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## Community in the Theology of Søren Aabye Kierkegaard

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Community in the Theology of Søren Aabye Kierkegaard

by

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A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology · Seminary of Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Systematic Theology.

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY • SEMINARY  
Saint John's University  
Collegeville, Minnesota

6.10.08

This paper was written under the direction of

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Dr. Bill Cahoy, Dean, St. John's School of Theology

Director

6.10.2008

## Community in the Theology of Søren Aabye Kierkegaard

Description: This work began as a term paper for an Independent Learning Project with Dr. Cahoy and Ben Durheim. From our discussions, it became clear that on a literal level, Kierkegaard's vision of Christianity is largely individualistic in emphasis. This work critiques this assertion through a wider engagement of several texts, illustrating the seminal Christian position of Kierkegaard. The analysis begins with secondary source appraisals of Kierkegaard as theologian, to clarify this endeavor as distinct from an exclusively philosophical pursuit. Next, Kierkegaard's major psychological understandings are addressed, revealing hidden potential for the role of community in authentic faith. Finally, this work asserts amidst several secondary scholarly positions that Kierkegaard's writings reflect an orthodox Christian theology of community, lacking in detail, but solid in foundation. It is the thesis of this graduate paper that Kierkegaard's work affirms an inward God relationship beyond the point of accessibility for the contemporary era, while depositing the necessary pieces to build a viable theology of community. I offer my thanks to Bill and Ben, whose insights have made this exposition possible.

This paper may not be duplicated.

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6.10.2008

## *Introducing Community in Kierkegaard*

Søren Aabye Kierkegaard is a powerful prophet for the modern age. His philosophical dictums on the human person, the importance of faith and the existential dilemma often remain overlooked. As a theologian, Kierkegaard portrays an unsystematic perspective which is highly confrontational. His thought can be seen as medicinal for Christians who have taken a casual stance in their walk of faith. For Kierkegaard, dialogical relating with God is necessary to become a full human subject. This conversation is ongoing, marked by continual conversion, and also shapes collective life. Kierkegaard argues that this process begins with moments of decision, when human choice can either affirm or deny the God relation. Each choice impacts this relationship, and subsequently affects not only the vertical God relation, but also affects horizontal relationships. Kierkegaard emphasizes that the Christian response of faith to God demands an ongoing commitment to love others on the basis of one's faith, which imitates Christ. I argue that Kierkegaard's work affirms an inward God relationship beyond the point of accessibility for the present era, while depositing the necessary pieces to build a viable theology of community.<sup>1</sup>

Kierkegaard's writings are contextually focused on the Danish Lutheran Church of Copenhagen in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. His polemical style of writing parallels that of Friedrich Nietzsche, both of whom seek to evoke a certain kind of response in their readers. Kierkegaard's writings are specifically aimed at healing abuses against Christianity, perpetrated by Christendom.<sup>2</sup> In other words, he perceives an inherent danger within Christianity of the modern

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<sup>1</sup> Christ the paradox is a concept in Kierkegaard's writing that is by definition defiant and inaccessible to reason. "the paradox has made... understanding the absurd, what the understanding regards as very important is no distinguishing mark." Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus: Kierkegaard's Writings, VII*. Ed. and trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 52.

<sup>2</sup> This is the term Kierkegaard employs to refer to Christianity's fallen interpretation. It is a lax response of the crowd, a continuing negative theme implying decreased individual responsibility. This term denotes Kierkegaard's

era: Christians no longer practice their faith because their relationship with God suffers from neglect. Kierkegaard acknowledges a crowd mentality within Christendom, a mindset that fosters permissiveness, laxity, and a decreased attentiveness to individual responsibility. Though his thought is not systematic, it consistently promotes a key theme: the responsibility of each individual to faith in God. Kierkegaard demonstrates the ills of Christendom by contrasting them with their healthy counterpoint—the subject whose relationship with God is primary.

Kierkegaard intends to target the ‘community as idol’ illness of Christendom with a series of ‘authentic God relation’ inoculations. This paper begins with preliminary remarks concerning Kierkegaard’s theological foundations to shed light on his understanding of faith. The ultimate goal of this explication is to locate his perception of authentic community. This essay will follow his developments through the concepts of anxiety, despair, and faith or conversion. These themes provoke commentaries, which critique and extend Kierkegaard’s understanding of community. In conclusion, I will respond with a critique of his individually directed methodology and propose a contemporary adaptation.

