still, this dialectic is clearly in view between these two works and in many regards extends directly into *For Self-Examination*, in which we find Kierkegaard, now under his own name, applying his psychological exposition of this dialectic to the phenomenon of reading or hearing "God's word." If the Hongs are correct and *Practice in Christianity* and *For Self-Examination* constitute the beginning of Kierkegaard's attack on the antichrist civil religion of Christendom, then it is certainly noteworthy that his first work under his own name to this effect is *For Self-Examination* which opens with "What Is Required," a discourse on reading Scripture that is richly informed by Anti-Climacus's psychological analysis.

#### ***5.4 Kierkegaard's Depth Psychology and Biblical Exegesis***

One of the more fascinating parallels between the function of the law as understood in Lutheran orthodoxy and the intended function of psychology in Kierkegaard's authorship is to awaken the despairing subject to personal or subjective realities of which the subject otherwise remains *unconscious*. Kierkegaard's psychology is aimed at awakening his "dear reader"<sup>107</sup> to the reality of his or her condition *coram Deo*. The phenomenon of

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<sup>107</sup> Kierkegaard ordinarily addresses himself to the individual reader rather than to all readers collectively. This is a deliberate attempt to isolate the reader and focus their attention on themselves as a fully accountable individual *coram Deo*, denying them the serendipitous distraction of thinking about others or the psychological comfort of belonging to "the crowd."

unconsciousness within the despairing subject could be present at several different levels. The despairing subject could be unconscious that she is a self or has a self, or that as a self she is in despair, or that in despair she is in fact in despair *coram Deo*. Anti-Climacus writes that the “physician of souls will certainly agree with me that, on the whole, most men live without ever becoming conscious of being destined as spirit—hence all the so-called security, contentment with life, etc., which is simply despair.”<sup>108</sup> Just as the law’s function is to deconstruct such “security, contentment with life, etc.” and thereby expose the true condition of the person *coram Deo*, so also Kierkegaard’s psychology intends to do the same by awakening in the subject a consciousness of matters of vital importance. This is the depth dimension of Kierkegaard’s psychology. Kierkegaard is convinced of the significance of the unconscious for biblical exegesis.

Anti-Climacus introduces his psychological exposition of despair and sin in *Sickness Unto Death* with the assertion that “Christianity has . . . discovered a miserable condition that man as such does not know exists. This miserable condition is the sickness unto death.”<sup>109</sup> It is of more than passing interest that Kierkegaard understands the “sickness unto death” as an explicitly biblical concept to be exegeted. In other words, as is often the case in Kierkegaard’s authorship, his psychological exposition in *Sickness Unto Death* is grounded in and richly informed by Scripture. There are very good reasons for this, two of which are evident in the assertion I have just quoted. This assertion places everything that follows under two distinct but intimately related qualifications: (1) the psychological exposition will be along the lines of a depth psychology that will treat realities of which “man as such” is

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<sup>108</sup> SUD, 26 (XI 140).

<sup>109</sup> SUD, 8 (XI 122).

unconscious and (2) the exposition itself is dependent upon a source of transcendent revelation since it is not something that “man as such” knows. Kierkegaard is not, as he believed Hegel and Hegelians claimed, claiming to have arrived at some superior or transcendent philosophical vantage point but is rather drawing insight from divine revelation given in Christian Scripture. He is a man under authority and dependent upon divine revelation. This dependence upon divine revelation also sets Kierkegaard’s depth psychology over against other more familiar psychological approaches such as Freudian psychoanalysis, which presumes to possess a self-sufficient scientific method for discovering and accounting for the unconscious. Kierkegaard does not agree. Kierkegaard does believe that a diagnostic description of the unconscious within us is possible, including an accurate account of the pattern and process of its formation within each person. But Kierkegaard does not accept that humans, as such, are capable of generating such an accurate exposition apart from divine revelation.

We have already seen that the human self is a relation that relates itself to itself through another. This other is God. The only way to be oneself is through being properly related to God. This proper God-relation is one of faith, of resting transparently in him. In *Sickness Unto Death* Anti-Climacus refers to the state that is free of despair as “the good health of faith” in which faith is “the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God.”<sup>110</sup> Considered in its broadest form, sin is, by definition, anything that represents a falling away from faith (cf. Rom 14:23). Such a falling away can occur at any point of this formula of faith. One can, for example, refuse to will to be oneself; or one can will to be oneself but not by resting transparently in God (and thereby fail to be oneself

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<sup>110</sup> SUD, 40 (XI 152), 82 (XI 194), respectively. Cf. SUD, 14 (XI 128).

despite themselves). The main point here is that sin in any form involves alienation from both God and oneself, without the sinner ceasing to be a self essentially related to God.

This fallen condition is not forced upon us; neither is it something we stumble into. Unlike Adam and Eve, we are corrupted and become conscious in a fallen world; like Adam and Eve, we proceed to willfully actualize sin in the moment of anxiety. Due to hereditary sin we are predisposed to sin or despair; it is the condition we immediately discover upon becoming self-conscious of our freedom and ability to will-to-be onself.<sup>111</sup> Yet it is also a condition we willfully embrace and often laboriously maintain. This perversity of the will belongs to the corruption of the self that enters the human race through sin. Though this condition and our desire to maintain it is in one sense natural to us given hereditary sin, it is also highly unnatural in that it is contrary to the structure of the self, which remains essentially related to God. It is therefore opposed to truth, the meaning and purpose of human existence, and our own good and well-being. In order to perpetuate this suicidal folly

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<sup>111</sup> Vigilius Haufniensis, the pseudonym for CA, opposes the concept of original sin as somehow necessitated by creation, existence, finitude, or human freedom. These conditions belong to the occasion for sin, the possibility of which first arises in the experience of anxiety, but they do not necessitate sin. Anxiety itself has two forms: an innocent anxiety of freedom and a culpable anxiety over sin. Haufniensis insists that human freedom does not consist in an arbitrary will but in the ability to actualize oneself in and through one's willed existence. Freedom is not defined by or identical to any particular set of options or objects of will. This is why the anxiety of freedom can be perfectly innocent and precede any consciousness of or act of sin. It is conceivable that one can be free and have only good objects or evil objects of will available. That each person is free in this sense and freely reenacts Adam's first sin in their existence does not involve or entail a denial of original sin. Peter Koslowski notes that "Kierkegaard grants the correctness" of "the view of the Protestant orthodox which uses *concupiscentia* as 'the strongest, indeed the most positive expression . . . for the presence of hereditary sin in man.'" Koslowski also notes that Haufniensis affirms the statement in the Augsburg Confession that "All men begotten in a natural way are born with sin, i.e., without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence," ("Baader: The Centrality of Original Sin and the Difference of Immediacy and Innocence," in *Kierkegaard and His German Contemporaries: Philosophy* [Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2007], 8-9; cf. CA, 41). "Kierkegaard quotes the Smalcald Articles," Koslowski continues, "that 'hereditary sin is so profound and detestable a corruption in human nature that it cannot be comprehended by human understanding, but must be known and believed from the revelation of the scriptures,'" (5; cf. CA, 26). Haufniensis is concerned primarily with the psychology of hereditary sin in CA. So far as the psychology of hereditary sin is concerned, all that is necessary is that the person presupposes guilt before God. This presupposition appears to be the psychological expression of hereditary sin (or *culpa hereditaria*) which, in Lutheran orthodoxy, is imputed to all people and the basis of hereditary corruption. Elsewhere, we should note, Kierkegaard clearly affirms both "hereditary sin" and, in *Fragments*, total inability.



a great deal of denial, suppression, and even defiance is often required. Anti-Climacus diagnoses each as a form of despair.

To successfully suppress known truth would be an unthinkable accomplishment if it were not for several factors. First, sinners have no other choice so long as we are determined to persist in our sinfulness—a central component of which is willed autonomy or independence from God. Second, in the condition of sinfulness suppressing offensive truth is second-nature: it is the basic survival skill of self-deception sinners must master in order to live out our rebellious lives in our preferred state of untruth. Kierkegaard is convinced that we are all natural masters of this craft and that underestimating our skillfulness in the art of self-deception is an integral part of the scam. As sinners, we find self-deception to be the natural and in some sense easiest thing to practice even if it proves a terribly burdensome and even an ultimately impossible task. Self-deception, though never involuntary, is almost as much a part of our background mode of operation as breathing.

That our determination to perpetuate our sinful state and condition is willed and involves a constant labor at self-deception does not imply that sinners are necessarily or even ordinarily conscious of these various theological and anthropological realities. Many people are unconscious of being a spiritual being who is essentially related to God and absolutely dependent upon him. Likewise, many people are unaware of even having a self or that the central task of our existence is being or becoming oneself *coram Deo*. Instead, it seems that our self-consciousness and God-consciousness (or lack of either or both) develops organically within us as we mature and acquire life-experience. Hence, anxiety in its pure or innocent form functions, in Evans's words, as "a revelatory emotion" disclosing "to us our

spiritual character by signaling our freedom.”<sup>112</sup> Unless and until we experience anxiety we will remain unconscious of our freedom as spiritual beings. For this reason anxiety is treated by Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous character Vigilius Haufniensis as both an occasion for sin and despair and a necessary condition for salvation.<sup>115</sup>

Apart from sin we can imagine this developmental process proceeding quite naturally and healthily with the development of the person according to his or her spiritual nature. This development, however, is one in which we are “active shapers, not just passive products.”<sup>114</sup> In the task of becoming oneself lies our freedom and responsibility as spiritual beings. As free beings, however, we are free to relate ourselves to ourselves by transparently resting in God *or not*. When we do this singular thing it is called faith; when we fail to do this it is sin. Sin relates to the diversity of *or not* options and results immediately in a misrelation in the self which Anti-Climacus diagnoses in terms of both despair and sin in *Sickness Unto Death*. In other words, sin wrecks what otherwise would be a natural developmental progression toward one’s eternal destiny by fulfilling one’s task of becoming one’s self *coram Deo* through faith. From this vantage point we discover that faith itself is the central task of human existence both before and after the fall and before and after regeneration.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Evans, *Psychology*, 61.

<sup>113</sup> This is a natural place to tie in Kierkegaard’s concept of general revelation. Though we cannot explore this matter at length, Kierkegaard clearly affirms a general revelation of God (see, for example, the opening prayer to “What Is Required,” in FSE, 13 (XII 305). A vital role of general revelation would seem to be awakening the developing self to self-consciousness and God-consciousness through life experience. General revelation continues to function this way but is unable to effect the radical cure needed to reconcile sinners with God, self, and others. Nevertheless, sinners find it necessary to suppress general revelation in a variety of ways as a self-defensive strategy.

<sup>114</sup> Evans, *Psychology*, 69.

<sup>115</sup> Cf. William McDonald: “Faith is the most important task to be achieved by a human being, because only on the basis of faith does an individual have a chance to become a true self. This self is the life-work which God judges for eternity,” “Søren Kierkegaard,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2008 edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2008/entries/kierkegaard>>.

Hereditary sin has plunged the entire race into the condition of sinfulness. Under this condition each individual reenacts Adam's actual sin in his or her own existence immediately upon awaking to the possibility of willing-to-be in the experience of anxiety. This happens even if the subject remains unaware of the full dimensions and proportions of their sin. The experience of anxiety is itself now corrupted and compounded by the consciousness of sin. It may not even appear to the anxious person that they are in fact willing to actualize a particular kind of existence in the moment of anxiety. Sinfulness and sin are very powerful forces at work in our human, cultural environment and within each person that derails healthy human spiritual development of self-consciousness and God-consciousness. This makes it possible for a person to not only fail to become fully conscious of the implications of the experience of anxiety for themselves but also to will to actualize a kind of existence that insulates them from ever becoming conscious of many basic realities of which one must become conscious in order to complete the central task of existence: becoming oneself through faith. Although sinners may be originally unconscious of these matters we have now also become culpable for our unconsciousness (and persistence in it) in that we have willfully rebelled against God in a suicidal folly and brought our present condition upon ourselves.

This is an important observation that helps us relieve some of the tension involved in the notion of willful unconsciousness. The apparent problem is that to be culpably unconscious of something implies that one wills to be unaware of the very thing about which they will to be unaware. This, of course, is the problem of whether intentional self-deception is actually possible. The first point to be made is that one can be culpable for being unconscious of an array of vital concerns because one has willfully chosen a rebellious

path that avoids exposure to or occasions for becoming conscious of these concerns. An obvious example is to refuse to read the Bible. Such a person will likely remain ignorant of the content of Scripture (assuming the individual is not taught in other ways) and yet may very well be culpable for this lack of consciousness.

That the whole race, as it were, is in league together and provides great encouragement, pressure, and cover to each member's rebellion does not excuse each individual for their particular participation. Neither does the fact that a person once sinned and thereby established a misrelation excuse the individual from culpability for all of the sinful consequences that follow from this one act. The misrelation is a complicating symptom of a willed act of despair reacting before either an innocent kind of anxiety over our dizzying freedom or offense. In fact, the misrelation is constantly and often laboriously sustained by the individual through his or her continued willful activity—there is a certain energy required to maintain the rebellious cause to which the misrelation and unconsciousness of God and self belong.<sup>116</sup>

Once, however, the misrelation is established within the subject it “leads to a disintegration of selfhood” in which the self becomes alienated from God and thereby from itself. Involved in “a failure to become the person God intended” the subject instead becomes “a disunified self, opaque to itself, caught in despair and pathological anxiety.”<sup>117</sup> It is in this alienation from God and oneself that culpable unconsciousness emerges and thrives—but only to the degree that one is successful in avoiding, suppressing, or otherwise

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<sup>116</sup> SUD, 22-28 (XI 136-141). The same phenomenon holds for the life of faith: faith must be continually reaffirmed, as it were, or else one will fall away. This constant reaffirming for faith in and with one's existence is part of what Kierkegaard means by repetition.

<sup>117</sup> Evans, *Psychology*, 95.

defending oneself against the truth. In other words, unconsciousness of God and self is sin's boast. Perhaps the most obvious examples of this are found among defiant agnostics or atheists who seem proud and emboldened by their ignorance or uncertainty about God. Yet, for Kierkegaard, more subtle forms of this boast are present in all sinners. Where sin's work is perfected a perfect unconsciousness not just of God and self, but of sin and despair exists in which the sinner is sick unto death and yet perfectly blind to the fact of being sick unto death. Although the perfect state of unconsciousness may be an ideal seldom if ever achieved a general approximation of this condition, as we shall see below, is by far the most common form of despair according to Anti-Climacus.

Sin, and thus alienation, is not a basic qualification of humans as created or established by God but a willful and spiritually suicidal condition brought upon oneself through an ongoing act of rebellion against God by free and responsible creatures. For Kierkegaard, the unconscious relates primarily to human willed activity as opposed to biological or instinctual structures or our created, finite condition. In other words, Kierkegaard prioritizes nurture over nature in his psychological expositions. David Gouwens picks up on this point and argues persuasively that the unconscious in Kierkegaard is intimately related to a kind of Kierkegaardian virtue ethics that takes the nurture of the whole person in that person's development very seriously.<sup>118</sup> According to Kierkegaard we bring unconsciousness upon ourselves through sin and are therefore culpable for that of which we are ignorant on these matters.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Gouwens, *Religious Thinker*, 95-102.

<sup>119</sup> There is, of course, non-culpable ignorance in addition to culpable ignorance. Non-culpable ignorance might include being unaware that Annapolis is the capital of Maryland or that it is the home of the Naval Academy or of more eighteenth century structures than any other town in America. One might be able to imagine circumstances under which ignorance of these facts would count as culpable ignorance but for most

Psychology, for Kierkegaard, is an independent discipline. Yet this by no means entails that psychology, of the kind Kierkegaard practices, is religiously unconcerned or “even faith-neutral, but is put to the service of a religious and specifically Christian interest,”<sup>120</sup> as we have already observed. Hence, *Sickness Unto Death* is subtitled *A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*. The combination of Kierkegaard’s depth psychology put into the explicit service of a “Christian interest” leads to a rather bold analysis of the human condition as both created and fallen. That what he describes is not readily apparent is not surprising given the frequently unconscious or radically suppressed depths of the human self to be described through anthropological and psychological reflection and personally explored through self-examination and inward deepening. If many readers do not recognize themselves in the typology of despair presented in *Sickness Unto Death* it is, on Kierkegaard’s analysis, not a sign of the absence of despair in the subject but of its degree of perfection. Since all are in despair, the only hope of overcoming despair by faith exists among those who recognize themselves as being in despair, correctly understood. Those who do not recognize they are sick unto death will not resort to the radical cure.

For some, the explicitly Christian context of Kierkegaard’s psychology raises the question of “whether his dogmatic orientation will distort one’s observation and imaginative construction as a psychologist.”<sup>121</sup> Gouwens replies that, “as far as I can see, Kierkegaard does not answer [this question]. Rather, he confidently goes forward with his psychological

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people ignorance on these points does not represent a case of culpable ignorance. On the other hand, there is a domain of culpable unconsciousness of which we are or become ignorant only through a deliberate willing-to-be ignorant or act of suppression.

<sup>120</sup> Gouwens, *Religious Thinker*, 68.

<sup>121</sup> Gouwens, *Religious Thinker*, 73.

and anthropological reflections, without worrying about such a question.”<sup>122</sup> Gouwens goes on to provide two reasons for Kierkegaard’s lack of critical interest on this point:

First, his concern as a psychologist is conceptual rather than empirical. . . . He is not concerned with quantitative research (which could be distorted in view of a “Christian” result, whatever that might be); rather, he sees in Christian faith an inexhaustible conceptual resource for illuminating human behavior. Second, the adequacy of the Christian conceptual scheme cannot be validated, but rather becomes persuasive (or not) only as one practices the anthropological contemplation he recommends.<sup>123</sup>

The first reason Gouwens gives applies to Kierkegaard’s anthropological description of the human self as much as it does his Christianly interested psychological reflections.

Kierkegaard is not pursuing anthropology or psychology for its own sake but rather with the explicit interest of illuminating various dimensions and implications of an explicitly Christian conception of what it is to be human. Kierkegaard’s confidence in Christianity comes from elsewhere such that, if Christianity is true then explicitly Christian categories and concepts are exactly what we want and ought to be drawing upon in our attempt to know and describe ourselves. As Gouwens admits, it would seem that Kierkegaard is “finally uncritically Christian in his psychology.”<sup>124</sup> That Kierkegaard takes Christianity to be true is obvious; that he presumes to be warranted to do so and thus presuppose as much in his anthropological and psychological reflection, as well as in Bible reading and in other activities, is also obvious. Whether or not he is correct on both counts is another matter. Either way, Kierkegaard seems convinced that only explicitly Christian categories are sufficient to provide an adequate account of the human self and human condition.

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<sup>122</sup> Gouwens, *Religious Thinker*, 73.

<sup>123</sup> Gouwens, *Religious Thinker*, 73-74.

<sup>124</sup> Gouwens, *Religious Thinker*, 74.

Ultimately, then, the issue becomes an epistemological concern related to the truth and justification of Kierkegaard's belief that Christianity is true and of Christian faith in general. Numerous Christian philosophers, Alvin Plantinga most prominently,<sup>125</sup> have argued that if Christianity is true it is not without resources to provide for the epistemic justification of the Christian believer. As we have observed Kierkegaard insists that such a justification is not possible via any merely objective approach. There is no rational argument to demonstrate that which is above reason and one cannot prove a fact of history or buffer it with any amount of objective evidence sufficient to render it as certain as the degree of ascent demanded by Christian faith requires. For Kierkegaard Christianity is found to be true in the practice of Christian faith and not merely in the analysis of its truth-claims. Thus Gouwens's second reason for Kierkegaard's lack of critical interest: that the validation of the adequacy of the Christian account of things is a matter of the person's subjectivity.

An obvious but important implication is that Kierkegaard does not understand himself to be discussing hypothetical matters that may or may not turn out to be useful for his readers. Instead he is convinced that he is dealing with matters vital to one's immediate and eternal spiritual life and death—hence the title of his leading psychological work: *The Sickness Unto Death*. Kierkegaard has Anti-Climacus make it clear that spiritual life and death is the ultimate issue. Spiritual life and death concerns one's eternal happiness or misery; even if a person were to gain the whole world, if he loses his self he has lost everything. Once again we see that Kierkegaard intends his psychological exposition to treat precisely the same disease and cure of the soul that the law and gospel are dealing with in Scripture.

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<sup>125</sup> See, for example, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).



Anti-Climacus presupposes the truth of Christianity which is disclosed to us only through transcendent divine revelation of which Scripture is the primary source and norm. He is not claiming to be able to work up an adequate description of human nature or the self apart from Christian dogma as presented and expounded in Christian Scripture. Kierkegaard frequently, though by no means universally, distrusts the church's dogmatic tomes and resorts directly to Scripture and especially the New Testament as the source and norm of the Christian life and faith. Thus there is no conflict here with claims made elsewhere that human nature is something that is beyond reason's grasp.<sup>126</sup> Just because something is beyond reason's grasp does not mean it is beyond being known by a faith that receives God's accommodated revelation to us.

To return to Kierkegaard's depth psychology, we should recognize that it is not a depth psychology like Freud's; rather, it is a depth psychology similar to the kind of exposition of the self one encounters in Augustine's *Confessions*. Like Augustine's narrative, Kierkegaard's exposition relates essentially to one's inner life and involves a complicated mixture of conscious and unconscious motivations and influences that carry one either toward or away from God through one's willed activity (and providence). Every decision contributes toward one's movement toward or away from becoming one's self *coram Deo*.<sup>127</sup>

Kierkegaard has a precedent for his exposition of the self along the lines of this kind of depth psychology in Scripture and especially in the work of the law as understood within

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<sup>126</sup> Of course Climacus ironically assumes the same position in the *Fragments* in that a central claim of the thought-project is that the very thing Climacus claims to be thinking up cannot simply be thought up but must be revealed to us via the paradox or learned through eyewitness reports and even then can only be received by those who have been granted the condition of faith. Climacus, of course, comes clean toward the end of *Fragments* and promises and mostly delivers a more straightforward account in *Postscript*.

<sup>127</sup> Cf. Gouwens, *Religious Thinker*, 89f. and Evans, *Psychology*, 40, 57f.

Lutheran orthodoxy. The Lutheran orthodox, though far from alone in this insight, propose that a central work or use of the law is to address the unconsciousness of sinners by holding up before them a clear mirror that accurately reflects the brutal and offensive truth of who they are *coram Deo* as sinners. This purpose of the law, however, is diagnostic. It is not ultimately aimed at producing despair but at exposing the true nature of the disease as a spiritually and eternally terminal sickness in order to prepare the subject for the decisive, radical cure of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet the law accomplishes this work in the consciousness of the subject precisely by placing the individual *coram Deo*. This not only elevates the consciousness of the despairing subject but ordinarily increases one's intensity of despair. As consciousness increases despair increases both in its desperation and in its aggravation. That is, the subject becomes all the more despairing *coram Deo* and yet all the more culpable for persisting in despair. But just here despair can be rendered paradoxically efficacious unto salvation in that the despairing subject who is awakened by the law is driven to the gospel. As already noted this is the classic second use of the law in Lutheran (and Reformed) orthodoxy and it is exactly how Kierkegaard intends Anti-Climacus's psychological exposition to function in the life of his "dear reader." It is also a crucial link between Kierkegaard's depth psychology and function and purpose of Scripture, which is law and gospel in dialectical relation.

Humans are no mere shells or thin layers of willing but have a depth dimension which they themselves must plunge through self-examination. This is precisely what Kierkegaard is calling Bible readers to in the first discourse of *For Self-Examination*, "What Is Required." The process of self examination is the inward deepening that Kierkegaard aims at developing, or at least calling his readers to develop, throughout his corpus. Plunging the

inward depths, however, takes a certain sober earnestness that is determined to penetrate the veneer of superficiality with which we are too often content. It also takes the courage of Beowulf to dive into the murky and dangerous abyss where one will certainly wrestle with frightening beings that lie beneath the surface. The instrument in hand for this inward deepening is the law and the gospel which is nothing other than God's word, declared to us primarily and normatively in the Bible.

Shallowness will never arrive at matters of genuine earnestness since shallowness is itself a strategy for avoiding the depths that lie within. Since, however, Christianity deals with matters of depth it is necessary, Kierkegaard is convinced, to move beyond the superficial through inwardness and earnestness in order to become a Christian in the New Testament sense (as opposed to the Christendom sense in which everyone is a Christian by virtue of birth or citizenship). Inwardness and earnestness "are the essential preconditions for understanding Christianity and becoming a Christian" and helping his readers to develop these that they may go on and actually become Christians is a strategic objective in Kierkegaard's larger evangelistic mission as a Christian writer.<sup>128</sup>

As already noted, Kierkegaard is not interested in cataloguing empirical observations but in discerning "meanings" or "possible ways of being" by "understanding patterns of action that have a history."<sup>129</sup> In other words, he is concerned with the narrative or narratives of the self.<sup>130</sup> These narratives are typified under the famous spheres of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical and religiousness A (or ethico-religious), and religiousness B (or

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<sup>128</sup> Evans, *Psychology*, 19.

<sup>129</sup> Evans, *Psychology*, 37.

<sup>130</sup> See Gouwens, *Religious Thinker*, 89-92.

Christianity). These various and deeply meaningful ways of being or modes of existing are presented by Kierkegaard not only in his psychological expositions but in the structure of his authorship through the various characters that populate and write his pseudonymous works. These figures are illustrative caricatures that amplify, frequently approaching the absurd, certain possible forms of life that Kierkegaard discerns actualized to varying degrees on the streets of Copenhagen (and Berlin and elsewhere). As such they are held up before his readers as mirrors of the self.

Here, then, we see once again the parallel relation that Kierkegaard envisions between his own authorship and that of Scripture—for Scripture too, it would seem, is populated by characters of many different types of the self *coram Deo* (though few are presented as authors). Sometimes these characters appear in historical narratives and other times they appear in parables and other more fictive genres. Some of these characters make their way into Kierkegaard's own corpus (Abraham, David, the Prodigal, etc.) where Kierkegaard attempts to show us the reflective power of these various characters for exegeting readers. These characters relate to us as types of ourselves as we presently are or possibly could be. Some function in a purely negative manner while others are worthy of imitation. Kierkegaard believes God is saying to us, through these biblical characters, what his prophet Nathan said to David in his parable of rebuke: "you are the man."<sup>131</sup>

The various spheres or modes of existence are not mutually exclusive nor are they ever entirely left behind in the subject's personal development or awakening consciousness. Though those who have, for example, come to faith in Christ and thus entered into the religiousness-B mode of existence have in one sense overcome the aesthetic and

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<sup>131</sup> See FSE, 37-39 (XII 325-27).

ethical/religiousness-A modes of existence these sub-Christian alternatives remain live options and in some sense constant dangers. A Christian can and presumably frequently does lapse into one form or another of these modes of existence. Though he has decisively entered into the Christian mode of existence he never completely has his being entirely within the sphere of religiousness B and as such the Christian life is a constant striving to relate oneself to oneself by resting transparently in God. Faith is both striving and resting.

This has a Lutheran ring to it on several counts. First, sin is always present and never fully overcome in one's life. Each of the sub-Christian modes of existence represent a form of life fashioned out of various forms of despair reacting to offense. Though there is also a sense in which each sphere is taken up into and redeemed, as it were, within the religiousness-B mode of existence Christians remain imperfect in faith and lapse into these spheres or modes of existence. Christians are also prone to misinterpret Christian existence along sub-Christian lines such as considering Christianity as a means to health, wealth, power, reputation, and so on.

Second, the real striving of the Christian life or in the process of sanctification is with faith alone. This does not mean that no aesthetic or ethical improvement should be expected. Religiousness B is not devoid of aesthetic or ethical content. It does, however, place the struggle of Christian existence entirely on the plane of faith and re-contextualizes aesthetics and ethics accordingly. Still, where one is relating oneself to oneself by resting transparently in God a proper relationship to the aesthetic and the ethical is also established. Only under faith is a proper relationship with God and self realized, however imperfectly. And only under faith is one's relationship to other objects properly ordered.

The centrality of faith for a properly ordered existence, however, is ontologically grounded in the fact that God is the other through whom the self relates itself to itself. The keystone of Kierkegaard's description of the self is that it is a relation that must relate itself to itself through another, that other being the one who established and sustains the synthetic, reflexive relation that is the human self. In order to realize self-consciousness the self must be able to differentiate itself from itself through the mediation of another with whom the self is then essentially related. Apart from this the self is in an undifferentiated identity with itself and there is no possibility of the self relating itself to itself—the self just is. Being essentially related to itself through this other is the ground of human freedom which is basic to the structure of human being. It is this other, the one who constitutes the self, that gives humans both the gift and the task of existence. This being the case the self is so constituted, or designed by its creator, that it exists before and in essential relationship to him. It is, therefore, impossible to become oneself except to do so *coram Deo*. This is the reason why *coram Deo* is the fundamental qualification in Kierkegaard's anthropology, hamartology, and soteriology as well as his critique of and proposal for biblical exegesis. The relation between God and the individual is the fundamental factor in human existence.

The self must recognize not only its absolute dependence upon God for its establishment and maintenance but also its absolute dependence upon God in the task of becoming itself in the stream of existence. To refuse to acknowledge this by resting transparently in him is to fall into despair. The root of despair is offense *coram Deo*. The only possible options for the self *coram Deo* is either faith or despair. Faith is defined as “the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God.”<sup>132</sup> The typology of

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<sup>132</sup> SUD, 40 (XI 152), 82 (XI 194), respectively. Cf. SUD, 14 (XI 128).

despair Anti-Climacus expounds in *Sickness Unto Death* represents the variety of ways one can fall away from faith. This is why there are two major types of conscious despair: not willing to be oneself and to will to be oneself without transparently resting in God, which is the individual's highest perfection. Faith, it turns out, is not only a constant striving in one direction but it is a constant striving along a razor's edge. Human existence is essentially and necessarily existence *coram Deo*. This is the ground of offense both in existing *coram Deo* and in reading God's word: "To be alone with Holy Scripture! I dare not!"<sup>133</sup>

### **5.5 Despair Coram Scriptura**

The role of Scripture in the dynamic of human existence is complex. We have already noted the role of Scripture as a source for Kierkegaard's psychological exposition. We have also noted that Kierkegaard's psychological exposition is aimed at describing the existential dimensions of Christian dogma as revealed in Scripture. Thus Scripture is both a source and norm for his psychology. Developed at more length, however, has been the parallel relationship between his psychological exposition and the law-gospel dialectic central to Lutheran orthodoxy. The reason this aspect of the role of Scripture in Kierkegaard's works has occupied this much attention is because the law-gospel dialectic is, for Lutheran orthodoxy, the dynamic of God's efficacious word, as we examined in chapter four.

The relevant contours of Kierkegaard's anthropology in front of us, we are now prepared to explore the role of Scripture within the dynamic structure of the human person. Kierkegaard's central analogy for Scripture's function is a mirror.

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<sup>133</sup> FSE, 31 (XII 320).

We have already noted the way the various characters within Scripture function as types of the self that reflect who we are or could possibly be *coram Deo*. We have also noted that the law functions as a mirror, too. As the law reflects who we presently are, the gospel reflects who we can become in Christ *coram Deo*. Since the word of God in its entirety is law and gospel the whole of Scripture reflects the reading subject *coram Deo*. The crucial qualification here is *coram Deo*. Scripture centers the reading self squarely before God; Scripture operates at the core of the structure of the human self. The dynamic of the self *coram Deo* is practically identical to the dynamic of the reading self *coram Scriptura*. There are three observations to explore in relation to this: first, Kierkegaard's analogy of Scripture as a mirror; second, the application of Anti-Climacus's typology in *Sickness Unto Death* to biblical exegesis; and third, the nature of offense *coram Scriptura* that leads to despair.

### 5.5.1 *The Mirror of God's Word*

"God's Word is the mirror,"<sup>134</sup> Kierkegaard declares, and we have already explored a great deal of what Kierkegaard means by this: how the mirror reflects the self *coram Deo* through the law-gospel dialectic and how that reflection enters into the meaning of the text. In this way the self's disclosure, which belongs to God's perlocutionary intention and the efficacy of Scripture, is essential to the Bible's meaning and must be accounted for in any faithful exegesis. I have also argued that Kierkegaard attempts to capture this mirror-like quality of Scripture in his own authorship and that in this sense his work is more exegetical than is often realized,

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<sup>134</sup> FSE, 25 (XII 315).



even by those who investigate his use of Scripture. Among the numerous similarities between Kierkegaard's understanding of his own corpus and his concept of Scripture—an underdeveloped theme in Kierkegaardian scholarship that I have returned to repeatedly in this dissertation—this is surely one of the most interesting and fruitful points to explore.

C. Stephen Evans has observed that the “major thrust of Kierkegaard’s early pseudonymous writings is, broadly speaking, psychological in that they focus on helping people gain a sense of what it means to exist as whole persons.”<sup>135</sup> He goes on to argue that,

The reason for the pseudonymity of these writings is linked to this goal. The pseudonymous “authors” of Kierkegaard’s early works . . . [function as] *personae*, like characters in a novel. Like literary characters they have their own perspectives and views. . . . Kierkegaard created these characters to represent what he saw as fundamental human possibilities. In holding out these characters to his readers he was therefore not simply presenting opinions, but possible mirrors. He hoped his readers would look into these works, behold themselves, and discover something about their own spiritual character.<sup>136</sup>

He is not the only observer to note this mirror-like quality at work in Kierkegaard’s authorship. “Kierkegaard aims to create a mirror for the reader,” writes William McDonald, “so that instead of acquiring a positive truth from the text, s/he will be forced to see him or herself.”<sup>137</sup> McDonald goes on to cite a footnote from *On My Work as an Author* in which Kierkegaard remarks that “all doubly reflected communication makes contrary understandings equally possible; then the one who passes judgment is disclosed by the way

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<sup>135</sup> Evans, *Psychology*, 22.

<sup>136</sup> Evans, *Psychology*, 22.

<sup>137</sup> William McDonald, “Indirection and *Parrhesia*—the Roles of Socrates’ *Daimonion* and Kierkegaard’s *Styrrelse* in Communication,” in *Søren Kierkegaard and the Word(s)*, *op. cit.*, 130.

he judges.”<sup>138</sup> Kierkegaard’s authorial strategy was to confront his reading public with a text that reflected the reader’s self and thereby force him or her, as an individual, to render an interpretive judgment about the meaning of the work. This judgment discloses the person’s self and belongs to the meaning of the text, McDonald argues. The diversity of texts that make up Kierkegaard’s authorship, it turns out, are aimed at revealing the reader’s self; these texts were meant to exegete the reader in and through the reader’s exegesis of the text. This is how the text functions as a mirror of the reader’s self.

As we noted briefly above, Kierkegaard conceived the mirror-like function of his pseudonymous characters in much the same way he understood and treated the canonical characters of Scripture—as mirrors of the reader’s actual or possible self *coram Deo*. By relating oneself in various ways to these various characters one discloses one’s own sense of self, such as it is, while simultaneously disclosing oneself as one is *coram Deo*. This is the dynamic that is at work when the Bible is being read or heard.

Kierkegaard has strong biblical precedent for reading the Bible and relating to its various characters as mirrors of the reader’s self (actual or potential). Many characters reveal the great diversity of tragic *personae* under our fallen condition; others are offered as models worthy of imitation—Christ, of course, above all others. But Kierkegaard’s concept for the mirror-like quality of his own authorship and of Scripture extends beneath the diversity of Kierkegaardian or biblical characters to the dynamic of the law-gospel dialectic that is at work throughout his authorship and the biblical canon. This dialectic shapes and structures the whole of Kierkegaard’s authorship and the biblical canon. The diversity of characters present in each corpus represents various types of the self under law and gospel. Ultimately

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<sup>138</sup> See PV, 18.

it is the positivity of the law that reflects the reader's actual self *coram Deo* as one who is in despair and the positivity of the gospel that discloses the potential self *coram Deo* that can be realized through faith.

As much as I agree with McDonald, his dichotomy between "positive truth" and the self-disclosing mirror-like function of the text seems both unnecessary and improper to attribute to Kierkegaard. McDonald maintains that the reflective power of a text arises not in its crisp and clear reflection of the reader's self through its "positive" content but through a kind of ambiguity that forces readers to decide the meaning for themselves. It is through the pure act of deciding that the reader's self is disclosed; the ambiguous text becomes a mere occasion for a self-disclosing decision. I am convinced, however, that the decision or judgment of the reader discloses the self by forcing readers to relate themselves to the particular, positive truth-claims the author of the text makes. Thus the self-consciousness realized through seeing oneself in the mirror is always defined in relation to the objective truth-claims an author asserts. As for the Bible, its truth-claims consist of the law-gospel dialectic that is both its content and mode of operation.

To be clear, McDonald is not suggesting that Kierkegaard's works lack positive content. He is instead arguing that the positive content he does offer is intentionally underdetermined, conflicted, and otherwise complicated and rendered ambiguous so that the meaning of his work must be determined by the reader. On this view, the author may very well disappear behind the ambiguity of the text and leave the reader to his or her own devices. McDonald argues that this is precisely the sort of phenomenon Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship represents. He also suggests that this is equally true of many of

the veronymous writings that were left to be published posthumously and thus intentionally “mediated by death.”<sup>139</sup>

The texts of the “authorship” endeavour to erase all authorial and textual authority by using contradiction, paradox, revocation, and various framing and masking devices. They thereby become impenetrable enigmatic surfaces. The exertions of active reading produce only reflections of the reader.<sup>140</sup>

McDonald represents this complexity as Kierkegaard’s intentional attempt at “reflecting the reflective out of reflection.” He also notes that the complexity itself represents “a temptation to the demonic” for Kierkegaard,<sup>141</sup> a point we shall return to shortly. On the first point, to reflect the reflective out of reflection, McDonald argues that Kierkegaard employs the strategy of indirect communication.

Kierkegaard begins his indirect communication with *Either/Or*, which reflects his estimation of where the reading public of Copenhagen stands at the time he commences his authorship. That is, Kierkegaard judges that the denizens of Copenhagen exist in the aesthetic sphere or at best on the aesthetic-ethical frontier. In this sense, his earliest pseudonymous works were intended to reflect his audience’s actuality. Meanwhile Kierkegaard offers a stream of veronymous “edifying discourses” to “that single individual.” Later Kierkegaard pointed to this stream of edifying discourses, noting that they begin at about the same time as *Either/Or*, as evidence that he has been executing a single, coherent, comprehensive religious program aimed ultimately at the problem of how to become a Christian. Kierkegaard contends that from the very beginning of his authorship he was

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<sup>139</sup> McDonald, “Indirection and *Parrhesia*,” 130.

<sup>140</sup> William McDonald, “Aping Kierkegaard: A Mimetic-Demonic-Offensive Redoubling of Søren Kierkegaard’s Philosophical Rhetoric” (Ph.D. diss., University of Sidney, 1989).

<sup>141</sup> McDonald, “Indirection and *Parrhesia*,” 129, 130.

executing a program carried out by the dialectic or “duplexity” of indirect and direct communication in his total authorship:

This movement was traversed or delineated *uno tenore*, in one breath, if I dare say—thus the authorship, regarded as a *totality*, is religious from first to last. Just as one versed in natural science promptly knows from the crisscrossing thread in a web the ingenious little creature whose web it is, an insightful person will also know that to this authorship there corresponds as the source someone who *qua* author “has willed only one thing.” This insightful person will also know that this one thing is the religious, but the religious completely cast into reflection, yet in such a way that it is completely taken back out of reflection into simplicity—that is, he will see that the traversed path is: to *reach*, to *arrive at* simplicity.<sup>142</sup>

As his pseudonymous works begin with the caricatured actuality of the reading public his veronymous works begin with the explicitly religious and eventually move into the exclusively Christian form of life. Between the two there is a narrowing of the audience, not in terms of scope but in terms of address. He hoped that as many people who read *Either/Or* would read the *Edifying Discourses* (this was not the case), but whereas *Either/Or* addresses the masses his religious discourses address “that single individual.”<sup>143</sup>

In this way Kierkegaard’s authorship takes on an intentional complexity that goes beyond the canon of Scripture. The human authors of Scripture, to the extent that their subjectivity enters into their message, do function as mirrors of the reader’s self. Ordinarily these prophetic and apostolic authors reflect the possibility of Christian existence readers are

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<sup>142</sup> “On My Work as an Author,” in PV, 6-7 (XIII 495).

<sup>143</sup> The terrible aloneness of the self before God here envisioned has caused more than one scholar to recoil and accuse Kierkegaard of positing an “isolated” or “lonely self” (e.g. Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975], 343-372). Others have rushed to Kierkegaard’s defense by pointing out the deeply communal and social aspects of Kierkegaard’s anthropological reflections. See, for example, Greg Beabout and Brad Frazier, “A Challenge to the Solitary Self Interpretation of Kierkegaard,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 17.1 (January 2000): 75-98 and James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 175-207. The latter line of thought seems ascendant within Kierkegaardian scholarship and represents a more accurate and balanced treatment of this thought.

to strive to actualize in their own existence. The distinctive complication in Kierkegaard's authorship, however, is the fact that many of his pseudonymous authors are intended to mirror the reader's self in despair. Rarely if ever does Scripture function this way. Models of despair abound in Scripture, but ordinarily as characters within the text not authors of the text. The latter, of course, is a notorious complicating factor within Kierkegaardian studies.

In Scripture, the reflection of the reader's actual, despairing self *coram Deo* is the work of the law. We have already observed that the law is present throughout the canon and is operative through the examples of the canonical characters, especially Jesus Christ. God (and the prophetic and apostolic human authors of Scripture) clearly have authority to write law; Kierkegaard does not. This is one of several reasons why he seeks to accomplish much the same work in his readers but through tactics like indirect communication, psychological expositions, and discourses as the law does in Bible readers. The point here is that the highly imaginative approach Kierkegaard adopts, and the rather complicated authorship it yields, worried Kierkegaard.