### *Theologically Orienting Discourse*

As a Kierkegaardian scholar, Arnold Come interprets Kierkegaard as a peculiar kind of theologian. He writes, “The central point of Kierkegaard’s theological methodology is this: there is both an objective source and a subjective source of Christian theological formulation, and neither one works without the other.”<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard uncompromisingly affirms God as the source of faith, while simultaneously acknowledging the subject’s duty of intrapersonal discernment, or

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disgust for the crowd’s abuse of the paradox of Christ, and so also serves as an icon for his thoughts on Christian existence proper to the context of authorship. In short, the danger of this mentality is that it praises mediocrity and promotes laxity of faith.

<sup>3</sup> Arnold B. Come, *Kierkegaard as Theologian: Recovering My Self* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), 44.

inwardness.<sup>4</sup> Kierkegaard attacks Christendom because it excludes serious reflection on one's relationship with God. Come further comments, "no other Christian thinker has matched the depth and complexity of his analysis of how this 'subjectivity' comes into being and operates in the process of one's becoming a self and, especially, in becoming a Christian self."<sup>5</sup> Connected to this process are three essential factors, namely encountering Christ, wrestling with Him as paradoxical, and accepting or denying him in the moment, also called the leap.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the process of becoming a Christian self is marked by "diseases of reflection," writes Gouwens. Dupré classifies Kierkegaard's thought as anti-Hegelian.<sup>7</sup> This observation draws out two important aspects regarding Kierkegaard's conceptions of faith: first, "God and man are separated by an eternal abyss..." and second, "whatever [God] communicates to us can, therefore, never be reduced to philosophical categories... it must be believed."<sup>8</sup> For Kierkegaard, faith requires the subjective individual to reflect earnestly on their relationship with God.

Kierkegaard's authorship is guided by one theological agenda as enunciated in *The Point of View: My Work as an Author*.<sup>9</sup> He indicates that his collective works are directed towards healing the ailing body of Christendom. "What the age needs in the deepest sense can be said fully and completely with one single word: it needs... eternity."<sup>10</sup> Curiously, his prescription

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<sup>4</sup> A theme to be discussed later. Please attend to this term as it is emblematic of the inherent difficulty of Kierkegaard's thoughts on community. As indicated by William Cahoy, Kierkegaard's later works are critical of hidden inwardness.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>7</sup> Hegel bears the brunt of Kierkegaard's disquietude against Christendom, simply because Hegel is the iconic philosopher of Christendom. Kierkegaard's primary complaints against Hegel oppose his intellectual and universal systematization of the God relationship. For Kierkegaard, the task of becoming a Christian is as unique as each individual and unintelligible as the paradoxical reality of God. Thus, Hegel's actions represent an inaccurate appraisal of God which, according to Kierkegaard, is the tendency of Christendom writ large.

<sup>8</sup> Louis Dupré, *Kierkegaard as Theologian: The Dialectic of Christian Existence* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 39.

<sup>9</sup> Though never intended to be published, this volume was published by Søren Kierkegaard's brother some ten years after his death.

<sup>10</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as An Author: A Report to History*. Ed. Benjamin Nelson, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 108.

abandons notions of mediation with God, and elicits a grace-dependent, relational theology. Atypical of his era, Kierkegaard focuses on the anthropological response of humans, rather than speculative reflection on the Godhead. Price comments that, “it is rather the human side of this relationship upon which Kierkegaard concentrates.”<sup>11</sup> Reflection reveals the dialectic of possibility and necessity, and through this human experience, the paradox of God emerges. The possibility of eternity can lead to a positive affirmation: “when the reason and the paradox encounter one another happily in the moment; [then] reason sets itself aside and the paradox bestows itself. The third entity in [this realization] is ...Faith.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, for Kierkegaard, the process of becoming a Christian acknowledges continuing dependence on the grace of God, and emphasizes the responsibility of each individual to this relationship. The God relationship conditions and informs human existence, is born of and continues to affect our reality. This relationship imparts the Christian task: build an authentic community based upon faith amidst the world’s crowds.

Kierkegaard’s theological anthropology is a Christian reading of what it means to be a human subject.<sup>13</sup> For Kierkegaard, the authentic self is often buried within, and the process of becoming fully human occurs through inwardness, which points to the primacy of the self’s relationship with God.<sup>14</sup> His maturing emphases value individual experiences and yield neither an objective notion of personhood, nor a definitive path. Perhaps this is Kierkegaard’s greatest methodological insight—for each human being, the path differs but the orientation of each person is always toward God. Gouwens writes that “all human beings, whether they are

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<sup>11</sup> George Price, *The Narrow Pass: A Study of Kierkegaard’s Concept of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, INC., 1963), 122.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>13</sup> Kierkegaard is often known as the father of existentialism. He argues that the human person discovers self via attentiveness to the God relationship, whereas the more prominent face of existentialism asserts that subjectivity is found via self-discovery, which is often atheistic in character. This factor distinguishes Kierkegaard from Nietzsche as a distinctly Christian existentialist.

<sup>14</sup> David Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 57.



conscious of it or not, exist in, and are intended for, relation to God.”<sup>15</sup> One of the greatest fruits of this notion is the inherent relational dynamism of the human person. Kierkegaard’s writings utilize soul-study or pre-Freudian psychology in conjunction with other methods of reflection to interpret human experience in light of this primary relationship. Gouwens interprets Kierkegaard’s writings via this ongoing, dynamic process, “[which involves] a journey or progress of self-purification of one’s moods and emotions on the way to self-clarification, what Kierkegaard calls ‘becoming a self before God.’”<sup>16</sup> This anthropological conception demonstrates two important points: first, the relationship with God is primary in the process of becoming a self, and second, the self is fundamentally relational. With this in mind, the next section summarizes Kierkegaard’s method of faith development via the themes of anxiety, despair, and conversion. This explication reveals possible implications of Kierkegaard’s theology for the communal dimension of faith.

### *Anxious Existence*

The psychological phenomenon of anxiety is a common human experience. The infinite potential in the human person can, in Kierkegaard’s perception, create a nauseating experience. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard deliberates on the psychological nature of anxiety and its potentially illuminating qualities for faith. This work is a mind study; it is an inquiry into the holistic experience of anxiety and its relation to sin as coming from the first sin of Adam.<sup>17</sup> It discusses disenfranchisement as a human reality that cannot be treated lightly in either analysis or praxis.<sup>18</sup> Kierkegaard posits that anxiety is a psychological phenomenon, arising from the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>17</sup> Kierkegaard’s project is an attempt to explain hereditary or original sin retrogressively in terms of its origin. The development of this paper will mimic Kierkegaard’s progression, which ultimately speaks to his thoughts on the universal experience of anxiety in human consciousness.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 82.

finite person's desire to seek the actuality of their eternal possibility. "In anxiety there is the selfish infinity of possibility, which does not tempt like a choice but ensnaringly disquiets with its sweet anxiousness."<sup>19</sup> There exists in each person, a temptation to assert a posited self over the true self.<sup>20</sup> This state can be sinful, insofar as it selfishly reaches towards ends which challenge the God relation.<sup>21</sup> This impulse also creates rifts in the whole human race. Regarding original sin, Kierkegaard writes that all humans live in the same space of possibility as Adam; he is not removed from the human race. "Just as Adam lost innocence by guilt, so every man loses in the same way."<sup>22</sup> Thus the discomfort of anxiety and possibility of sin exists in all persons, just the same. Radically, Kierkegaard affirms the interconnected nature of sin and its effects on others. He argues that every individual has a history, and this history becomes the pre-established context of others. "At every moment, the individual is both himself and the race."<sup>23</sup> Thus, anxiety, which is the precursory psychological phenomenon to sin, is both a functioning event in the individual, as well as an other-effecting moment in the dialectic of history. The biblical reality that "sin came into the world by a sin," establishes a ground of mutual human engagement in this discordant reality.<sup>24</sup> However, Kierkegaard maintains that, "since the race does not begin anew with every individual, the sinfulness of the race does indeed acquire a history."<sup>25</sup> Though possibly sinful, the experience of anxiety arises from within, wooing its inhabitant with possibility, and also temptation.

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<sup>19</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin: Kierkegaard's Writings, VIII*. Ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte and Albert Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 61.

<sup>20</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening: Kierkegaard's Writings, XIX*. Ed. and trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 29-31.

<sup>21</sup> Sin is to be defined under the definition of despair, which is to follow.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

Anxiety presents each individual on the one hand with choice, and on the other, the desire to actualize a limitless number of possibilities. This is why Kierkegaard calls anxiety “the dizziness of freedom.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, anxiety is the psychological state whereby the finite person is interpersonally flooded by endless possibilities, resulting in what can only be called ‘dizziness.’ Recall that Kierkegaard’s anthropological conceptions describe the human person as a relation, in relationship with God. In this context he writes that, “man is a synthesis of psyche and body, but he is also a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal.”<sup>27</sup> The human person exists in a place that is between worlds and desires in an eternity of possibilities before human decision. Psychologically speaking, “anxiety is a psychological state that precedes sin.”<sup>28</sup> Further, it is, “the final psychological state from which sin breaks forth in the qualitative leap.”<sup>29</sup> However, anxiety itself has come into humanity through the first sin of Adam. “The first [sin] posits the quality. Adam, then, posits sin in himself, but also for the race.”<sup>30</sup> Because of Adam’s sin, a response to anxiety stemming from the dizziness of freedom, the consequence of sin exists in all human beings. It continues, because it is inescapable under the powers of human action.<sup>31</sup>