McDonald notes that the intentional duplexity at work in Kierkegaard's authorship represented a temptation to the demonic if, that is, Kierkegaard was involved in the kind of evangelistic project he claims to be in *Point of View*. This "temptation to the demonic" concerns the possibility that his complex scheme could become a distraction from his message. Kierkegaard as an author might become more interested in being clever, witty, and ironic than faithful and true; his readers, in turn, might become happily distracted by the craft and complexity of his authorship. The demonic temptation essentially consists in rendering his authorship so complex that it undermines his soteriological purpose.

Christianly, one does not proceed from the simple in order then to become interesting, witty, profound, a poet, a philosopher, etc. No, it is just the

opposite; here one begins and then becomes more and more simple, arrives at the simple. This, in Christendom, is Christianly the movement of reflection; one does not reflect oneself into Christianity but reflects oneself out of something else and becomes more and more simple, a Christian.<sup>144</sup>

His attempt at “reflecting the reflective out of reflection” could actually become an occasion for just the sort of “demonic” reflecting he was trying to drive out of his readers. Instead of leading his reader toward simplicity he might become a seducer who, in his lack of authorial restraint, essentially “plans his seductions in the brooding, inclosing reserve.”<sup>145</sup>

Kierkegaard has Vigilius Haufniensis elaborate on the demonic in *The Concept of Anxiety* where it is defined as “anxiety about the good.”<sup>146</sup> To be demonic is to relate to the good as one ought to relate toward evil. Here the good is conceived under a diversity of forms including faith, love, truth, salvation, and God.<sup>147</sup> In other words, the demonic views and relates to the good, whatever the particular form of the good may be in any given case, as though it were a threat against which one must defend oneself. As Julia Watkin writes, the demonic “wants to shut itself up in itself and isolate itself from the threat of the good.” She points to Quidam in *Stages on Life's Way* as an example of this in that “he quibbles about whether he is guilty” which “is a form of keeping repentance and God at bay.” She also rightly notes that the extreme form of defiant despair is counted by Kierkegaard as demonic.<sup>148</sup> McDonald points out that any denial of God as the power that established the self is also demonic. Such a denial occurs when one refuses to acknowledge the self or to

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<sup>144</sup> “On My Work as an Author,” in PV, 7 (XIII 495).

<sup>145</sup> William McDonald, “Demonic,” in forthcoming dictionary.

<sup>146</sup> CA, 118. Anti-Climacus also discusses the demonic under the category of despair in SUD, 72-73 (XI 183-84) and sin in SUD, 108, 109-10 (XI 218-20).

<sup>147</sup> William McDonald, “Demonic,” in forthcoming dictionary.

<sup>148</sup> Julia Watkin, *Historical Dictionary of Kierkegaard's Philosophy*, 63-64.

relate oneself to oneself in and through God by faith. In this case even the person who despairs over sin rather than resting transparently in the God who atones for and forgives sin is in some sense falling into the demonic.

For Kierkegaard “*qua* author” to become lost or unrestrained in the complexity, wittiness, and so on of his own reflecting would take on the form of the demonic precisely in the sense that it would be a movement away from instead of toward the clarity and simplicity of Christianity. What ought to be spiritually edifying would become a treacherous deceit leading his readers away from Christianity and their possible salvation. Because, for Kierkegaard, “everything, indeed everything, ought to serve for upbuilding,”<sup>149</sup> whatever does not serve this end is actually a service only to the demonic end of defending oneself against the good, the simple, the Christian. McDonald is right to observe the demonic temptation present in Kierkegaard’s authorial activity as one who begins in complexity and ironically only intensifies this complexity by juxtaposing it with the explicitly religious. The same temptation, however, exists for the reader who may become so captivated by the wit, style, and complexity of the authorial product that this and this alone becomes the subject of interest. Just as the God-man had to come in a form that was outwardly inconspicuous so also must the word of God in Scripture lest we be tempted to praise it as great literature, thrilling entertainment, and so on, and become altogether distracted by its craftsmanship.

The demonic has much in common with exegetical despair. To be demonic, we have just noted, is to relate to the good as one ought to relate toward evil and vice versa. Kierkegaard conceives of the good under a diversity of forms including faith, love, truth, salvation, and God. It is quite clear that the word of God ought to be added to this list.

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<sup>149</sup> SUD, 5 (XI 117).



Exegetical despair (whether conscious of being such or not) treats the word of God as one ought to treat a lie by suspecting it, doubting it, and defending oneself against it. To be in anxiety or despair over the word of God is demonic. Because of the mirror-like quality and function of the Bible, to treat it as though it were evil is also to treat one's self as though it were evil since Scripture reflects the reader's self *coram Deo* and is the means or occasion for becoming oneself by faith *coram Deo*. Because the self is essentially *coram Deo* and the only way to become oneself is by resting transparently in God, exegetical despair likewise adopts the demonic relation to both God and faith as well.

Not every exegete is in demonic despair, however—not even every exegete who deliberately acts to defend his or herself from the word of God. Demonic despair, according to Anti-Climacus, is an extreme form of “madness” or “rage” in which the subject approaches full consciousness of being in despair and nevertheless willfully “abandoned the good” in “an effort to survive by sinking even deeper” into despair and sin.<sup>150</sup> “The more consciousness there is in such a sufferer who in despair wills to be himself,” Anti-Climacus asserts, “the more his despair intensifies and becomes demonic.”<sup>151</sup> Exegetical despair that seeks to defend itself against the word of God is also a kind of suicidal madness but it is not always accompanied by a consciousness as intense as that which belongs to demonic despair. At the same time, all conscious despair that wills to maintain or perpetuate itself is a move toward the demonic and exegetical despair is very often just such a form of despair. One reason for this is that exegetical despair is usually a form of conscious despair. We will see why this is so below, when we consider the varieties of despair *coram Scripture*. Another

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<sup>150</sup> SUD, 72, 108, and 110 (XI 183, 218, and 220), respectively.

<sup>151</sup> SUD, 71-72 (XI 182-83).

reason for this is that the methods and practices of biblical exegesis that rise out of despair *coram Scriptura* are aimed at reading the text as though exegesis were not an act of resting transparently in God or even a spiritually significant exercise. As we shall see below, defiant despair is just this: to be conscious of being in despair and in despair willing to be oneself—that is, to will to be oneself apart from resting transparently in God. Critical-era exegetical despair belongs to this category: to will to exegete the text or to be oneself *coram Scriptura* apart from resting transparently in God. So, even those in whom the intensity of consciousness is insufficient to pronounce the exegete in demonic despair, exegetical despair fits the pattern and serves the same demonic end. It is, after all, the exegete who renders the exegetical task so “enormously complicated” that “this business about the mirror becomes so confusing that I [the exegete] very likely never come to see myself in the mirror.”<sup>152</sup> The concern Kierkegaard had over his authorship is realized on the side of reader through the crafty schemes of despairing exegetes.

So, the positive doctrinal content of both law and gospel is dialectically structured and efficacious as a mirror that reflects the reader’s self *coram Deo* such that the reflection of the individual’s actual and potential self *coram Deo* enters into the meaning of the text as determined by God its author. The image in the mirror of God’s word is always a reflection of the self *coram Deo*, both the reader’s present despairing self and the reader’s possible, Christ-like self. This mirror-like function of Scripture is the occasion for offense and exegetical despair *coram Scriptura*. Before turning to the types of despair *coram Scriptura* there is one final point of contrast between Kierkegaard and Vanhoozer worth noting.

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<sup>152</sup> FSE 25-26 (XII 315).

Vanhoozer begins *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* by using Kierkegaard's mirror analogy presented in "What Is Required" to introduce his central dichotomy between hermeneutic "realism" and "non-realism."<sup>153</sup> Although Vanhoozer does not engage in a lengthy consideration of Kierkegaard's critique he does use "What Is Required" to frame the central question of his project: "Is there something in the text that reflects a reality independent of the reader's interpretive activity, or does the text only reflect the reality of the reader?"<sup>154</sup> Is there, in the words of the title of his book, a meaning in the text to be discerned by readers or do readers impose meaning on the text in their interpretive activity? Vanhoozer proceeds to offer a strong and largely compelling case for what he calls hermeneutic realism.

Kierkegaard's mirror analogy, however, suggests that Vanhoozer's dichotomy is oversimplified. Vanhoozer contends that hermeneutic realism, assuming that there is an objective meaning in the text, approaches interpretation as a project of recovery; hermeneutic non-realism, however, approaches interpretation as a creative project of invention.<sup>155</sup> On this basis Vanhoozer identifies hermeneutic realism—the family of positions that affirm that the text "reflects a reality independent of the reader's interpretive activity"—with a view of interpretation as a task of "recovery."

Kierkegaard also clearly affirms a reality in the text "independent of the reader's activity" and in this sense is rightly placed on the side of hermeneutic realism within Vanhoozer's dichotomy. Yet Kierkegaard also tends to reject the "recovery"

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<sup>153</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in That Text?*, 15-16, 431.

<sup>154</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in That Text?*, 15.

<sup>155</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in That Text?*, 431.

model for understanding what it is to read God's word. Meaning, for Kierkegaard, is before the text in the sense that it emerges between the positive, doctrinal content presented in the text and the reading subject's relation to that content. This in no way denies the objectivity of truth or meaning. Kierkegaard rather intends to take just as seriously the reader's subjective relation to those objective realities and ultimately to the God who has spoken and stands behind this message as its author, and through him to themselves as selves *coram Deo*. Just as truth, according to Climacus,<sup>156</sup> has both an objective and subjective dimension, so also does textual meaning. That has been a constant assumption throughout this chapter and is worth making explicit. Textual meaning is not created or determined by the reader. Kierkegaard is not a radical subjectivist in this sense. Rather, the subjective dimension of biblical meaning concerns the relation of the reader to its objective textual meaning. To be in truth as a biblical exegete is to be rightly related to the objectively true content of the divine revelation, which is only possible through faith.

For this reason the meaning of the biblical text involves both the perlocutionary intentions of the divine author and the divinely-intended perlocutionary effects of the text upon readers. Those effects are matters of the reader's relationship to the content of God's word and ultimately to the divine author himself. God has, in the text of Scripture, held a spiritual mirror of the self up in front of his readers (and hearers) so that they may see themselves and know themselves as they are *coram Deo*.

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<sup>156</sup> CUP, 21-22 (VII 11-12).

It is ultimately this single qualification, *coram Deo*, that is decisive. God is not, for Kierkegaard, a mere idea or human projection. God is a living subject who exists independent of our thinking about him and to whom we are accountable and upon whom we are absolutely dependent. He is our creator and redeemer and being rightly related to him and through him to ourselves and others is the defining issue of our existence. The Bible is given by God to bring us into a right relationship with him. The ground of the objective meaning of Scripture is the reality of God as a living subject; the ground of the subjective meaning of Scripture is in the mirror-like quality of the law-gospel dialectic which is its essential content and mode of operation. Meaning, in this sense, does not have to be recovered as though the text were addressed to some other person at some past historical point in time. Rather, biblical meaning is located in the divine address to the reading subject right here, right now, through this text. This meaning is determined by God but realized in the reader's response which discloses his present relationship to God and thereby clarifies what is required for that individual to become a Christian.

#### 5.5.2 *Types of Despair Coram Scriptura*

In the "Introduction" to *Sickness Unto Death* Anti-Climacus begins with Christ's ironic declaration regarding Lazarus' sickness that "this sickness is not unto death."<sup>157</sup> Christ is apparently implying that there is a sickness that is unto death which Lazarus has not contracted. Of course Lazarus is sick unto death in a physical sense. This creates an apparent contradiction between Christ's remark and what in fact turns out to be the case for

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<sup>157</sup> See John 11:4.

Lazarus in his illness. This irony, however, can be taken in at least two ways. First of all, one can continue to interpret the passage with respect to the physical condition and health of Lazarus as the primary referent. In this case the irony focuses attention upon the revivification of Lazarus by Christ. This is a common and straightforward reading that seems consistent with Jesus' comment that Lazarus' death is "for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."<sup>158</sup> But Anti-Climacus takes this ironic statement as an impetus to look beyond the temporal events of Lazarus' illness and death, discerning what some would label a "spiritual sense."

Anti-Climacus's interpretation is consistent with Kierkegaard's understanding of the function of irony and how it relates to the boundary conditions between existence spheres. It is also a very plausible interpretation of Christ's comment in its broader Johannine context. The irony created between Christ's declaration and Lazarus' death focuses readers' attention on Christ as he arrives on the scene. The tension within this particular ironic statement comes to its climax, however, not in the event of Lazarus' reviving from death but in Christ's conversation with Martha and specifically with his declaration that "I am the resurrection and the life." The central question of the episode turns out not to be whether or not Lazarus will be restored to life, or whether Christ is able to do so, but whether Martha believes: "Do you believe this?" Kierkegaard's exegetical approach calls us to identify with Martha in such a way that Christ is here and now asking the reader this very question, too. In an almost incredible development, the raising of Lazarus is subsumed under this point and offered as a sign to faith—Martha's and our own—that confirms Christ's own teaching about himself being "the resurrection and the life." This, of course, is how the miracles or

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<sup>158</sup> John 11:4

“signs” in John’s Gospel tend to function. The death and revivification of Lazarus is no different: it is “for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”<sup>159</sup>

But what, then, becomes of the “sickness unto death”? That Christ has in mind something other, or at least more than physical life and death is highly plausible. As he says to Martha in the climatic exchange, “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”<sup>160</sup> Clearly Jesus is speaking of a life and death that transcends and turns out to subsume physical life and overcomes physical death. Here eternal life is posited immediately after the continuing reality of physical death is affirmed. It seems reasonable, then, that Jesus may well have had a death other than physical death in view when he asserted that Lazarus, who was indeed sick unto physical death, was not sick unto death. This is Kierkegaard’s starting point: that Jesus Christ here makes a distinction between two kinds of death: one temporal or physical and the other eternal or spiritual. In making this distinction he is also, then, distinguishing between all those sicknesses that are not unto eternal, spiritual death, including those that take one’s temporal, physical life, and that one sickness which is unto eternal, spiritual death:

Christianly understood, then, not even death is “the sickness unto death”; even less so is everything that goes under the name of earthly and temporal suffering: need, illness, misery, hardship, adversities, torments, mental sufferings, cares, grief. And even if such things were so hard and painful that we human beings or at least the sufferer, would declare, “This is worse than death”—all those things, which, although not sickness, can be compared with sickness, are still, Christianly understood, not the sickness unto death.<sup>161</sup>

He continues,

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<sup>159</sup> John 11:4, 25-26.

<sup>160</sup> John 11:25-26.

<sup>161</sup> SUD, 8 (XI 122).

Christianity has in turn discovered a miserable condition that man as such does not know exists. This miserable condition is the sickness unto death.<sup>162</sup>

In light of this sickness all those things that “man as such” tends to call sickness or even death recede nearly to a vanishing point—not because they are insignificant but because they are *relatively* so much less consequential than that which is *the* sickness unto death. The Christian is able to look courageous in the face of all sorts of adversity, opposition, pain, and suffering; but courage, Anti-Climacus informs us, is a function of being even more terrified of another, far greater danger that hangs in the balance. The natural man, through his ignorance of the sickness unto death, does not escape “from shuddering and shrinking.” On the contrary, in ignorance of what is truly horrifying he is tormented by many lesser fears. The Christian has been liberated from all these lesser fears through consciousness of the one superlative horror. Of course lacking a clear consciousness of this one superlative horror does not enable the natural man to escape from the horror and misery that attend the spiritual sickness unto death, either.<sup>163</sup>

An “entirely dialectical” irony follows from this. The most horrifying prospect is spiritual death. The person who is sick unto this death is the person who is either ignorant of this reality or else determined not to confront the reality of one’s terminal condition. The person who is most keenly aware of it and fully conscious of the peril they face is the person who has confronted it, accepted it, and in part through this consciousness is being delivered out from under it. Eternal, spiritual death is the superlative horror; despair, from the psychological perspective, is the sickness unto death.

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<sup>162</sup> SUD, 8 (XI 122).

<sup>163</sup> SUD, 8-9 (XI 123).



### 5.5.3 *Despair is the Sickness unto Death*

Anti-Climacus's psychological exposition of the sickness unto death is conducted under the properly psychological category of despair, sin being a theological category for the same phenomenon. Despair is described as "the misrelation in the relation of a synthesis that relates itself to itself."<sup>164</sup> This formulaic description is obviously stated in terms of the formula of the self Anti-Climacus offers at the outset of *Sickness Unto Death* discussed above. According to this definition, despair is located at the very center of the dynamic of one's existence and structure of one's being. Despair is a misrelation in the subject of the most basic kind imaginable; it represents a fatal "sickness of the self."<sup>165</sup>

By despair Anti-Climacus does not have in view the feeling or sense of hopelessness that resides on the surface of a person's self-consciousness. Instead, despair is a condition or position that one inhabits whether aware of it or not. In this respect despair is similar to certain conditions sometimes found in bodily sicknesses:

The position of the common view in interpreting despair is like that of the common view in determining whether a person is sick . . . As a rule, a person is considered to be healthy when he himself says that he is well. But the physician has a different view of sickness. Why? Because the physician has a defined and developed conception of what it is to be healthy and ascertains a man's condition accordingly. The physician knows that just as there is merely imaginary sickness there is also merely imaginary health, and in the latter case he first takes measures to disclose the sickness. Generally speaking, the physician, precisely because he is a physician (well informed), does not have complete confidence in what a person says about his condition. If everyone's statement about his condition, that he is healthy or sick, were completely reliable, to be a physician would be a delusion. A physician's task is not only to prescribe remedies but also, first and foremost, to identify the sickness, and consequently his first task is to ascertain whether the supposedly sick person is actually sick or whether the supposedly healthy

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<sup>164</sup> SUD, 15 (XI 130).

<sup>165</sup> See, e.g., SUD, 19 (XI 132).

person is perhaps actually sick. Such is also the relation of the physician of the soul to despair.<sup>166</sup>

Just as it is entirely possible that a person terminally ill with cancer may in fact be blissfully unaware and feel quite healthy, so also it is possible for a person in despair to be perfectly unconscious of the fact that he or she is in despair. What is required is the ministry of one “well informed”—a physician of the soul. This physician’s job is to heal, or at least to prescribe the remedies that are able to heal the despairing soul. But this is not possible without first being able to properly diagnose despair in the despairing subject. In other words, the physician’s task is first diagnostic and then prescriptive. This, as already noted, is another expression of the law-gospel dialectic that so richly informs Kierkegaard’s thinking. Once again we see that this dialectic not only informs his interpretation of Scripture but also plays a structural role in his own thought and authorship.

It is of more than passing interest to observe that the physician of souls he calls for has its prototype in Jesus Christ. Jesus does seem to ordinarily follow the method of dealing with sin-sick souls Kierkegaard here describes for dealing with despair-sick souls. We also note that Kierkegaard himself is attempting to follow this model and become a physician of the soul through his work as an author. This, in turn, sets his critique of exegetical method and practice in its proper light: it is intended to diagnose not merely errors in exegetical methods and practices but to expose the terminal disease in the reading subject that is the central issue operative in Bible reading (or hearing)—the diagnosis is intended to expose exegetical despair in order to drive despairing readers to turn from all merely earthly hopes (repentance) and rest transparently in the God of grace declared in the gospel (faith).

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<sup>166</sup> SUD, 23 (XI 137).

The diagnostic moment is complicated for the physician of souls in a way it is not for the physician of bodies. This is due to the manner in which despair can remain so perfectly hidden or camouflaged within the despairing subject:

Despair is not only dialectically different from a [bodily] sickness, but all its symptoms are also dialectical, and therefore the superficial view is easily deceived in determining whether or not despair is present. Not to be in despair can in fact signify precisely to be in despair, and it can signify having been rescued from being in despair. A sense of security and tranquility can signify being in despair; precisely this sense of security and tranquility can be the despair, and yet it can signify having conquered despair and having won peace. Not being in despair is not similar to not being sick, for not being sick cannot be the same as being sick, whereas not being in despair can be the very same as being in despair.<sup>167</sup>

Anti-Climacus equivocates throughout this passage between the more superficial view of despair and the depth concept of despair for which he is arguing. The point, however, is important: to not be in despair in the superficial sense is no sure sign that one is not in despair in the deeper sense. There is no physical illness that can mask itself so perfectly as despair. To not be in despair in the superficial sense is consistent with two radically divergent interpretations: either the person is indeed not in despair, having overcome despair through faith, or the person is in despair but unconscious of being in despair.

For Anti-Climacus the latter interpretation of the person who shows no evidence of being in despair is by far the most likely for at least two reasons. First, despair (like sin) is universal:

Just as a physician might say that there very likely is not one single living human being who is completely healthy, so anyone who really knows mankind might say that there is not one single living human being who does not despair a little.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> SUD, 24-25 (XI 138).

<sup>168</sup> SUD, 22 (XI 136).

Actually it is worse than it sounds. Here Kierkegaard is using despair in the “superficial” or “customary” sense, again, in which it relates to conscious “unrest, . . . inner strife, a disharmony, an anxiety.”<sup>169</sup> But this kind of sensible despair (or conscious despairing) is actually only symptomatic of being in the state or condition of despair:

Just as the physician speaks of going around with an illness in the body, he [i.e. the despairing subject] walks around with a sickness, carries around a sickness of the spirit that signals its presence at rare intervals in and through an anxiety he cannot explain.<sup>170</sup>

I will explore the relationship between consciousness and despair below. For now it is important that we grasp that for Anti-Climacus (and behind him, Kierkegaard) despair as a depth concept is a universal condition of which one may or may not be conscious, but that nevertheless signals its presence “at rare intervals” through instances of despairing.

An identical dynamic is at work *coram Scriptura*. Exegetical despair is nothing other than despair *coram Deo* operative in the dynamic of reading (or hearing) the Bible, God’s word. Unsurprisingly, then, despair *coram Scriptura* can be masked just as effectively as despair *coram Deo*—so effectively, that is, that the exegete appears to be perfectly at ease and despair-free. This ease is most likely a false sense of security before the text. Such security arises not in overcoming despair through faith in Jesus Christ as proclaimed in the gospel but in the tranquility of those who have momentarily forgotten their terminal illness. Dialectically, that one is greatly troubled *coram Scriptura* may be a sign of awakening or even spiritual life or healing just as tranquility may be a sign of despair.

Exegetical despair is always *coram Deo* and lurks in the depths of the reader’s self; it will signify its presence “at rare intervals” through instances of despairing. These instances

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<sup>169</sup> SUD, 22 (XI 136).

<sup>170</sup> SUD, 22 (XI 136).

will likely come in the form of passages that stubbornly refuse to be explained away or otherwise dismissed or suppressed by our exegetical methods and practices that ordinarily work so effectively and craftily to this end. There may well be something Kuhnsian at work here. These instances of despairing may accumulate as anomalies that begin to undermine our comfortable and exceedingly useful exegetical paradigm. We find ourselves holding on to an increasingly dubious exegetical paradigm with a kind of quiet ministerial or academic desperation until a new option emerges enabling the paradigm shift to occur. The anomalies, however, are frequently signifiers of exegetical despair—which is despair *coram Deo* breaking through and manifesting itself *coram Scriptura*. The reigning exegetical paradigm, Kierkegaard suspects, is simply the most useful strategy at this time and place for defending oneself from both the consciousness of despair and the offensiveness of our absolute dependence upon God.

Instances of despairing occur in a diversity of forms. Kierkegaard has Anti-Climacus survey these various forms in *Sickness Unto Death* “with regard to the constituents of the synthesis.”<sup>171</sup> We need not review these abstract forms at length. Suffice to say that the synthesis establishes a dialectical relation between two poles variously described in terms of finitude/infinity and possibility/necessity (the third pairing, eternity/temporality, is passed over at this point). These forms of despair function as media for the expression or manifestation of despair *coram Deo* and, in the case of exegetical despair, *coram Scriptura*, within the despairing subject. Anti-Climacus himself emphasizes that “despair must be considered primarily within the category of consciousness” because, as we have already

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<sup>171</sup> SUD, 29-42 (XI 142-153).

alluded to, “whether despair is conscious or not constitutes the qualitative distinction between despair and despair. . . Thus, consciousness is decisive.”<sup>172</sup>

#### 5.5.4 Unconscious Despair

This leads to the second reason why it is more likely that one who does not seem to be in despair is actually in despair. The first reason is that despair is universal; the second reason is that the most common form of despair, by far, is to be unconscious of being in despair. This is why “happiness” or “security and tranquility” can be and often are forms of despair according to Anti-Climacus. Security and tranquility do not reflect a lack of despair but only a lack of consciousness of being in despair:

[T]o be unaware of being defined as spirit is precisely what despair is. Even that which, humanly speaking, is utterly beautiful and lovable . . . is nevertheless despair. To be sure, it is happiness, but happiness is not a qualification of spirit, and deep, deep within the most secret hiding place of happiness there dwells also anxiety, which is despair; it very much wishes to be allowed to remain there, because for despair the most cherished and desirable place to live is in the heart of happiness. . . . Consequently, even that which is utterly beautiful and lovable, . . . is still despair, is happiness.<sup>173</sup>

I have argued above that Kierkegaard has Anti-Climacus pursue a rather aggressive depth psychology in *Sickness Unto Death*. But it is not just the method of depth psychology that Kierkegaard carries over and applies to biblical exegetical method and practice; he also brings over the analysis of despair, especially as it is developed under the category of “consciousness,” into his analysis of exegetical method and practice in “What Is Required.” It is my contention that the analysis of despair with regard to consciousness, considered in the framing law-gospel dialectic and informed by his thesis that religious truth has an

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<sup>172</sup> SUD, 29 (XI 142).

<sup>173</sup> SUD, 25 (XI 139).

essential subjective dimension, accounts for the basic structure and content of Kierkegaard's critique of exegetical method and practice when coupled with a proper understanding of his concept of the nature and function of Scripture. This does not mean, however, that unconscious despair is not also operative in biblical exegesis.

As we have already observed, there is a "qualitative distinction between despair and despair." This distinction centers upon the "decisive" issue of the despairing subject's consciousness of being in despair.<sup>174</sup> It follows that there are two major types of despair: despair that is not conscious of being despair and the despair that is conscious of being despair. We will consider the two types in order, beginning with the former:

This form of despair (ignorance of it) is the most common in the world; indeed what we call the world, or, more exactly, what Christianity calls the world—paganism and the natural man in Christendom . . . is despair but is ignorant of the fact.<sup>175</sup>

As Anti-Climacus defines the depth dimension of despair it is a universal condition absent only in the presence of perfect faith. Since none but Christ are perfect in faith none of us are perfectly free of despair even if we are presently overcoming it by faith. Therefore despair has been a universal condition of fallen human existence. Yet, if one were to approach one's neighbors and inquire whether they believe themselves to be in despair, chances are they would deny it. For some this denial is a conscious cover-up—a lie. But for most it represents an honest report of their belief that they are not in despair—a tragic error but not a lie. He is also convinced, however, that precisely this lack of consciousness signifies a kind of perfection of despair.

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<sup>174</sup> SUD, 29 (XI 142).

<sup>175</sup> SUD, 45 (XI 157).

Such people may count themselves to be quite happy and content with what appears to be a secure, tranquil, and productive life. They may have every appearance of being happy and content to others, as well. Yet “every such existence, whatever it achieves, be it most amazing, whatever it explains, be it the whole of existence, however intensively it enjoys life esthetically—every such existence is nevertheless despair.”<sup>176</sup> Even the most esteemed, learned, prolific, useful, and happy exegete—one who can calmly and compellingly explain the meaning of any text of Scripture—is almost certainly in despair *coram Deo* and thus *coram Scriptura*. It is not a matter of what one feels or believes to be the case but of definition and what in fact is the case. This is clearly a startling claim and yet it is one in which Kierkegaard is quite confident; it plays a central role in his critique of exegetical method and practice and his proposals for reading the Bible with benefit.

We have already observed the reality of the unconscious within a person and briefly addressed how it may arise and be sustained. There are cases in which the misrelation that leads to God- and self-alienation can arise prior to the full development of a person’s consciousness such that one derails one’s existence prior to becoming fully conscious of God or of having a self. Furthermore, even if this is not granted, or in cases in which the despairing subject has become conscious of having a self, it is at least theoretically possible that this person succeeds to suppress or block-out this consciousness so effectively that, in time, they come to lose their consciousness of having a self. This is also true of God-consciousness, though *Anti-Climacus* treats this under the category of sin, not despair. Still, the connection between God-consciousness and self-consciousness is the most intimate one imaginable given the structure of the self as outlined above.

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<sup>176</sup> SUD, 46 (XI 158).



There are numerous strategies available to the despairing subject for avoiding, suppressing, or otherwise losing one's God- or self-consciousness. These strategies lead to a variety of actions including various exegetical strategies and techniques for avoiding, suppressing, or otherwise castrating the efficacy of Scripture to awaken the consciousness of despair *coram Deo*. I will hold off on exploring these strategies until my discussion of conscious exegetical despair below. My primary concern here is in what Anti-Climacus (and behind him, Kierkegaard) has to say about this form of unconscious despair. There are three points worth noting: (1) that being in unconscious despair entails being unconscious of having a self; (2) that unconsciousness of despair is no escape from despair but rather (3), in one crucial respect at least, the worst imaginable condition or type of despair.

The first point follows from Anti-Climacus's concept of the human self and what it is to be in despair. Despair is a misrelation in the dynamic of the synthetic relation's mediated relation of itself to itself via God. To be conscious of being a self is to be conscious of relating oneself to oneself—it is the consciousness of freedom which is anxiety under the condition of innocence and conscious despair under the condition of sinfulness in which the self is misrelated to itself. So long as one is conscious of having a self one is conscious of being in despair even if that consciousness is exceedingly weak or actively denied and suppressed. The only two exceptions in which a person can be perfectly unconscious of being in despair is if that person is not in despair (in which case there is no misrelation within the self of which to be conscious) or if that person is unconscious of having or being a self. Outside of Jesus Christ the former does not exist within humanity on earth since the fall; the latter, however, is surprisingly common though usually in an imperfect and at times faltering form in which self-consciousness and with it consciousness

of being in despair breaks through and signifies itself “at rare intervals.”<sup>177</sup> Just because someone lacks consciousness of having a self does not mean that the person ceases to be a self. The structure and dynamic of the self is an inescapable reality of human existence.

Most people in Christendom never read the Bible at all, Kierkegaard insists.<sup>178</sup> This is frequently a strategy for either avoiding or maintaining the suppression of the consciousness of despair—that is, of having a self *coram Deo*. Not reading the Bible may be the preferred strategy of one who is conscious of being in despair and is actively trying to suppress this consciousness. It may also be the habit of one who is unconscious of being in despair and can conceive of no reason to take up and read the Bible since it is addressed to the despairing. Either way, it is a strategy aimed at avoiding the consciousness of despair. Refusing to read the Bible, however, is hardly an *exegetical* strategy. Still, this is a form of despair *coram Scriptura* and thus a form of exegetical despair since the subject who refuses to read the Bible is doing so in despair *coram Deo*, whether conscious of being in despair or not.

To be unaware of being in despair is, as we have seen, to be unaware of having a self, much less having a self *coram Deo*. Such people may or may not read the Bible. If they do read the Bible as one unconscious of having a self they will not be able to read the Bible rightly since it is addressed to the self. Such a person will read it as though it were something other than what it is and derive meaning out of it, if they derive any meaning from it at all, that is contrary to what God has intended. They may read it as an historical artifact, an entertaining narrative, a notable work of literature, or whatever else. They may even believe that it is a sacred, divinely inspired, and even inerrant text. But they will not, so

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<sup>177</sup> SUD, 22 (XI 136).

<sup>178</sup> FSE, 33 (XII 322).

long as they remain unconscious of being in despair, be able to read it for meaning as defined above in this dissertation. Therefore they will not be able to derive any saving or spiritually edifying benefit from it. In Kierkegaard's terms, such people will miss seeing their reflection in the mirror simply because they are unaware of having a self to be reflected in the mirror. All they can see is the materials and craftsmanship of the mirror, but not the reflection of the self *coram Deo* in the mirror of God's word.

Some of the Pharisees and scribes seem to provide a biblical example of this kind of misreading of Scripture, and were rebuked for it. Despite their apparently robust doctrine of and confidence in Scripture as God's word, they read the sacred writings as though they were not in despair or sick unto death and thereby missed its meaning altogether, and with it any saving benefit to be derived from it. Their lack of consciousness of being in despair undermined the proper exegesis of the text and their ability to read it with saving benefit. Instead of seeing their self *coram Deo* in the mirror of the text they only saw doctrines and codes of conduct they may have mistakenly thought laid within their power to fulfill. But the Bible is not merely doctrine and instruction and its meaning is neither exhausted nor comprehended by doctrine and instruction (though as I have argued above the Bible certainly and essentially includes both doctrine and instruction and could not function as a mirror without this positive content). The Bible is addressed to despairing subjects and only those who recognize themselves as being in despair will relate rightly to the text and be able to exegete it correctly because only they are enabled to see themselves reflected in the text as they are, both actually and potentially, *coram Deo*.

Thus the consciousness of being in despair, a consciousness the Bible is able to awaken in the reading subject, is vital to the exegetical task and product. Where this

consciousness is lacking, if the reader would see a reflection of the self in the mirror, the reader would fail to understand that the self being reflected is his or her own. Hence the “*first requirement*” for reading the Bible in order to understand it rightly and derive saving or spiritually edifying benefit from it “*is that you must not look at the mirror, observe the mirror, but must see yourself in the mirror.*”<sup>179</sup> As we will explore more fully below, some exegetes intentionally distract themselves with inspecting the mirror in order to avoid looking into the reflection in the mirror and seeing themselves. But it is also possible that those who lack the consciousness of being a self *coram Deo* look into the mirror and yet fail to realize that the reflection is of themselves as they are or could possibly be *coram Deo*. For this reason,

*The second requirement is that in order to see yourself in the mirror when you read God’s Word you must (so that you actually do come to see yourself in the mirror) remember to say to yourself incessantly: It is I to whom it is speaking; it is I about whom it is speaking.*<sup>180</sup>

Kierkegaard pleads with his reader: “Do not let yourself be deceived—or do not yourself be cunning”<sup>181</sup> so as to deceive yourself into thinking that the self reflected in the mirror is someone else, as though this text were addressed only to another and for that other reader.<sup>182</sup> “In relation to God and God’s Word,” Kierkegaard laments, “we human beings are so sly, even the most stupid of us is so sly.”<sup>183</sup> By reading the Bible this way the reader who is originally unconscious of being in despair will be awakened to the reality of having a self *coram Deo* and of being in despair. This is the efficacy of the law.

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<sup>179</sup> FSE, 25 (XII 315), (emphasis original).

<sup>180</sup> FSE, 35 (XII 324), (emphasis original).

<sup>181</sup> FSE, 35 (XII 324), (emphasis original).

<sup>182</sup> As an example of this phenomenon one can think of the cliché one frequently hears from academic exegetes to the effect that they can only tell people what the Bible meant, not what it means.

<sup>183</sup> FSE, 35-36 (XII 324).

To resist or defeat this efficacy requires vigorous and often herculean efforts of self-defense on the part of the despairing reader. We will return to this observation when we consider conscious despair *coram Scriptura*. The point here is that acquiring or growing in consciousness of despair, which belongs to the efficacy of Scripture, is not a welcome development for those who are not truly earnest about becoming themselves *coram Deo*. Those despairing subjects who do glimpse their reflection in the mirror of God's word and come to understand that this is indeed a reflection of themselves and not of someone else are offended by what they see. Offended, they immediately go to work trying to deny and suppress this consciousness and thereby defend themselves against the efficacy of Scripture. This leads Kierkegaard to insist that,

*Finally, if you want to look at yourself in the mirror with true blessing, you must not promptly forget how you looked, you must not be the forgetful bearer (or reader) of whom the apostle says: He looked at his bodily face in a mirror but promptly forgot how he looked.*<sup>184</sup>

The tendency of the despairing subject, in whom "hereditary sin" is cunningly at work,<sup>185</sup> is to bury the consciousness of being a self in despair *coram Deo*. The "full force of human craftiness" is brought to bear on the suppression of this consciousness because "we really do not want to see ourselves in that mirror."<sup>186</sup> Yet the only way to realize the saving benefit of Scripture is to persevere in the consciousness of despair through offense. The reader (or hearer) who determines to suppress this consciousness, whether through sheepish or defiant acts, is without hope of salvation. But such acts are the acts of one conscious of being in despair not of one who lacks this consciousness.

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<sup>184</sup> FSE, 44 (XII 331), (emphasis original).

<sup>185</sup> FSE, 40 (XII 328).

<sup>186</sup> FSE, 26 (XII 315).

Just as being unconscious of having a self is no escape from having or being a self so also being unconscious of being in despair is no escape from despair, but rather its perfection. This is the second point to be noted about unconscious despair:

[I]gnorance is so far from breaking the despair or changing despair to nondespair that it can in fact be the most dangerous form of despair. To his own demoralization, the individual who in ignorance is in despair is in a way secured against becoming aware—that is, he is altogether secure in the power of despair.<sup>187</sup>

Consciousness of despair is a very disturbing experience. To be conscious of despair is to be conscious of a basic disharmony within the core of oneself—to feel in some sense that one is alienated from oneself and not what one is suppose to be; to know or sense that inwardly something is terribly wrong. To live in despair, conscious of being in despair, is to live a tormented life. The more conscious of oneself one is, and thus the more conscious of being in despair one is, the more intense the torment. There are, then, very powerful reasons for the despairing subject to seek an escape from despair. But if that escape is sought anywhere other than in willing to be oneself by resting transparently in God, there will be no displacement of or overcoming of despair but only a more or less effective and ultimately futile suppression of it. It may be possible to mask despair by gaining relief from its symptoms but this is only a deceit we play on ourselves. We convince ourselves that the absence of symptoms or sensible despair signifies the absence of despair. In truth, both the motive to be rid of the consciousness of despair and the happiness obtained are further signals that one is indeed in despair. Despair loves to hide in happiness.

This, in turn, leads us to the third noteworthy point to be made. The person who is conscious of being in despair and yet wills to remain in despair is involved in a kind of

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<sup>187</sup> SUD, 44 (XI 157).

aggravated despair. This is a more intense type of despair from the experiential, ethical, and spiritual points of view. It is experientially more intense simply because the subject is conscious of being in despair. As noted above, this can be a very unsettling consciousness that drives the subject into a variety of despair-management strategies. We will explore this consciousness in more detail below and see there that much of Kierkegaard's critique of exegetical method and practice centers upon his suspicion that many methods and practices, perhaps most, are actually strategies of despair management. The subject in conscious despair is also ethically further removed from God and self precisely because this person is conscious, to some degree at least, of what he or she is doing and willing to do it anyway—hence the aggravation involved in conscious despair. This is not an offense committed in ignorance but an offense that is aware of itself as offense. In its more extreme forms conscious despair is willed in defiance of the structure of the self and the God who established and maintains one's self. The most extreme form is the demonic in which the subject declares despair good and faith evil.

But there is another, crucial, "totally dialectical"<sup>188</sup> sense in which the person who is unconscious of being in despair is in fact in a far worse condition than the person who is conscious of being in despair. As just noted, to be in despair and yet unconscious of being in despair is to be in what essentially amounts to a perfected form of despair in which despair has so completely consumed or entrapped the individual that he or she is no longer even conscious of being in despair. This is a perfected form of despair in that there truly is no hope for such subjects so long as they remain in this state of ignorance, be it a blissful

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<sup>188</sup> SUD, 26 (XI 139).

experience or otherwise. Dialectically it is necessary for the person to first be awoken to the reality of their condition as one who is in fact a self and a self who is in despair *coram Deo*.

This, of course, relates to the first moment in the law-gospel dialectic. The efficacy of Scripture is first diagnostic, then curative. In the diagnostic moment the reading subject is confronted with oneself as one presently is *coram Deo*. Law precedes gospel in the dialectical efficacy of Scripture and thus consciousness of being in despair precedes deliverance from despair. The person who is conscious of having a self and being in despair has, in this sense, a dialectical head-start on the one who is unconscious of being in despair:

The common view, which assumes that everyone who does not think or feel he is in despair is not or that only he who says he is in despair is, is totally false. On the contrary, the person who without affectation says that he is in despair is still a little closer, is dialectically closer, to being cured than all those who are not regarded as such and who do not regard themselves as being in despair.<sup>189</sup>

Of course this dialectical distance could be traversed within a single moment of awakening *coram Scriptura*. But this does not alter the reality that the condition of the person in unconscious despair is one of being dialectically farther removed from salvation. This is because consciousness of the truth about such people's desperately miserable condition lies between them and their salvation. Yet this consciousness typically comes either to "those who have so deep a nature that they are bound to become conscious as spirit or those whom bitter experiences and dreadful decisions have assisted in becoming conscious as spirit."<sup>190</sup> The consciousness of being in despair does not come easy or cheaply to despairing subjects.

Being unconscious of despair is to be deceived at a fundamental level. For this reason, to become conscious of despair is actually a blessing.

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<sup>189</sup> SUD, 26 (XI 140).

<sup>190</sup> SUD, 26 (XI 140).



That person's life was wasted who went on living so deceived by life's joys or its sorrows that he never became decisively and eternally conscious as spirit, as self, or, what amounts to the same thing, never became aware and in the deepest sense never gained the impression that there is a God and that "he," he himself, his self, exists before this God—an infinite benefaction that is never gained except through despair.<sup>191</sup>

The blessing of being conscious of despair lies in the dialectical structure involved in becoming a self, now amplified through the fall into despair or sin. To become or be oneself *coram Deo* is achieved when, "in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it."<sup>192</sup> In other words, before we can fulfill the central task of our existence of becoming oneself it is necessary for us to become fully conscious of having a self. But to be fully conscious of having a self involves becoming fully conscious of being in despair *coram Deo*.

The point here is that it is absolutely necessary, given a despairing subject, for that subject to become fully conscious of being in despair in order for that subject to become oneself. For this reason "it is the worst misfortune never to have had that sickness: it is a true godsend to get it, even if it is the most dangerous of illnesses."<sup>193</sup> Anti-Climacus doubts that it is possible for a despairing subject "to slip through life" on the level of immediate happiness because the individual has a self and is in despair and as such despair will surely manifest itself at least "at rare intervals," disturbing the individual's happiness in immediacy.<sup>194</sup> On the other hand, he is certain that people nevertheless successfully slip through life while remaining unconscious of having a self and being in despair. Just as

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<sup>191</sup> SUD, 26-27 (XI 140).

<sup>192</sup> SUD, 49 (XI 160).

<sup>193</sup> SUD, 26 (XI 140).

<sup>194</sup> SUD, 22 (XI 136).

anxiety is the signal of our freedom so also sensible despair in despairing subjects is the signal of the self—that we have a self. On this count alone it is a blessing for the despairing subject to become conscious of his or her condition as one in despair. But this also is the necessary condition of an even greater blessing: salvation.

This blessing, to become conscious of being in despair *coram Deo*, is among the first blessings to be realized in the reading of Scripture. But its full efficacy is only realized when this consciousness is embraced and overcome by faith. The earnestness of faith accepts the verdict of the law and goes on to lay hold of the gospel's promise of forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God and self on the basis of the atoning work of the God-man. The blessing of becoming conscious of being in despair, then, is only operative within the dynamic of the law-gospel dialectic. The law, the Lutheran orthodox insist, has "a consuming and inexorable power" but only "to threaten and to judge and to kill."<sup>195</sup> Its contribution toward the salvation of the despairing subject is purely "paradoxical" and "entirely dialectical." It drives sinners to an ever more perfect consciousness of despair *coram Deo* in order to drive them to the gospel which alone has properly saving efficacy. Hence in order to derive saving benefit from Scripture one must read it while conscious of being in despair. If one takes offense at the message of the law that one is in despair then one will never reach the gospel which is the centerpiece of the canon and end of the law.

In order for the person to come to himself it is first of all necessary for that person to become disabused of this self-deception. Such disabusing can occur in a variety of ways. We have already observed that it can occur in part at least through "bitter experiences and

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<sup>195</sup> Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism: A Study of Theological Prolegomena* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), 364.

dreadful decisions.”<sup>196</sup> But it is not strictly necessary that one pass through such agonies nor is there any guarantee that such experiences alone are effective. It is possible, for example, for one to exist in perpetual immediate sorrow just as another might exist in perpetual immediate happiness—sorrow and despair are not identical so being sorrowful is no sure sign that one is conscious of being in despair. With or without the harsh teachings of experience what is required is awakening and inward deepening. This is the role of the law. The law, as intended by God, is effective in awakening despairing subjects to their terminal condition. Indeed, the law prepares for the application of the gospel by disabusing the despairing subject of whatever lingering idols and illusions remain. Those who are already in conscious despair often need to have their consciousness of despair clarified as a consciousness of sin and deepened and intensified as such. Yet those who are conscious of being in despair, however malformed and misconceived this consciousness is, are in a better position than those who remain unconscious of being in despair. Those who remain unconscious of being in despair may, on the surface, seem tranquil and secure, happily enjoying their apparently productive life. They find the physician’s diagnosis deeply offensive. Yet in this moment of awakening to oneself as in despair the despairing subject has two options available: either faith leading to eternal life or offense leading to eternal death. This is why the sickness unto death is indeed “the most dangerous of illnesses, if one does not want to be cured of it.”<sup>197</sup>

This leads us directly into another dimension of the “horrible” hidden-ness of unconscious despair that Anti-Climacus finds deeply disturbing. We have just been

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<sup>196</sup> SUD, 26 (XI 140).

<sup>197</sup> SUD, 26 (XI 140).

discussing how unconscious despair is the worst case of despair, dialectically considered, because its unconsciousness represents the perfection of despair. Along the way we have noted that even though being in despair can be the most dangerous of all illnesses becoming conscious of being in despair is in many regards the first of all blessings for despairing subjects. God graciously gives us the law in Scripture in order to communicate this blessing to us lest we remain in unconscious despair. The law aspect of Scripture is a truly gracious gift aimed ultimately at awakening sinners to their condition that they might flee to Christ in faith and be radically cured. The flip side, however, is that remaining unconscious or sinking back into unconsciousness after having once been awoken, is the worst of all tragedies:

[T]o me an even more horrible expression of this most terrible sickness and misery is that it is hidden—not only that the person suffering from it may wish to hide it and may succeed, not only that it can so live in a man that no one, no one detects it, no, but alas that it can be so hidden in a man that he himself is not aware of it! And when the hourglass has run out, the hourglass of temporality, when the noise of secular life has grown silent and its restless or ineffectual activism has come to an end, when everything around you is still, as it is in eternity, then . . . everything is lost for you, eternity does not acknowledge you, it never knew you—or, still more terrible, it knows you as you are known and it binds you to yourself in despair.<sup>198</sup>

We must first be put to death, Kierkegaard insists, in order to live. The law is graciously efficacious to this end: the law kills so that the gospel might make us alive in Christ.

#### *5.5.5 Conscious Despair*

Despair that is conscious of being despair or, what amounts to the same, in despair to be conscious of having a self, is the other major type of despair. Consciousness, however, ranges across a sliding scale of intensity from a minimal consciousness which

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<sup>198</sup> SUD, 27-28 (XI 141).

hardly merits the label “conscious of being in despair” to a maximal, demonic consciousness. Much of this spectrum consists in the kind of despair that the superficial or customary analysis of despair mentioned above recognizes as despair. The customary analysis is superficial because it fails to recognize the depth dimension to despair.

[T]he distinction must be made as to whether or not the person who is conscious of his despair has the true conception of what despair is. Admittedly, he can be quite correct, according to his own idea of despair, to say that he is in despair; he may be correct about being in despair, but that does not mean that he has the true conception of despair. If his life is considered according to the true conception of despair, it is possible that one must say: You are basically deeper in despair than you know, your despair is on an even profounder level.<sup>199</sup>

Just because one’s concept of despair is superficial does not mean that one’s conclusion is entirely wrong or that the kind of despair one discerns is a superficial matter in the despairing subject. There is a depth dimension to conscious despair that runs just as deep as in unconscious despair. As noted above, conscious despair is experientially, ethically, and spiritually more intense.

Furthermore, the problem of the superficial analysis of despair in relation to conscious despair is essentially the same as the problem of the superficial analysis with respect to unconscious despair. Anti-Climacus illustrates this point by imagining a pagan who counts himself to be in despair:

When he regarded himself as being in despair by comparing himself with others, he was probably correct about his being in despair but wrong in regarding the others as not being in despair—that is, he did not have the true conception of despair.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> SUD, 47 (XI 159).

<sup>200</sup> SUD, 47 (XI 159).

Despairing subjects who operate with a superficial concept of despair may perceive themselves to be in despair. If so, they are correct but fail to grasp how radical the condition of being in despair truly is and therefore become offended when the radical cure of the gospel is offered. On the other hand, it is possible that a church member in Christendom, operating with an identical concept of despair, examines herself and fails to recognize that she is in fact in despair. Though both Anti-Climacus's imaginary pagan and the church member operate with the same superficial concept of despair it turns out that the pagan is much closer to the truth precisely because it is first necessary to become conscious of being in despair before one can overcome despair through faith in the gospel.

The superficial concept of despair, which is the standard analysis of the condition, goes astray in at least two ways: first, it only recognizes a subset of symptoms that belong to certain manifestations of despair rather than the full range of symptoms of despair—symptoms that frequently includes such counterintuitive reactions as feelings of security, tranquility, and happiness; second, it mistakes the symptoms it does recognize for the sickness itself such that the absence of these surfacing symptoms is taken to be the absence of the sickness. Methods that tend to treat this narrow subset of symptoms, then, are deemed sufficient to cure the disease. This is where much counseling goes astray; this is also where much biblical exegesis goes astray. In an attempt to overcome obvious despair before the text an exegetical method or technique is prescribed that is able to smooth away the particular troubling issue: this is a case of hyperbole; actually there was a gate in the wall called “the eye of a needle” that camels were able to pass through; this hard saying is a concession to a primitive culture; this particular text is not apostolic; and so on.

With regard to conscious despair, however, these symptoms function as signals of a much deeper, structural form of despair within the self. It is, then, both possible and highly likely that consciously despairing subjects fail to be conscious of the cause and depth of their despair and extremity of their condition. This is because they may only be conscious of the surfacing symptoms of despair as despair signals its presence in relation to various experiences and objects. In other words, such people may become conscious of despair without discerning that what they recognize as the experience of despair is really symptomatic of a spiritually terminal condition. In this case despairing subjects may and often will have only a partial consciousness, sometimes an exceedingly minimal consciousness, of the depth and scope of their despair. This leads them to misdiagnose their despair as something essentially objective rather than profoundly subjective:

An individual in despair despairs over *something*. So it seems for a moment, but only for a moment; in the same moment the true despair or despair in its true form shows itself. In despairing over *something*, he really despaired over *himself*, and now he wants to be rid of himself.<sup>201</sup>

Anti-Climacus goes on to discuss the example of an “ambitious man whose slogan is ‘Either Caesar or nothing’.” When this man “does not get to be Caesar,” he “despairs over it.”

But this also means something else: precisely because he did not get to be Caesar, he now cannot bear to be himself. Consequently he does not despair because he did not get to be Caesar but despairs over himself because he did not get to be Caesar.<sup>202</sup>

The point is that not getting to be Caesar is not the root of his despair but merely the occasion for its surfacing in his consciousness. His despairing “over something”—namely over not getting to be Caesar—is actually a symptom or signal of the true form of despair

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<sup>201</sup> SUD, 19 (XI 132-133).

<sup>202</sup> SUD, 19 (XI 133).

“over himself.” Despairing over himself precedes his sensible despair “over something.” In truth, Anti-Climacus contends, he is in despair over himself all along: “As soon as despair becomes apparent, it is manifest that the individual was in despair . . . for whenever that which triggers his despair occurs, it is immediately apparent that he has been in despair his whole life.”<sup>203</sup>

This man’s determination to become Caesar is actually a strategy for losing himself in all the trappings of being Caesar in order to avoid facing his true, tormented, despairing self. If he had become Caesar he would have been delighted because he would have successfully avoided “coming to himself,” unlike the hungry prodigal feeding swine in the foreign country. Likely this happiness would have been short lived because his despair over his self would have survived his becoming Caesar and broken through anyway, despite himself. Even if he could have successfully suppressed his consciousness of being in despair throughout his entire life as Caesar he would not have overcome despair but only suppressed his consciousness of it. Perhaps as Caesar he would have successfully become and remained blissfully ignorant of being in despair. That, however, would be the greatest of all tragedies. Not only would such a state be “a state,” Anti-Climacus notes, “that . . . is just as despairing”<sup>204</sup> it would be one devoid of the ironic, paradoxical blessing of the consciousness of despair—the blessing the pagan in the above example enjoyed that brought him closer to the truth of his radical need and thus to salvation than the citizen of Christendom lacked.

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<sup>203</sup> SUD, 24 (XI 138).

<sup>204</sup> SUD, 19 (XI 133).



Conscious despair comes in two forms: weakness and defiance. Both forms are described over against the formula of faith in which the self, “in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, . . . rests transparently in the power that established it” who is God.<sup>205</sup>

Every human existence that is not conscious of itself as spirit or conscious of itself before God as spirit, every human existence that does not rest transparently in God . . . every such existence, whatever it achieves, be it most amazing, whatever it explains, be it the whole of existence, however intensively it enjoys life esthetically—every such existence is nevertheless despair.<sup>206</sup>

“The opposite to being in despair is to have faith,” Anti-Climacus asserts.<sup>207</sup> But there are at least two ways to deviate from faith according to the formula of faith as willing to be oneself by resting transparently in God: (1) despair in weakness is the form of conscious despair in which the consciously despairing subject does not will to be oneself; (2) defiance is the form of conscious despair in which the consciously despairing subject wills to be oneself without resting transparently in God.

In one sense all conscious despair is defiant. Even the person who despairs in weakness *wills* not to be oneself and such a willful act is a defiant act *coram Deo*. For Kierkegaard such an act represents nothing less than a rebellious refusal to apply oneself to the central task of human existence. “No despair is entirely free of defiance; indeed, the very phrase ‘not to will to be’ implies defiance,” Anti-Climacus writes.<sup>208</sup> “On the other hand,

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<sup>205</sup> SUD, 49 (XI 160).

<sup>206</sup> SUD, 46 (XI 158). Anti-Climacus goes on to explain that this “is what the ancient Church Fathers meant when they said that the virtues of the pagans were glittering vices: they meant that the heart of paganism was despair, that paganism was not conscious before God as spirit.”

<sup>207</sup> SUD, 49 (XI 160).

<sup>208</sup> SUD, 49 (XI 161).

even despair's most extreme defiance is never really free of some weakness."<sup>209</sup> The difference between the two forms of conscious despair—weakness and defiance—largely centers upon whether or not and to what degree the despairing subject is consciously defiant. For all consciously despairing subjects are both culpably weak and defiant.

The defiant form of conscious despair arises when the despairing subject, conscious of being in despair, “goes one single dialectical step further” than the person who despairs in weakness: “he realizes why he does not will to be himself.”<sup>210</sup> According to Anti-Climacus defiance is “despair” that “is conscious of itself as an act; it does not come from the outside as a suffering under the pressure of externalities but comes directly from the self.”<sup>211</sup>

[T]he self in despair wants to be master of itself or to create itself, to make his self into the self he wants to be, to determine what he will have or not have in his concrete self. . . . If the self in despair is an *acting self*, it constantly relates itself to itself only by way of imaginary constructions, no matter what it undertakes, however vast, however amazing, however perseveringly pursued. It recognizes no power over itself.<sup>212</sup>

Such conscious, willful despair cuts the despairing self off “from any relation to a power that has established it . . . severing it from the [very] idea that there is such a power.”<sup>213</sup> Thus defiant despair is at its core defiance *coram Deo*—the willful assertion of the individual's absolute autonomy. Anti-Climacus continues his meditation on the defiant form of despair:

The self is its own master, absolutely its own master, so-called; and precisely this is the despair, but also what it regards as its pleasure and delight. On closer examination, however, it is easy to see that this absolute ruler is a king without a country, actually ruling over nothing. . . . Consequently, the self in

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<sup>209</sup> SUD, 49 (XI 161).

<sup>210</sup> SUD, 67 (XI 178).

<sup>211</sup> SUD, 67 (XI 179).

<sup>212</sup> SUD, 68 (XI 179, 180).

<sup>213</sup> SUD, 68 (XI 179).

despair is always building only castles in the air. . . . In despair the self wants to enjoy the total satisfaction of making itself into itself, of developing itself, of being itself.<sup>214</sup>

The defiant form of despair, in which the despairing subject wills to be oneself without resting transparently in God, is a futile effort of self-assertion—a vain work. It is impossible to become oneself apart from faith that rests transparently in God. Every act of defiance is a kind of suicidal folly in which one wills to actualize a self that turns out to be “nothing.”

The person who despairs in weakness, on the other hand, experiences despair as “a suffering, a succumbing to the pressure of external factors.”<sup>215</sup> This is quite different and much more superficial than the consciousness of despair possessed within the defiantly despairing subject. The defiant form of despair is “conscious of itself as an act.” But despair in the form of weakness lacks this consciousness: “in no way does it [i.e. despair] come from within as an act.”<sup>216</sup> It may be that the person who despairs in weakness becomes conscious of the fact that it is a kind of weakness to be in despair over earthly things. “But now, instead of definitively turning away from despair to faith and humbling himself under his weakness, he entrenches himself in despair and despairs over his weakness.”<sup>217</sup> Thus the despairing subject continues to refuse to will to be oneself.

This superficial concept of despair allows the despairing subject to objectify its despair as despair over something external to itself. Here despair is something alien to the self that one suffers not something that one wills. This is the classic form of exegetical despair. The exegete despairs over a great diversity of issues and problems related to the text

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<sup>214</sup> SUD, 69 (XI 180-181).

<sup>215</sup> SUD, 51 (XI 163).

<sup>216</sup> SUD, 51 (XI 163).

<sup>217</sup> SUD, 61 (XI 173).

and its interpretation and “in no way” discerns or even considers that the source of their exegetical despair “comes from within.” Yet exegetical despair is so perverse a corruption of the reader’s self that the reader actually delights and seeks out diversions and distractions to despair over as useful defenses against the word of God. Entire sub-disciplines within Biblical Studies flourish around such issues and problems. On a more vernacular level, armchair exegetes are distracted with many of the same issues and problems as their more academic counterparts:

“God’s Word” is indeed the mirror—but, but—oh, how enormously complicated—strictly speaking, how much belongs to “God’s Word”? Which books are authentic? Are they really by the apostles, and are the apostles really trustworthy? Have they personally seen everything, or have they perhaps only heard about various things from others? As for ways of reading, there are thirty-thousand different ways and then this crowd or crush of scholars and opinions, and learned opinions and unlearned opinions about how the particular passage is to be understood . . . . Is it not true that all this seems to be rather complicated! God’s Word is the mirror—in reading it or in hearing it I am suppose to see myself in the mirror—but look, this business about the mirror is so confusing that I very likely never come to see myself reflected—at least not if I go at it this way. One could almost be tempted to assume the full force of human craftiness has a hand in it. . . . One could almost be tempted to assume that this is craftiness, that we really do not want to see ourselves in that mirror and therefore we have concocted all this that threatens to make the mirror impossible, all this that we then honor with the laudatory name of scholarly and profound and serious research and pondering.<sup>218</sup>

The result is a confused and confusing tangle that more or less successfully obscures and suppresses the meaning of the text in order to avoid seeing oneself as one is *coram Deo* in the mirror of the word of God. This form of exegetical despair belongs to the form of despair that Anti-Climacus analyzes as despair in weakness. In this case the weakness is manifest in that the exegete does not will to be oneself *coram Scripture*.

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<sup>218</sup> FSE, 25-26 (XII 315-16).

The result of this form of exegetical despair is that the despairing exegete objectifies his or her despair onto these various issues and problems. Such exegetes despair over the apostolicity or authenticity of the canonical writings or their canonical status; they despair over the quality of the manuscript tradition or obscurity of some of its vocabulary or the proper identification of the author's sources or literary forms and so on. Yet all of these issues and problems represent objectifications of despair in weakness. They are expressions of unbelief. Kierkegaard does not deny that there are legitimate and perhaps even interesting questions around which these various sub-disciplines are constructed. But he adamantly denies that they represent anything like fatal difficulties or are prerequisites for seeing oneself in the mirror of God's word. He strongly denies that the effort to answer these questions or solve these problems counts as reading God's word. To fall into exegetical despair over any of these issues or problems signals not a problem with the text or its interpretation<sup>219</sup> so much as despair in the exegete *coram Deo* and thus *coram Scriptura*.

It is for this reason that many critical-era exegetical methods and practices are based on fundamental objectifications of the meaning of Scripture. Such objectifications arise out of the form of exegetical despair that is despair in weakness. The genius of critical-era exegetical methods and practices is that they allow and even seem to justify a program that is in fact little more than the exegete's projection, whether consciously or not, of his or her own despair upon the text or upon various real or imagined problems with the text. Having done so, such despairing exegetes then despair over one or more of these issues or problems and thereby defend themselves from seeing themselves as they are *coram Deo* in the mirror of

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<sup>219</sup> As noted above, Kierkegaard nowhere denies that there are obscure passages or that the various issues and problems investigated in academic biblical scholarship are legitimate scholarly pursuits. He instead insists on distinguishing these pursuits from reading for meaning that is the central task of the exegete.

the word of God. “God’s word is given,” Kierkegaard insists, “in order that you shall act according to it, not that you shall practice interpreting obscure passages.”<sup>220</sup> All such issues and problems are, if they are taken to be of decisive significance, so many illusions of reading that are actually diversions from reading that serendipitously creep in.<sup>221</sup>

On the other hand, there is also such a thing as exegetical defiance. The defiant exegete goes beyond the exegete who despairs in weakness in that he is conscious of the fact that his exegetical despair is willed and not merely something external to the self that the self suffers. “But, asserting defiantly that one does indeed dare to be alone with it,”—that is, Scripture—which, although not to be taken in an overly literal sense is nevertheless a condition Kierkegaard argues is required to truly read God’s word, “one can also defend oneself against God’s Word in a quite different way.”<sup>222</sup>

Take Holy Scripture, lock your door—but then take ten dictionaries, twenty-five commentaries, then you can read it, just as calmly and coolly as you read newspaper advertising. If, as you sit there reading a passage, you happen, curiously enough (of course, you can hit upon such ideas only in distraction, in an absentminded moment when you are not concentrating with your usual seriousness), then the danger is still not very great. Look, perhaps there are several variations, and perhaps a new manuscript has just been found—good Lord!—and the prospect of new variations, and perhaps there are five interpreters with one opinion and seven with another and two with a strange opinion and three who are wavering of have no opinion, and “I myself am not absolutely sure about the meaning of this passage, or, to speak my mind, I agree with the three wavering interpreters who have no opinion” etc. Such a person does not get into the awkward position I am in: either to have to comply with the Word immediately or at least to be obliged to make a humbling confession. No, he is calm and says, “There is no problem as far as I am concerned; I certainly intend to comply—as soon as the discrepancies are ironed out and the interpreters agree fairly well.” . . . The man succeeded, however, in obscuring the fact that the error is in him, that it

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<sup>220</sup> FSE, 29 (XII 319).

<sup>221</sup> FSE, 31 (XII 320).

<sup>222</sup> FSE, 32 (XII 320).

is he who has no desire to deny flesh and blood to comply with God's Word. What tragic misuse of scholarship, that it is made so easy for people to deceive themselves.<sup>223</sup>

The essence of defiant exegesis, then, is the consciously willful attempt to defend oneself against God's word by deliberately obscuring or misconstruing the meaning of the text. Here one claims to be an exegete and proceeds to explain the meaning of the text. It turns out, however, that the meaning asserted is something like the most comfortable plausible meaning for the exegete and his audience as despairing subjects.

That explanation of the text's meaning may be, as in the illustrative case just offered, that the text's meaning is in fact too obscure or ambiguous to determine. The result supposedly secured is that we cannot be expected to comply with a text whose meaning is unclear or beyond us. But the defiant exegete does not always resort to obscurity or ambiguity for shelter from the "dangerous matter" of God's word. Exegetical defiance may take on a form exemplified in Polk's imaginative construal regime in which despairing exegetes are free to imaginatively construe the text and thus its meaning as they want, perhaps within certain communal limits. This is exactly parallel to the form defiance takes in the despairing subject who wills to be a self without resting transparently in God. As we saw above, the defiant subject "wants to be master of itself or to create itself" and strives to achieve this by making "his self into the self he wants to be, to determine what he will have or not have in his concrete self."<sup>224</sup> Exegetical despair operates in a parallel manner in relation to Scripture and textual meaning. The defiant self "constantly relates itself to itself only by way of imaginary constructions, no matter what it undertakes, however vast,

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<sup>223</sup> FSE, 32 (XII 320-21).

<sup>224</sup> SUD, 68 (XI 179, 180).

however amazing, however perseveringly pursued. It recognizes no power over itself.”<sup>225</sup>

The defiant exegete constantly asserts the reader’s authority over the text and the text’s author “by way of imaginary constructions” or construals of the text and its meaning according to what the despairing subject wants it to be.

There is, however, no clear break between exegetical despair in weakness and exegetical defiance. Exegetical defiance contains much despairing weakness and despairing weakness is by no means free of exegetical defiance. The person who despairs in weakness desperately wants to become someone else and despairs over their failure to become another self *coram Deo*. There is clearly a kind of self-assertion involved in the refusal to will to be oneself but this is the self-assertion of a one who balks—which is itself a willful paralysis *coram Deo*. Fundamentally despair is a willful act on the part of the despairing subject. This is true *coram Deo* and *coram Scriptura*: the same dynamic is at work in both relations because ultimately despair *coram Scriptura* is despair *coram Deo*. Yet there is also a kind of weakness involved in every defiant act in that defiant persons are not really willing to be themselves but rather vainly strive to actualize an imaginatively constructed self or meaning that is ultimately “nothing.” Recall the man who would be Caesar. His defiance was his ambitious, egotistical self-assertion to become Caesar; his weakness was that in willing to be Caesar he was not willing to be himself *coram Deo* but desperately wanting to be someone he was not—namely, Caesar. In his failure he despaired of the externalities that frustrated his determination to become Caesar. Yet his despair was grounded in his self and only objectified away from his self as a coping mechanism—a way of diverting himself from the truth. If we were to place this same despairing subject *coram Scriptura* he would, in defiance,

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<sup>225</sup> SUD, 68 (XI 179, 180).



ambitiously assert an explanation of the meaning of the text grounded in his own imaginative construal of the text and yet, in doing so, would be demonstrating that he is unwilling to will to confront, much less become his true self *coram Scriptura*.

### **5.6 The Nature of Offense Coram Scriptura**

The root cause of both forms of conscious exegetical despair—weakness and defiance—is offense *coram Scriptura*. Yet consciousness of oneself as being in despair *coram Scriptura* is necessary in order for despairing exegetes to read the Bible rightly—that is, to see themselves as they are *coram Deo* in the mirror of God’s word. A despairing subject does not and cannot approach the Bible from some neutral, purely objective, despair-free situation. Everyone who dares to read God’s word is profoundly invested in the exercise. There are only two options *coram Scriptura*: offense or faith.

The possibility of offense is ever present in the exegetical task. To be offended is in fact our natural reaction to God’s word given hereditary sin. Offense is, however, an unnecessary response given that faith is also a live option for the reader of God’s word. Indeed, there is a kind of consciousness of despair—that is, a consciousness that one is offended—that is able to lead the despairing subject to faith:

Note that here despair over sin is dialectically understood as pointing toward faith. The existence of this dialectic must never be forgotten (even though this book [i.e. *Sickness Unto Death*] deals only with despair as sickness); in fact, it is implied in despair’s also being the first element in faith.<sup>226</sup>

Without the consciousness of despair it is impossible for despairing subjects to come to faith. Yet consciousness of despair always takes the form of either “despair in weakness,

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<sup>226</sup> SUD, 116 (XI 226).

which is offended and does not dare to believe,” or “the despair of defiance, which is offended and will not believe.”<sup>227</sup> That faith can ever overcome despair is only possible through grace and the gospel. Yet the gospel, the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ the God-man, is “the most extreme concentration of offense.”<sup>228</sup> This gospel proclaims that “every . . . single individual [is] an individual sinner”<sup>229</sup> whose hope is only in a gracious God who does the unthinkable and accomplishes the otherwise impossible in saving his people from their sins. But this message offends the defiant because it pronounces all their striving futile and it offends the weak because it denies that the object of their despair is any real obstacle *coram Deo*. Thereby both forms of conscious despair are exposed as simple, willful, rebellious unbelief *coram Deo* or, as law and gospel are proclaimed in Scripture to the exegete, *coram Scriptura*.

Christianity says to each individual: You shall believe—that is, either you shall be offended or you shall believe. Not a word more; there is nothing more to add. “Now I have spoken,” declares God in heaven; “we shall discuss it again in eternity. In the meantime, you can do what you want to, but judgment is at hand.”<sup>230</sup>

Anti-Climacus concludes that the “possibility of offense is the dialectical element in everything essentially Christian.” There is no escape from the possibility of offense without also escaping from everything Christian and thus also from all hope of salvation and eternal happiness. The possibility of offense is ever present in the exegetical task and salvation can only be realized through faith in the moment of conscious despair and offense.

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<sup>227</sup> SUD, 113 (XI 223).

<sup>228</sup> SUD, 122 (XI 231).

<sup>229</sup> SUD, 122 (XI 232).

<sup>230</sup> SUD, 122 (XI 231).

It is not just the possibility of offense, but actual or realized offense that is universal *coram Scriptura*. The Bible always posits the possibility of offense; but this possibility is realized by every sinful reader because each one begins in despair or untruth. Since all are sinful, all are actually offended. Offense precedes faith. Faith arises only in the moment of conscious despair—of having taken offense. Yet faith overcomes and displaces offense *coram Deo* and *coram Scriptura*, faith and offense being mutually exclusive. So even if actual offense is common to all sinners *coram Scriptura*, it is not necessarily realized in every act of reading since faith excludes offense. But even in the believing reader faith remains imperfect and thus commingled, as it were, with unbelief and offense. Believing readers continually strive to overcome lingering offense *coram Scriptura* so long as their faith remains imperfect.

The Bible is an essentially Christian and therefore offensive thing. It is ultimately offensive because it is the proclamation of the gospel within its vital law-gospel dialectical context. The core message of the Bible, then, is essentially offensive to despairing exegetes and yet the central exegetical task is just this: to clarify the offensiveness of the law and the gospel to despairing subjects and call for repentance from despair to faith in the face of offense. The exegete must first confront and overcome the offensiveness of the biblical message for his or herself. The exegetical task involves nothing less than dying to oneself as an autonomous, despairing individual and entrusting oneself to God with whom and for whom all things are possible. The act of reading the Bible rightly is an act of faith; the act of explaining its meaning faithfully is an act of confession. Exegesis arising out of offense in despair rather than faith will inevitably falsify the meaning of Scripture: despair in weakness will deny its saving efficacy; defiant despair will distort and even fabricate its meaning. Either way, the concentration of offense in the proclamation of the gospel will be obscured,

blunted, and otherwise suppressed. This denial of the gospel contravenes the law-gospel dialectic and controverts both the meaning and saving efficacy of Scripture.

Offense *coram Scriptura* is a reaction against God's word as God's word. It is not necessary to have saving faith in order to be conscious of the offensiveness of God's word or to grasp that Scripture is God's efficacious word. Apprehending that Scripture is God's word is *not* an act of faith any more than apprehending that one has a self or is in despair is an act of faith; reading and explaining Scripture rightly *is* an act of faith. All offense *coram Scriptura* is self-defensively reactionary even in those cases where the despairing subject remains unconscious of their despair *coram Scriptura*.

There is, however, some confusion over the nature of biblical offense in Kierkegaard. We have already encountered this confusion in chapter three. There we observed that Polk depicts the primary offensiveness of Scripture as consisting in grave moral errors "deep within the fabric of its writings" that render the Bible a guilty text. According to Polk the Bible is offensive to its readers in the same way a sinner is offensive to the one he or she has sinned against. For him,

scripture is the "**guilty one**" to be explained, a rich repository of oppression freighted with the hypocrisy of easy wisdom, patriarchy, ethnic prejudice, etc. Kierkegaard would have us read this guilty text with suspended judgment until, lovingly, forgivingly, we find the "**mitigating explanation.**"<sup>231</sup>

Polk is certainly correct to highlight the priority of offense in Kierkegaard's thinking about and practice of biblical exegesis. But the offense he describes is significantly different from the offense Kierkegaard has in view.

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<sup>231</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 52 (emphasis original).

Polk takes a long paragraph out of Kierkegaard's chapter "Love Hides the Multiplicity of Sins" in the second part of *Works of Love* as his "focus text" for understanding Kierkegaard's exegetical method and practice. Polk finds in this passage a "combination of key terms—'imagination,' 'interpretation,' and 'love'—that commends the passage as a prime entry point for discussing Kierkegaard's use of the Rule of faith."<sup>232</sup> He pronounces this passage "a classic piece of hermeneutic reflection"<sup>233</sup> and argues that it is properly understood as a paradigmatic text for understanding Kierkegaard's biblical hermeneutic. But there are numerous, serious problems with taking this text as a paradigmatic "focus text" or a "prime entry point" for understanding Kierkegaard's way with Scripture. Among these, the passage does not address the question of how to read the Bible or any other text. Rather, Kierkegaard is here considering how the one who has been personally offended by a sinner is able to hide the sinner's sin in various ways. Kierkegaard nowhere, either explicitly or implicitly, draws an analogy between this situation and the situation of the exegete *coram Scriptura*. To his credit, Polk realizes and frankly admits that he is on thin ice with this analogy. He nevertheless proceeds: "as a hermeneutic construal," he writes, "all that's lacking here is the word 'scripture'."

That Polk's paradigmatic focus text for understanding Kierkegaard's biblical exegetical method and practice fails to even refer to Scripture, he acknowledges, "presents us with a significant methodological hitch."<sup>234</sup> The "methodological hitch" is how Polk can leap so freely from Kierkegaard's reflection on how love hides the offense of a sinner to how

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<sup>232</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 50.

<sup>233</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 50.

<sup>234</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 52.

we are to read the Bible as the word of God. Admitting that his read of this passage out of *Works of Love* is actually allegorical in nature he openly asks whether “any warrant for reading the Kierkegaard text this way” can be found.<sup>235</sup> He argues that his allegorical reading of this passage and use of it to understand Kierkegaard’s biblical exegesis is warranted on the basis that Kierkegaard understands the Bible to be analogous to the “guilty person” in this passage. The slender link between Scripture and the sinner upon which Polk attempts to ground this analogy is that both the sinner and Scripture cause offense. Polk openly asks, “how can I switch his [i.e. Kierkegaard’s] referent from actual person to biblical text without contrivance? That is, do I have any warrant for reading the Kierkegaard text this way? Can my allegory be justified?”<sup>236</sup> He concludes that “before we talk about forgiving the sins of scripture (in subsequent chapters), I need to show that Kierkegaard would endorse this analogy between scripture and the ‘guilty person.’”<sup>237</sup> To do so he turns to the first discourse in *For Self-Examination: “What Is Required.”* But the analogy fails because Polk overlooks Kierkegaard’s equivocation on the term offense between the two passages.

The sinner’s offense turns out to be radically different than biblical offense in that the sinner offends the innocent through sinful acts whereas the Bible offends sinners through truth and grace, law and gospel. The approach Polk advocates through this analogy actually belongs to the form of exegetical despair in weakness. To count the Bible as a guilty sinner is to objectify one’s own despair by projecting it onto the text. In this case the exegete despairs over something external to his self and fails to recognize that the problem

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<sup>235</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 52.

<sup>236</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 52.

<sup>237</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 52-53.

really resides within himself and that his despair over the supposed moral barbarisms within the text is actually a willed act of self-defense *coram Scriptura*. Yet Polk's proposed method for dealing with this barbaric text represents a form of exegetical defiance in that the exegete imaginatively construes the text to explain away and mitigates its offensiveness. Operating with a superficial concept of despair, the exegete objectifies and misidentifies the source of offense and then defiantly construes the text in a vain attempt to render it inoffensive—all as a self-defensive reaction to its true offensiveness as a proclamation of the gospel in its proper law-gospel dialectical context.<sup>238</sup>

What is required in order to exegete Scripture accurately and faithfully is not a means for explaining away its inherent offensiveness to despairing subjects but faith. This, it turns out, is Kierkegaard's most radical exegetical proposal. It is radically anti-modern in the sense that critical-era exegetical methods and practices call for the bracketing of the exegete's subjectivity in order to read the Bible objectively. Exegetes objectified their exegetical despair onto the text in the forms of numerous textual and interpretive issues and problems. Kierkegaard, however, calls for radical self-examination *coram Scriptura*. Critical era methods and practices signal profound despair or unbelief in the exegete that needs to be exposed, confronted, and overcome by faith. On the other hand, Kierkegaard's exegetical proposal also stands against many postmodern exegetical methods and practices that empower

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<sup>238</sup> Polk's treatment of offense *coram Scriptura* ought to be distinguished from what might be called an "honest questions" approach to offense. In a Kierkegaardian honest questions approach, the offended (or confused) reader would recognize one is offended (or confused) *coram Scriptura* but refuse to accuse the biblical author of immoralities and confusion or seek a method for mitigating or explaining away the author's intended meaning. Instead, in faith, such readers would confess their sinfulness and lack of understanding and patiently seek an answer through ordinary exegetical means coupled with ever more perfect faith and submission to the divine will. Kierkegaard insists that honest questions about more difficult teachings or obscure passages will be framed by the reader's obedience to what is clearly understood. Questions not contextualized by and aimed at obedient action are not honest in this sense even if they reflect genuine offense or confusion on the part of the reader. Kierkegaard is much less troubled by innocently misguided acts of obedience arising out of misunderstandings than he is disobedience. Still, he nowhere promises that all offense will be resolved through faith because faith remains imperfect and we remain ignorant in this present life.

exegetes to read defiantly, constructing and imposing their own meaning upon a text whose meaning is in most cases sufficiently clear to unsettle and deeply disturb despairing subjects.

What is required is an alternative exegetical paradigm that embraces the authority of the divine author and the demand for faith on the part of the would-be exegete. Only then is an exegete able and qualified to faithfully explain the meaning of Scripture in its objective and subjective fullness. Just as no exegete is entirely free from despair, so also no exegesis is perfect, entirely free from the taint of despair. (No exegesis is exhaustive of meaning, either.) Nevertheless, faith is able to understand biblical meaning rightly, however imperfectly and incompletely, and explain it faithfully. Exegesis begins with the exegete's existence *coram Deo*. Only those exegetes who will to be themselves by resting transparently in God on the basis of the gospel of Jesus Christ the God-man are able to exegete God's written word rightly. Exegesis is, in the final analysis, a spiritual discipline of faith.



**CHAPTER 6**  
**CONCLUSION**  
**TOWARD AN ALTERNATIVE EXEGETICAL PARADIGM**

***6.1 The Problem with Conclusions: A Kierkegaardian Perspective***

Conclusions are troublesome for Kierkegaard. Climacus's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, with its several appendices, is nearly six times longer than *Philosophical Fragments*, the work it was suppose to conclude. This is not the only evidence that Kierkegaard struggled with conclusions. We can think of his several failed attempts to conclude his authorship, finally succeeding only with the help of death—itself a kind of provisional conclusion.

Kierkegaard's several failed attempts to conclude his authorial activity are exceedingly appropriate. The very idea of writing a final conclusion to anything from within our finitude is unthinkable for Kierkegaard. Everything we write is merely an approximation of the reality we discuss. In this sense no merely human author can offer a final concluding comment on anything. That includes the topic of this dissertation. I have striven to interpret Kierkegaard's thoughts on biblical exegesis as accurately as possible; I am keenly aware that my best effort remains a mere approximation that can be improved upon and corrected. Nevertheless, the interpretation of Kierkegaard's thoughts on biblical exegesis is offered as a helpful contribution to (1) research into Kierkegaard's approach to biblical exegesis and to (2) the current debate on the theological interpretation of Scripture. This

dissertation is not offered as a final, concluding statement on the subject but rather a modest attempt to advance the discussion. Kierkegaard is right: no final conclusion to any subject can be written by finite creatures.

Yet for this very reason a conclusion must be written. As finite creatures who cannot offer a final conclusion to any subject we take up, we are compelled to stop writing. In this sense a conclusion is a sign of our finitude and a reminder of our dependence. It is in this sense that I offer the following, provisional, concluding comments to this dissertation. Contra Julia Watkin I am convinced that Kierkegaard's critique of and proposal for biblical exegesis remains highly relevant on the contemporary, pluralistic, multicultural scene. This is not to argue that we should all become Kierkegaardian exegetes. Not only does Kierkegaard's account fail to address many important issues, it fails to satisfy on all points that he does address. Still, his proposal calls for nothing less than the adoption of an alternative exegetical paradigm. The paradigm he proposes is not radical from the perspective of the precritical exegetical tradition; it is, however, radically discontinuous with the dominant critical-era exegetical paradigm that still haunts contemporary biblical studies.

## ***6.2 The Abiding Relevance of Kierkegaard's Thoughts on Biblical Exegesis***

Julia Watkin argues that the relevance of Kierkegaard's critique of exegetical method and practice in "What Is Required" is problematic on at least three points:

First, there is the question of Kierkegaard's presentation of . . . biblical criticism; second, there is the issue of what it means to believe where intellectual and existential assent are concerned; third, there is the problem of what is to constitute the occasion for faith. . . . [T]hese issues point to the

important question of the nature of the “occasion” for religious belief in our modern multicultural world.<sup>1</sup>

Although Watkin’s analysis ranges over several different points of criticism, her primary objection revolves around this final point: that Kierkegaard’s proposal, as it stands, is largely irrelevant to the contemporary situation because it fails to adequately address our current, religiously pluralistic, multicultural world. Such is the view, apparently, from “the standpoint of the neutral person with no axe to grind.”<sup>2</sup>

Watkin’s analysis of Kierkegaard’s presentation of biblical criticism is illustrative. Although she believes he is correct to draw “a distinction between objective scholarly investigation and reading for personal edification,” she questions Kierkegaard’s “assumption that the Bible scholar must not ‘forget to read God’s Word.’”<sup>3</sup> According to her,

Such a statement is understandable in a country where membership of the Christian religion was obligatory for nearly everyone, but we can initially question whether the scholar has any such duty. We can challenge the suggestion that the translation of a text also necessitates reading it for personal application to one’s life.<sup>4</sup>

Her conclusion is that outside of Christendom there “is certainly no intrinsic moral duty to read it [i.e. the Bible] for spiritual guidance.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Watkin, “The Letter from the Lover: Kierkegaard on the Bible and Belief,” in *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself: International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 21; ed. Robert L Perkins (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2002), 288.

<sup>2</sup> Watkin, “Letter from the Lover,” 296. Intriguingly, Watkin includes this footnote: “Care needs to be taken not to fall too easily for the suggestion made in Kierkegaard’s authorship (see, e.g., *Anti-Climacus*, SUD, 98, 125-31), that if one honestly does not find Christian scripture justified or helpful, this must be because one is an ‘offended’ aesthete of some kind, having a self-centered, bad, will” (294). Watkin offers no justification for her devaluation of Kierkegaard’s psychological and spiritual critique. As demonstrated in chapter five of this dissertation, in Kierkegaard’s view no one escapes this critique; no one occupies the “standpoint of a neutral person with no axe to grind” *coram Scriptura*.

<sup>3</sup> Watkin, “Letter from the Lover,” 289; citing FSE, 29 (XII 318).

<sup>4</sup> Watkin, “Letter from the Lover,” 289; citing FSE, 29 (XII 318).

<sup>5</sup> Watkin, “Letter from the Lover,” 289.

Kierkegaard's claim in the passage Watkin cites, however, is not that translators or critical scholars in Christendom are morally obligated to read the Bible for personal edification but that anyone who would derive saving benefit from it must read it the way he prescribes rather than the scholarly way. Still, Kierkegaard might grant Watkin's claim given two points stressed in this dissertation: first, God intends the Bible to save and therefore it is necessary to read it accordingly to exegete it rightly; second, becoming a self *coram Deo* is the central task of human existence. Taken together, it very well may be that Kierkegaard believes we are obligated to read the Bible, if we are to read it according to the purpose for which it was given, in the way he prescribes. But even if all people, including translators and critical scholars, were obligated to read the Bible this way, Kierkegaard nowhere appeals to or grounds such an obligation in the Bible reader's citizenship in Christendom. On the contrary, Kierkegaard believes that Christendom demands an altogether different, refined exegesis that represents a major obstacle to reading the Bible rightly.

Watkin is not arguing that Kierkegaard appeals to one's civil or moral duty as a citizen in Christendom. She instead suggests that Kierkegaard's thoughts on exegesis are so historically and culturally conditioned that they are not "understandable" outside of Christendom and therefore not applicable to our post-Christendom context. Only in the historical and cultural situation of Christendom can one assume that scholars have a duty to read the Bible for personal edification in addition to "objective scholarly investigation." Outside of the context of Christendom no such assumption exists or makes sense.

What is ultimately needed, and proposed by Watkin, is a reformulation of the problem. Kierkegaard, living and writing at a time when "Biblical scholarship was still in its

infancy, as was the question of other mainstream religions,”<sup>6</sup> naively “assumed the standpoint of [the] orthodox doctrine” of Christ.<sup>7</sup> Lacking the benefits derived from the subsequent “development[s] in Bible criticism,” including “from source and form criticism” and the “emphasis on redaction criticism,”

Kierkegaard presents Jesus as the “offense” of the poor serving preacher who said he was God. His Jesus is the Jesus of all four gospels: the performer of miracles. . . . Kierkegaard ‘reveals no reservations’ regarding the historical reliability of the material. It can be added that Kierkegaard’s historical Jesus is the one who suffers and dies for humans, atones for sin, and, throughout, retains ambiguity about his status, in order to repel humans from an easy, thoughtless, appropriation of Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

Kierkegaard, it seems, was more naïve and uninformed of the rather radical advances in historical-critical scholarship in his own generation than we have assumed in this dissertation. Watkin goes so far as to suggest, with Rosas,<sup>9</sup> that “[h]ad he lived in our time, Kierkegaard might . . . have emphasized the Christian way of life with a differently described object of offense.”<sup>10</sup>

“Where religion is concerned,” Watkin concludes, “a variety of materials may therefore serve as ‘occasions’ for existential religious commitment.”<sup>11</sup>

To return to Kierkegaard’s analogy in *For Self-Examination*, we therefore need to accept that a lover behind the universe must surely be capable of writing all kinds of love letters, and that humans are going to get the translation of the letter wrong sometimes. As Kierkegaard points out in *For Self-*

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<sup>6</sup> Watkin, “Letter from the Lover,” 310-11.

<sup>7</sup> Watkin, “Letter from the Lover,” 301.

<sup>8</sup> Watkin, “Letter from the Lover,” 301-2; citing Herbert Wolff, *Kierkegaard and Bultmann: The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965), 21.

<sup>9</sup> Watkin cites L. Joseph Rosas III, *Scripture in the Thought of Søren Kierkegaard* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 151.

<sup>10</sup> Watkin, “Letter from the Lover,” 311.

<sup>11</sup> Watkin, “Letter from the Lover,” 312.

*Examination*, this need not be a disaster—yet, as with every communication, people need to be alert as to whether it really is a love letter they are looking at.<sup>12</sup>

And again,

If we extend the analogy [of the love letter], to take into account the fact that we today live in an ideologically and religiously pluralistic society, then we are looking at a view in which it is assumed that all genuine religions are basically similar or contain similar elements, so that the task is to make sure one has got a correct version of the letter from the beloved. Yet maybe we need to move away from seeking one particular truth channel or trying to locate some basic element or elements of the one truth channel in other religions . . . , and accept that humans receive these revelations and interpret and develop them in a variety of ways.<sup>13</sup>

Kierkegaard's critique of and proposal on biblical exegesis is supposedly discredited by subsequent developments within critical biblical studies and the advent of religious pluralism and multiculturalism. In order for Kierkegaard's critique of biblical exegesis to be relevant to the contemporary, multicultural world, it must be reformulated in terms of religious pluralism. According to Watkin, the real problem is not so much the occasion for explicitly Christian faith as it is the occasion for religious belief in general, understood as both intellectual assent and existential commitment. Christian faith is only one family of interpretations of one revelatory source or "truth channel."

C. Stephen Evans, however, is convinced that Kierkegaard's thought is highly relevant to the contemporary exegetical scene. Surveying several "areas where more attention to Kierkegaard would be salutary,"<sup>14</sup> Evans explicitly singles out the fecundity of Kierkegaard's thought for contemporary exegetical methods and practices.

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<sup>12</sup> Watkin, "Letter from the Lover," 313.

<sup>13</sup> Watkin, "Letter from the Lover," 311-12.

<sup>14</sup> C. Stephen Evans, "Where Can Kierkegaard Take Us?" in *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco, Baylor University Press, 2006), 330.

A third area where Kierkegaard continues to be helpful concerns historical criticism of the Bible. Kierkegaard was acutely aware of the implications of the new “higher criticism” that had emerged from Germany. That kind of critical scholarship shows no signs of abating, as evidenced by the continuing “quest for the historical Jesus.” While in no way impugning genuine historical inquiry or preventing critical scrutiny of texts, Kierkegaard raises the kinds of philosophical questions about the value and limits of such historical inquiry that some historical critics fail to ask.<sup>15</sup>

Evans’ contention has been borne out in this dissertation and is further supported by the growing attention being paid to Kierkegaard’s thoughts on exegetical method and practice and use of Scripture in the secondary literature. Far from finding Kierkegaard’s thought irrelevant to exegetical method and practice this dissertation has demonstrated, I trust, that Kierkegaard’s critique is quite radical and to the point. While it is especially directed towards and applicable to the family of methods as construed and practiced under the historical-critical exegetical paradigm, it applies far beyond the horizons of historical-critical exegesis. Kierkegaard’s critique calls all Bible readers and exegetes to examine their exegetical methods and practices in light of the profoundly spiritual concerns at play in the exegetical task. This includes, but is far from limited to, historical-critical scholars.

Although I nowhere pretend to know what Kierkegaard might have believed or written had he not been Kierkegaard but some contemporary author, this dissertation has further demonstrated, I trust, that the actual Kierkegaard believes that the Bible is God’s written word in a manner that no other religion’s sacred text is or can be. This distinction is most obvious at the level of content: the Bible alone among the other “mainstream religions” testifies to the scandalous, concrete, historical reality of Jesus Christ as the God-man come to save his people from their sin. In other words, the Bible preaches the only

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<sup>15</sup> Evans, “Where Can Kierkegaard Take Us?” 331-32.

gospel that must be believed by all those who read it or hear it read in order to be reconciled to God, self, and others. The message about Jesus that is the saving gospel is not a generic teaching on love or hope or faith; it is not something capable of transcending the concrete historical realities to which it testifies; it is not capable of being translated into pure rational, moral, or idealist terms; it is rather a report about what God has done in space and time for us and our salvation as the man Jesus Christ. Watkin's critique, from a Kierkegaardian point of view, only highlights yet one more way contemporaries may take offense *coram Scriptura*.

### ***6.3 An Incomplete Proposal***

To argue that Kierkegaard's critique of and proposal on exegetical method and practice is both interesting and relevant to the contemporary scene is not to argue that Kierkegaard's proposal is entirely satisfying. The following section attempts to correct an important but not fatal problem in Kierkegaard's critique. This section is devoted to describing the boundaries of Kierkegaard's proposal by noting those aspects of any complete exegetical proposal that Kierkegaard either neglects or leaves undeveloped.

There are many significant exegetical issues, for example, that Kierkegaard does not address: there is no consideration of the many complicated and subtle philological and literary issues involved in biblical exegesis except the briefest affirmation of the legitimacy of philological scholarship;<sup>16</sup> there is no elaboration of the role critical exegetical studies serve within his proposed exegetical paradigm, though his critique and proposal is suggestive and

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<sup>16</sup> See CUP, 25 (VII 15), where Climacus states that "philological scholarship is wholly legitimate. . . . On the other hand, one gets no unalloyed impression of critical theological scholarship. Its entire effort suffers from a certain conscious or unconscious duplicity. It always looks as if something for faith, something pertaining to faith, should suddenly result from this criticism. Therein lies the dubiousness."



he affirms that such scholarship has a useful purpose;<sup>17</sup> there is no direct discussion on how we are to move from exegesis to doctrinal formulation, though he clearly believes doctrine serves a necessary function;<sup>18</sup> and there is scant attention paid to the role of the Church and the division of labor in exegesis.<sup>19</sup> Kierkegaard offers us little help on the relation of the human discourse to the divine discourse or of the Old and New Testaments within the canon. There is no treatment of the exegetical implications of canonization, either. These issues can be added to his refusal to offer a description of the process of divine inspiration or to address the numerous supposed errors and other problems with the biblical reports raised by historical-critical scholarship. Unlike these last two issues, however, the neglect of which is directly related to his argument on the irrelevance of historical evidence for faith, there is no obvious reason why these topics should not have been explored. We do not find fault with his general neglect of these issues; we only need to be clear that Kierkegaard's proposal does not represent a comprehensive exegetical treatise.

One of the most significant concerns Kierkegaard fails to adequately address, and one we might have expected him to address given the centrality of the topic to his critique and proposal, is the issue of criteria for determining a right reading or accurate exegesis. As argued in this dissertation, a true exegesis must meet certain conditions. These conditions

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<sup>17</sup> In addition to CUP, 25 (VII 15), noted above, see FSE, 28 (XII 318).

<sup>18</sup> In addition to his praise of the doctrine of Lutheran orthodoxy in FSE, 16, 24 (XII 307, 314), see David Gouwens, "Kierkegaard's Understanding of Doctrine," *Modern Theology* 5:1 (October, 1988): 13-22. Kierkegaard also suggests that clear passages ought to be obeyed before laboring over obscure passages. We are very likely to read this as a mechanism for building up a rule of faith with an existential twist not much different than Calvin's claim that "all right knowledge of God is born of obedience," *Institutes* 1.vi.2.

<sup>19</sup> The division of labor and role of the Church in biblical exegesis is suggested by his comments on the necessity of scholarly translators, FSE, 26 (XII 316), and philologists, FSE, 28 (XII 319); his "lack of historical-critical competence," CUP, 29 (VII, 18); and his recognition that critical-era biblical scholarship had departed from the tradition of reading represented by "the fathers," FSE, 39 (XII 327). See also David Gouwens, "Kierkegaard's Hermeneutics of Discipleship: Communal and Critical Uses of Scripture in the 1854-1855 Attack," in *Soren Kierkegaard and the Word(s): Essays on Hermeneutics and Communication*, ed. Poul Houe and Gordon D. Marino (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 2003), 81-92.

arise out of the basic criterion of meaning, the author's intent. But appealing to the author's intent does not exhaust the question of exegetical criteria. One may still ask how an exegete knows that he or she has rightly understood and accurately explained the author's intent. The author's intent, after all, is identical to meaning and ordinarily unavailable to readers from any source other than the text being read.

The want of a set of sufficient criteria to distinguish a true reading or explanation from a false one is not surprising. An essentially subjective matter, it cannot be settled on purely objective grounds and may resist codification. This is not a dodge but a resurfacing of the problem of approximation that plagues objectivity. Knowing an author's intention with absolute certainty through objective criteria is impossible. There is always some epistemic risk in the face of objective uncertainty involved in every exegesis of a text, however objectively plausible a particular interpretation may be, and the Bible is no exception. This does not mean that there are no objective criteria or that it is impossible to describe subjective criteria with sufficient accuracy to be useful guides or perhaps even negative tests. Exegetes are warned, however, of the temptation of claiming a final, exhaustive, and certain explanation of the meaning of the biblical text. The explanations of truth and meaning offered by finite creatures are always partial and provisional.

Contrary to the interpretation presented in this dissertation, Polk and Watkin propose that Kiekegaard's basic criterion is circular. Polk, drawing inspiration from *Works of Love*, argues that the criterion is love. "Defining what Christian Scripture is," love, as the content of the rule of faith, also "prescribes how to read it" and what a right reading constitutes: "Essentially, the Rule legislates that scripture, read rightly ('rightly' for the

Christian), everywhere speaks of love.”<sup>20</sup> Watkin, noting the circularity of Polk’s interpretation, turns to *The Book on Adler* to argue essentially the same point. She defines love in terms of “a christlike character.” Kierkegaard, she argues, “derives [this character] from the New Testament” and then uses it “to justify the picture of Christ in the New Testament.”<sup>21</sup> Both maintain that love is the exegetical presupposition and conclusion.

As noted, Kierkegaard does not articulate a set of sufficient criteria for judging the rightness of a particular exegesis of Scripture. He does offer some comments, however, that suggest a less circular position on the matter than Polk and Watkin propose. Some help can be derived, for example, from Kierkegaard’s criteria for determining a genuine authoritative revelation presented primarily in *The Book on Adler*. Evans identifies three important negative criteria that offer some insight, by way of analogy, into what a set of criteria for judging a genuine exegesis might look like.<sup>22</sup>

“The first criterion,” Evans notes, “is that the individual who is entrusted with a revelation must appeal to the revelation itself as the ground of his or her message.”<sup>23</sup> If a divine revelation has been given then it is authoritative in itself because it is from God. Any appeal away from that authority, whether to the genius or superior consciousness of the

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<sup>20</sup> Polk, *Biblical Kierkegaard*, 32-33.

<sup>21</sup> Watkin, “Letter from the Lover,” 298-99.

<sup>22</sup> Evans, “Kierkegaard on Religious Authority: The Problem of the Criterion” in *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 239-60. See also Julia Watkin, “The Criteria of Ethical-Religious Authority: Kierkegaard and Adolph Adler,” *ACMF: Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell’Università degli Studi di Milano* 45.1 (1992): 27-40. Although the problem of a criterion for determining genuine revelation arises in *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard’s answer is elaborated mostly in *The Book on Adler*.

<sup>23</sup> Evans, “Kierkegaard on Religious Authority,” 246.

supposed recipient of revelation or to some external authority or rational or evidential demonstration, denies the sufficiency of the divine authority of the supposed revelation.<sup>24</sup>

Likewise, “a person who has genuinely received a revelation will not use worldly means to ensure the triumph of the revelation, but will rest content in God’s providence.”<sup>25</sup> This test relates to the fact, in Kierkegaard’s mind, that the recipient of divine revelation is called to be a witness to that revelation and a true witness is one who is willing to suffer the martyrdom of faith. Such a witness will not need or resort to the support of external props like a sectarian party, opinion of the majority, official authority, the worldly success of the message in the form of many disciples or great influence, and so on.

Both of these tests relate to the subjectivity of the recipient of the revelation. The final test Evans reviews “applies more directly to the revelation itself. . . . A genuine revelation would be marked, he thinks, by paradoxicalness.”<sup>26</sup> Paradoxicalness is a sign of the revelation’s transcendent source and content. It calls the recipients of such a revelation to faith and renders the revelation inherently offensive or scandalous to the proud who rest in their own reasoning powers rather than in the word of the living God.

These three criteria are suggestive of the kind of criteria that Kierkegaard might offer for distinguishing genuine from spurious biblical exegesis. A true exegesis of the Bible will not rest upon an authority other than the supreme authority inherent in the text as God’s word, as though that other authority were decisive for meaning. One implication of this is

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<sup>24</sup> Of course someone may receive a divine revelation and behave inconsistently on this point due to lack of faith. In other words, a false negative is possible, though perhaps recipients who act this way disqualify themselves from serving as conveyers of divine revelation to others or perhaps they undermine others’ warrant for believing them to have received a divine revelation. False positives seem possible, too. The point here is that none of the tests Kierkegaard offers are conclusive in themselves. There is simply no secure objective stronghold for faith.

<sup>25</sup> Evans, “Kierkegaard on Religious Authority,” 248.

<sup>26</sup> Evans, “Kierkegaard on Religious Authority,” 250.

that the exegete will use Scripture to interpret Scripture and refrain from suspending meaning on speculative, historical reconstructions or extra-canonical sources.

As for the second test, a particular exegesis will take on the form of a testimony offered by a true witness. He will not attempt to translate the religious language of the Bible into pure, philosophical concepts or some kind of rational, moral doctrine but rather be content to testify to the meaning and saving benefit he or she has understood and received from God. This does not preclude detailed philological discussions that contribute to explaining textual meaning. It does challenge the assumption that discussions of these issues are properly exegetical simply because they arise in biblical scholarship.

Finally, the content to which the exegete testifies will be marked by the paradoxicalness of the biblical revelation and its preaching of Christ. This is another reason that exegesis will necessarily take on the form of testimony or something very similar to testimony. The paradoxicalness of biblical revelation entails many things for Kierkegaard, not least of which is the transcendent nature of both the source and content of God's word. For this reason, a true exegesis will not present itself as the product of a pure application of reason but as a report of faith, to faith, and for faith. In other words, a true exegesis will not seek to explain away every mystery or source of offense in the gospel but will be marked by the same paradoxicalness that defines the content and meaning of Scripture.

Perhaps the most relevant comments Kierkegaard offers on the matter of exegetical criteria are found, not surprisingly, in "What Is Required." Here Kierkegaard insists that much of the Bible is so clear that its meaning is something like hermeneutically self-evident:

It is only all too easy to understand the requirement contained in God's Word. . . . It is all just as easy to understand as the remark "The weather is fine today," a remark that could become difficult to understand in only one way—if a literature came into existence in order to interpret it. The most

limited poor creature cannot truthfully deny being able to understand the requirement—but it is tough for flesh and blood to will to understand it and to have to act accordingly.<sup>27</sup>

Kierkegaard does not think this is an exceptional quality of divine discourse. Many other discourses enjoy such clarity of meaning; the Bible is no different.

It is quite natural that the clearer passages become useful guides for interpreting less clear or obscure passages.<sup>28</sup> This can happen in two ways. First, this is facilitated through the traditional analogy of Scripture in which less clear passages are read in light of clearer passages. Here Scripture functions as its own criterion and the highly probable exegesis of the clear passages becomes a criterion for assessing the exegesis of less clear passages. Christians have long practiced the analogy of Scripture confident that the diversity of canonical writings has one single divine author. Second, clearer passages become guides for interpreting less clear passages through the analogy of faith. Here the doctrine that emerges from the exegesis of clear passages via the analogy of Scripture can be built up into a rule of faith that becomes a criterion for assessing the exegesis of less clear passages.

Kierkegaard's concept of the rule of faith, however, has a definite subjective emphasis. The rule of faith is not just an objective articulation of biblical theology; it is the content of the faith that must decisively shape the form of life of the exegete. Kierkegaard insists that we have no right to complain about our inability to understand the difficult passages of Scripture until we have done everything that the clear passages demand of us.<sup>29</sup> In other words, the exegete's form of life must be conformed to the clear teachings of

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<sup>27</sup> FSE, 34-36 (XII 323).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. FSE, 29 (XII 318-19).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. FSE, 29 (XII 318-19).

Scripture. Out of such obedience of faith, it seems, greater clarity and understanding will emerge. Though perhaps not enough clarity will be gained to understand all the obscure passages in Scripture, it seems progress ought to occur.

On the other hand, Kierkegaard argues that certain forms of misunderstanding God's perlocutionary intent are not necessarily disastrous for the believer *coram Deo*. There are many cases in which faithful obedience in response to sincere exegetical error is preferred over disobedience (or indefinitely delayed obedience) to a passage rightly explained.<sup>30</sup> This is hardly a criterion for assessing the rightness of a particular exegesis. It is, however, a reminder that if the subjective and objective criteria are largely or even entirely met, and the exegete errs anyway, that such an error may be, under certain conditions, more consistent with acting according to the true meaning of Scripture than to be paralyzed by fear of misunderstanding in the face of obscurity and uncertainty. Finite creatures do not have the luxury of objective certainty; just the necessity to live by faith *coram Deo*.

There is one final point: according to Kierkegaard the divine author is available for interrogation through prayer to those who live by faith and approach him humbly:

Truly, in nothing do you leave yourself without witness; and finally you gave him [i.e. us] your Word. More you could not do. To force him to use it, to read it, or to listen to it, to force him to act according to it—that you could not wish. Ah, and yet you do more. . . . O God, you give your Word as a gift. . . . And if you find only some willingness in the single individual, you are promptly at hand and . . . with divine . . . patience sits and spells out the Word with the single individual so that he may understand it aright.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. FSE, 29-30 (XII 318-19).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. FSE, 13-14 (XII 305-6).

This is the prayer that Kierkegaard offers at the beginning of “What Is Required.” Such is the availability of the divine author to the reader of his word who reads by faith and for the divinely intended meaning and saving efficacy.

Although Kierkegaard does not elaborate a set of exegetical criteria, and the comments above offer only a partial answer, he leaves us enough suggestive material to begin to piece together a sketch of what a set of criteria might look like.

#### ***6.4 A Point of Criticism: The Case for Biblical Apologetics***

In her critique of Kierkegaard’s presentation of biblical criticism, Watkin argues that contemporary readers cannot simply assume that the Bible is God’s word. Stating the issue in terms of Kierkegaard’s love-letter analogy she maintains that contemporary Bible readers “are dealing with an initial situation in which it has to be decided whether the letter really is from the beloved.”<sup>32</sup> She pushes back against Kierkegaard’s claim that the historical scholar can offer nothing of value on this point either for or against faith.

Watkin grants “that knowing the truth about something does not necessarily cause a person to accept it and change to a new way of life.”<sup>33</sup> So it is possible that even if a scholar could prove that Christianity is true or that the Bible is true or reliable that saving faith would not necessarily follow.

Climacus is correct in seeing that intellectual acceptance of information does not necessarily result in personal subjective response or a favorable response, even though one might be intellectually excited and enthusiastic about the facts one had brought to light. Something more is needed to trigger a personal subjective response that is to have bearing on how one lives.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Watkin, “Letter from the Lover,” 290.

<sup>33</sup> Watkin, “Letter from the Lover,” 292.

<sup>34</sup> Watkin, “Letter from the Lover,” 292.



She also agrees with Kierkegaard that “absolute certainty” on “historical and metaphysical issues” is out of reach—that the best we can hope for is the most accurate possible approximation. “One’s relation to the world,” she affirms, “has to be in terms of intellectual belief [as opposed to objective certainty] concerning how things ultimately are, and correspondingly, in terms of faith as an existential commitment to what one believes about the ultimate scheme of things and our place in it.”<sup>35</sup> But it does not follow from this, she observes, that the scholar who succeeds in disproving the authenticity of the Bible is unable to harm the faith of the believer.

To be clear, the truth of Christianity does not depend upon the Bible. Christianity is not true because the apostles taught it; the apostles taught it because it was true. Even if the various portions of the New Testament were never written or gathered into the canon it would still be true that the Son of God became man, lived among us, died on a cross, rose from the dead, was believed upon in the world, and ascended to the Father. Climacus is right, then, to argue that “it does not follow” from proving the Bible inauthentic “that Christ has not existed.”<sup>36</sup> Even if contemporary Christian faith is dependent upon an historical report, Climacus contends in *Philosophical Fragments* that a very minimal report would have sufficed. If the eyewitnesses “had not left anything behind except these words, ‘We have believed that in such and such a year the god appeared in the humble form of a servant, lived and taught among us, and then died,’ this would be more than enough.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Watkin, “Letter from the Lover,” 292.

<sup>36</sup> CUP, 30 (VII 319).

<sup>37</sup> PF, 104 (IV 266).

In *Postscript*, however, Climacus seems to be making the much stronger claim that if the Bible were discredited as a reliable report of the historical events to which it testifies the believer would still be “equally free” to believe the testimony of Scripture or not. This interpretation of Climacus’s claim is consistent with Kierkegaard’s strong opposition to the relevance of historical evidence for faith throughout his authorship. More immediately, it is consistent with the grounds he offers for this claim in the following sentence: that the believer’s faith is unharmed because it was not “accepted . . . by virtue of a demonstration” in the first place.<sup>38</sup> The point seems to be, however implausible it initially appears, that because Christian faith is not based upon an objective-type historical (or rational) demonstration it cannot be touched by such demonstrations.

Perhaps Climacus only means to suggest that whatever the authenticity of its authorship, the Bible continues to bear testimony to the fact of the Christ event.<sup>39</sup> Or perhaps Climacus is suggesting that Christian faith can exist without the Bible. But Watkin correctly notes that Climacus’s claim involves more than eliminating the Bible from consideration. The supposed demonstration that the Bible is inauthentic seems to implicate not just the identity of its human authors but the historicity of its reports. If so, then Climacus, and behind him Kierkegaard, is proposing that the historicity of the biblical reports could be demonstrated to be false and that this would in no way affect the faith of the Christian believer.

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<sup>38</sup> CUP, 30 (VII 319).

<sup>39</sup> See Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript: The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1983), 255. This reading does not seem to do justice to Climacus’s claim that he is considering the hypothetical case in which the enemy of Scripture is able to demonstrate everything he could have ever hoped to demonstrate through historical-critical scholarship in order to discredit the Bible. Presumably this would extend beyond discrediting the identity of the human authors to discrediting the truth-claims Scripture asserts.

The larger issue in Kierkegaardian studies involved here is the relation of faith to history. Kierkegaard is obviously convinced that Christian faith is “grounded in factual historical events” and yet not “dependent upon historical evidence.”<sup>40</sup> This position, ably defended as a coherent account of the relation of faith to history by Evans, is in line with Protestant orthodoxy’s emphasis on the role of God’s word and the ministry of the Spirit in the unbeliever’s coming to faith. Contrary to M. Jamie Ferreira,<sup>41</sup> Evans argues that Kierkegaard’s view succeeds because even though faith has an essential “historical component, it does not depend on evidence but rather on a firsthand experience of Jesus for which historical records serve as an occasion.”<sup>42</sup> I have argued here that the Bible is such an historical record, serving as the normative occasion for faith in the moment of contemporaneity between Jesus Christ and the reader *coram Scriptura*. Kierkegaard’s strong opposition to the relevance of historical evidence for faith, however, seems to work against his argument for the priority and saving efficacy of the Bible as God’s word.

Since, according to Kierkegaard, Christian faith has an essential historical content that is provided by the Bible, it would seem to be vulnerable to an historical demonstration that the historical content of that faith is in fact false, purely fabricated. Conversely, faith would seem to be genuinely aided by certain kinds of apologetic endeavors aimed at refuting such accusations and demonstrating the plausibility that the historical reports of Scripture are accurate depictions of real events. Yet Kierkegaard seems to deny both the negative and positive relevance of historical evidence for faith.

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<sup>40</sup> Evans, “The Relevance of Historical Evidence for Christian Faith: A Critique of a Kierkegaardian View,” in *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 154.

<sup>41</sup> See M. Jamie Ferreira, “The Faith/History Problem and Kierkegaard’s A Priori ‘Proof,’” *Religious Studies* 23 (1987): 337-45.

<sup>42</sup> Evans, “Relevance of Historical Evidence,” 151.

Historical critical scholarship's inability to defeat saving faith (*fides divina*) seems both coherent, as Evans demonstrates, and correct.<sup>43</sup> That historical-critical scholarship may be able to defeat *fides humana* is not in doubt. But *fides divina* is not grounded in or maintained by arguments or evidence as *fides humana* often is. Rather, *fides divina*, in the Kierkegaardian scheme, arises from a "firsthand experience of Jesus for which historical records serve as an occasion."<sup>44</sup> In this regard *fides divina* may be considered properly basic and the believer who possesses such faith may very well enjoy an assurance or certainty of faith no merely approximating objective demonstration is able to defeat.

Here we can make a useful distinction. It may be possible that the believer's *fides divina* is properly basic and undefeatable and yet the believer's knowledge that their faith is properly basic is both non-basic and defeasible. It is at least thinkable, then, that a believer may know that Jesus is God incarnate who has acted in time to save his people from their sin and yet not know that they *know* this—not in the sense that they are ignorant of their belief that Jesus is God incarnate but in the sense that they fail to realize that their belief counts as knowledge. It is possible, in other words, for a person to be a believer who possesses an undefeatable (i.e. persevering), properly basic, and certain *fides divina* and yet lack assurance and be wracked by doubts. Though *fides divina* may be certain of the object of its beliefs the subject's faith may not be an object of *fides divina* but of *fides humana*.

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<sup>43</sup> For a fuller discussion of the epistemological issues at play here see Evans, "Relevance of Historical Evidence," and "Kierkegaard and Plantinga on Belief in God: Subjectivity as the Ground of Properly Basic Religious Beliefs," in *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 169-182; and "Externalist Epistemology, Subjectivity, and Christian Knowledge: Plantinga and Kierkegaard," in *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 183-205. See also his *Faith Beyond Reason: A Kierkegaardian Account* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 78-112.

<sup>44</sup> Evans, "Relevance of Historical Evidence," 151.

Assuming that there is edifying value in strengthening the conviction that one's faith, as *fides divina*, is justified and even undefeatable, Kierkegaard is wrong to suggest that every apologetic argument or use of historical evidence is opposed to authentic Christian faith, that faith "must even consider it its enemy."<sup>45</sup> Though arguments and evidence may not be able to either establish or defeat *fides divina* they may, it appears, greatly harm or aid the believer's strength, courage, and assurance of conviction that one's faith is justified, true, and saving belief. Although saving faith is not grounded on historical evidence it is "grounded in factual historical events" which are reported in the Bible. Whether these reports are reliable descriptions of those factual, historical events is more than a mere distraction for faith. Granted, no apologetic is able to secure a certain, objective stronghold for faith. Yet a humble, faith-friendly apologetic not only seems possible but exceedingly helpful and potentially edifying. In a word, it really does matter if the preaching of Christ, which is the center of Scripture, offers readers an accurate representation of Jesus Christ and thereby provides a reliable occasion for a faith whose content is in large part historically grounded.

### ***6.5 Toward an Alternative Exegetical Paradigm***

Kierkegaard's critique of exegetical methods and practices applies directly to any exegetical approach that attempts to exclude or bracket the reader's subjectivity in the exegetical task. Kierkegaard's critique goes beyond the now familiar critique that excluding one's subjectivity from the interpretive process is impossible. Though his critique certainly includes this observation it does not follow from this observation alone that the ideal of

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<sup>45</sup> CUP, 39 (VII 19). Kierkegaard's opposition to biblical apologetics does help clarify the distinction between biblical exegesis and biblical apologetics, highlighting that large swaths of supposed exegesis produced under the critical-era paradigm are actually work in apologetics posing as exegesis rather than a true explanation or the meaning of the text as intended by its divine author.

objectivity, even if ultimately out of reach, is not a worthy exegetical goal. (Of course it does not follow that we should exchange the criterion for meaning of the author's intent for the reader's subjective responses, either.) Kierkegaard grants the appropriateness of the ever elusive ideal of objectivity in other pursuits such as historical or scientific inquiry. The primary problem of adopting this ideal for biblical exegesis is that it denies both the nature and function of the Bible as God's word and what we might call the spirituality of biblical exegesis. What is needed is an exegetical paradigm attuned to the reality of the Bible as God's efficacious word addressed to sinners.

The Bible may be used for the purposes of historical inquiry, for example, and this use of the Bible may involve acts of reading aimed at ends other than discovering the divine author's intended meaning. Such uses or readings of the Bible do not belong to biblical exegesis or represent right reading of God's word, however. Here Kierkegaard makes a strong distinction between reading and reading. To read the Bible as part of an objective, historical investigation into the origins of Christianity, the life of Jesus, the history of Israel, the composition, sources, or manuscript traditions of the canonical writings, and so on, may be a legitimate scholarly pursuit in its own right. Such ends of reading and corresponding ways of reading must not, however, be confused with reading the Bible for its own sake—to know what God is saying to us in and through his word. This is the end for which the Bible must be read by anyone who would claim to explain its meaning to others and not just explain its significance as a useful source on some other topic of interest.

It turns out, however, that the Bible is intended by its divine author to communicate a particular form of life or mode of existence *coram Deo*—not just any form of life, that is, but the form of life that humans must live to realize their *raison d'être* as creatures in God's

image. What is more, the efficacy of God's word is such that it will accomplish this saving purpose in all those who read it the way Kierkegaard prescribes, assuming they do not resist this efficacy in some other way or at some other level.

Kierkegaard's proposal in "What Is Required" is not offered as a comprehensive theory of or method for biblical exegesis but as a highly descriptive or illustrative exhortation to read the Bible according to three basic requirements the Bible itself demands of its readers and exegetes. These requirements are descriptive of the way faith reads God's word in order to realize its saving efficacy in the readers own existence. Whatever is not aimed at this end does not count as reading God's word. Only by reading the Bible in this way is one able to offer an accurate explanation of its meaning as God's word.

Kierkegaard articulated the sort of radical break with modern exegetical methods and practices he believed necessary in terms of repentance: "Following the path of commentators is often like traveling to London; true, the road leads to London, but if one wants to get there, he has to turn around."<sup>46</sup> The road itself may serve the purpose, but modern, critical-era exegesis is aimed at and moving in the wrong direction. Kierkegaard addresses would-be exegetes directly: if you persist in reading the Bible this way you will never succeed in reading the requisite "fear and trembling into your soul so that, with God's help, you . . . succeed in becoming a human." If, on the other hand, "you keep on reading God's Word in this way," that is, in the way Kierkegaard prescribes, "you will (even if it will be dreadful for you, . . .) succeed in doing what is required—to look at yourself in the mirror of the Word. Only in this way will you succeed."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Journals, I A 55 (1.203 [83]).

<sup>47</sup> FSE, 43 (XII 331).

But biblical efficacy is not restricted to just those who realize saving benefit from it by reading it in the prescribed manner. The Bible has a double efficacy: when read it is always efficacious to either save or condemn. For this reason every reading of the Bible is a spiritually significant act *coram Deo*. As such, every act of reading God's word is subject to the analysis of despair elaborated in *Sickness Unto Death*. In this light every exegetical act, method, or practice is suspect as a more or less sophisticated strategy used by readers, as despairing or unbelieving subjects, to defend themselves against the authority, perspicuity, and efficacy of God's word.

The divinely intended efficacy of Scripture is not an application readers make of the meaning of Scripture but something determined by God and realized through his word. Kierkegaard may view the Bible as unique on this point. Biblical efficacy is a kind of significance that lies within the author's control. This makes biblical efficacy a special kind of perlocutionary efficacy that is indeed meaning-significant. The kind of efficacy realized in the reading process, whether saving or condemning, may be determined by the faith of the exegete but it is not, ultimately, in the exegete's power to render the Bible efficacious or not. The exegete is always responding to the inescapable efficacy of Scripture either in faith unto salvation or despair unto ruination.

Kierkegaard's proposal prescribes an exegetical approach that conceives of Bible reading as a spiritual discipline. His prescribed approach to reading the Bible rightly—that is, for saving benefit—is not offered as a formulaic methodology guaranteed to produce a right reading or saving outcome for the reader. It is instead a spiritual discipline of reading by faith that exegetes must cultivate in and with their life. As such it also represents an alternative exegetical paradigm that is radically discontinuous with modernist, critical-era



exegetical approaches (and contemporary, postmodernist approaches). Kierkegaard's critique is not anti-critical, however. Critical methods continue to play a purely instrumental role under the proposed paradigm. Although radically discontinuous with the critical-era exegetical paradigm, Kierkegaard's proposed paradigm is far from new. In many ways his proposal represents a return to an ancient, precritical exegetical paradigm of faith seeking biblical meaning. In this paradigm the subjectivity of a humble, obedient faith is vital to understanding the meaning of the text as determined by the divine author's intent.

Kierkegaard's proposal represents nothing less than an exhortation to embrace an alternative exegetical paradigm—one attuned to the nature and function of the Bible as God's efficacious word and the reality of readers as sinners created in the image of a sovereign and holy God. Under this paradigm exegesis is conceived as a profoundly spiritual task aimed at realizing the saving efficacy of Scripture in the life of the exegete and those for whom the exegesis is made. Such exegesis will take on a form similar to testimony offered by true witnesses to the saving benefits received from God's word. These saving benefits often lie on the surface of crystal-clear passages but sometimes are submersed in the depths of murky waters. Faith alone, however, is prepared to receive these benefits and able to explain them or testify to them rightly. The one who dares to exegete this "extremely dangerous" and "imperious book" must give himself to it and to the God whose word it is. The one who does will find that by reading this book their life will "radically change . . . on a prodigious scale."<sup>48</sup> Ultimately, the Bible defines and determines the exegete who dares to see the image reflected in its mirror. May we all be so changed by God's word into ever more faithful exegetes *coram Deo*.

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<sup>48</sup> FSE, 31 (XII 320).

**APPENDIX**  
**PROPOSITIONS**

*A. From the Dissertation*

1. There is both a saving and condemning efficacy of the word of God (and sacraments).

Explanation: though God alone is the efficient cause of salvation and the means of grace he employs (word and sacraments) relate to his gracious work in an ordinary and not absolute manner, it is permissible to speak of both the instrumental necessity and efficacy of God's word for salvation. This efficacy is not inherent in God's word in the Lutheran sense that informs Kierkegaard's thoughts on exegesis but ordinarily accompanies the proper use of these means. The Reformed frequently observe that willful neglect of attending to the word of God will result in spiritual loss. My contention is that just as the proper use of these means by faith has a saving efficacy in the life of the user so also the misuse or abuse of these means has a condemning efficacy in the life of the user. The word of God is always powerful or efficacious, that is, unto either eternal life or death even though its efficacy to save is only by the accompanying operation of the Holy Spirit and through the faith of the one being saved.

2. The efficacy of Scripture as the word of God is exegetically significant.

Explanation: given proposition 1, and that biblical exegesis constitutes a use of God's word, it is reasonable to conclude that the efficacy of Scripture is exegetically significant since Scripture, as a divinely ordained means of grace, is working either salvation or condemnation in the life of the exegete as he or she handles the word of God.

3. The same spiritual disposition that renders the sinful heart a manufacturer of idols also perverts the reception and explication of the meaning of Scripture.
4. The Bible being God's word, no appeal to a higher authority is possible: for this reason, appeals to the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit or the analogy or rule of faith must not be construed or employed as appeals to an authority higher than Scripture.
5. Kierkegaard's critique of biblical apologetics is sensitive to a real danger—the magisterial use of reason and misplaced faith—but is too extreme. Apologetic arguments may be used in a variety of faith-friendly, edifying ways.

*B. From Graduate Work in Theology*

1. The medieval *quadriga*, as modified by the Reformed into a single literal sense with multiple applications along the lines of the three theological virtues, remains a fruitful exegetical grid for ministers of the word.

Explanation: medieval exegesis is much maligned and frequently disregarded in contemporary exegetical literature. Yet the Reformed orthodox, such as William Whitaker, continued to affirm the value and usefulness of the *quadriga* as an exegetical paradigm for unpacking the significance of the single, literal sense of the biblical text as God's word. Unlike most historical-critical exegesis, the *quadriga* is aimed at understanding the significance of God's word for the salvation of his people.

2. Post-Enlightenment critiques of Christianity, in general, seek to undermine the epistemic justification of Christian faith rather than disprove its truth-claims.

Explanation: Alvin Plantinga argues that from an epistemological viewpoint there are two major types of objections to Christian faith: *de facto* and *de jure*. Although it is difficult to find a plausible *de jure* objection to Christian faith that does not assume Christianity is false, many post-Enlightenment objections to Christian faith ignore the *de facto* question as practically irrelevant. I believe Plantinga's analysis is very useful and applies far beyond the examples of Freud and Marx he treats in *Warranted Christian Faith*.

3. Propitiation, as an act of divine love satisfying God's just wrath against sinners, is the proper center of a comprehensive, unifying theory of the atonement.

Explanation: the various theories of the atonement are sometimes construed as mutually exclusive alternatives. It seems better, however, to recognize that Christ had to accomplish many things to effect reconciliation between God and sinners. Several of the various theories of the atonement contain valid insights that enjoy biblical warrant. In this light, a more comprehensive, unified theory of the atonement that is able to account for the diversity of views that do enjoy biblical warrant is preferable. I contend that propitiation is the central accomplishment of Christ's atoning work and the key to any unified theory of the atonement.

4. The central, scandalous claim of the gospel is that Jesus Christ the crucified God-man rose bodily from the dead and that his victory over sin, death, and Satan that secures our salvation is not sufficiently explained or proclaimed by preaching Christ's propitiatory death alone.
5. A natural law account of the ontology of the moral order is more satisfying, from a Reformed perspective, than a divine command account as articulated, for example, by Karl Barth.

### C. *On Miscellaneous Topics*

1. The humanly constructed landscape is, as a source on culture, generally superior to other, frequently appealed to sources on culture such as cinema, television, music, literature, or fine art. This means that a convenience store or suburban neighborhood is likely both more telling and more useful for understanding contemporary American culture than the latest exhibit at the local art gallery.

2. Although texts such as 1 Peter 3:15 are sometimes used to justify apologetic projects that proceed to offer elaborate apologetic arguments, the model actually called for is something much more like credible, personal testimony. Elaborate apologetic arguments may be useful but seldom if ever reflect the real reason for the hope that is within the believer that explains his or her peculiar form of life.

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