Kierkegaard’s other descriptions of anxiety shed light on its relevance for faith, and the question at hand regarding community. This transfixing state is also described as dreaming. “So spirit is present, but as immediate, as dreaming.”<sup>32</sup> How often we wake from a pleasant dream and wish that it were true. The capacity of imagination and wonder stemming from the infinite soul seeks to live out our dreams. Kierkegaard summarizes this as the “anxious possibility of

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>31</sup> Please note page 92 of *The Concept of Anxiety*. Anxiety is the psychological state that precedes sin.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 43.

*being able.*”<sup>33</sup> It passes psychological ambiguities before us in a way that evokes the desire for actuality. “Anxiety is a *sympathetic antipathy* and an *antipathetic sympathy.*”<sup>34</sup> In other words, the anxious state prevents certitude regarding the self, and regarding relations with others. It is not sin until a selfish choice is made. However, anxiety places brokenness amidst the infinite number of possibilities without qualitative distinction, enticing, but not demanding choice. Thus, it makes sin possible or even likely on the part of the isolated individual.<sup>35</sup> The eternity within longs for reality and decision, but when this comes to pass, it once again seeks to posit another reality, and the cycle repeats. It is because of this two step dance between choice and possibility that, “freedom’s possibility announces itself in anxiety.”<sup>36</sup> Kierkegaard urges his readers to consider anxiety carefully, and to choose wisely amidst the cacophony of decisions. He cautions, “[if persons] are not willing to think eternity earnestly but are anxious about it, [then] anxiety can contrive a hundred evasions.”<sup>37</sup> Optimistically, the reality of anxiety does not necessitate a descent into sin, but rather provides possibility.

Kierkegaard’s notion of anxiety is confrontational and possibly directive: it forces his readers to acknowledge that their choices are social in nature and consequence. This does not mean that anxiety is bad in and of itself; it can be a powerful guide. “Anxiety is freedom’s possibility, and only such anxiety is through faith absolutely educative, because it consumes all finite ends and discovers all their deceptiveness.”<sup>38</sup> This response is one of trust and openness, as opposed to fear and easy choice. Possibilities do not have to frighten the individual, but rather, when given over in the moment of decision to faith, they find their purpose. The well considered

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>35</sup> Please note this distinction for the sake of a later assertion.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 155.

person is ready to act and exclaims: “Now I am ready. Then anxiety enters into his soul and searches out everything and anxiously torments everything finite and petty out of him, and then leads him where he wants to go.”<sup>39</sup> When the finite individual surrenders to the infinite part, anxiety becomes a teacher. It is, “with the help of faith [that] anxiety brings up the individuality to rest in providence.”<sup>40</sup> This is a conscious act, and an appropriation of will within a sinful context. The individual acknowledges their responsibility and surrenders this dizziness and potential sinfulness before God, who makes transformation possible. It is for this reason that Kierkegaard warns: “whoever does not wish to sink into the wretchedness of the finite is constrained in the most profound sense to struggle with the infinite.”<sup>41</sup> This is the hermeneutic lens which is necessary to approach despair, Kierkegaard’s pinnacle insight as writ in *The Sickness unto Death*.<sup>42</sup>

### *Despair is the Sickness unto Death*

The concept of anxiety is centrally important to the psychological analysis of despair, which is ultimately related to the pursuit of faith. Regarding despair’s continuity with anxiety, Howard and Edna Hong write in the historical introduction to *The Sickness unto Death* that this sickness, “presupposes anxiety but excludes it from consideration, inasmuch as despair is a more advantageous stage.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, despair is a function of anxiety insofar as it is a preoccupation with possibility amidst choices. Unlike anxiety, despair is reflexively concerned with the self’s relation to God, and thus reveals a potentially liberating dimension. This volume is the second part of a two stage development in the conscious awakening of the person,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>41</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 160.

<sup>42</sup> The concept of anxiety is the psychological precursor to despair, both of which are inherent universal conditions. They must be acknowledged and appropriated towards God for faith and any form of authentic community.

<sup>43</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, xi.

following *The Concept of Anxiety*. Therefore it reveals key information about Kierkegaard's anthropology, as well as speaks to the human condition as alive in a vast web of relationships. In the famous opening paragraph to this work, a complex array of words suggests that a human being comes into fullness through action, the continuous act of relating.<sup>44</sup> This act is not without direction; it is aimed towards the other. "The human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in the relating itself to itself relates to another."<sup>45</sup> The ultimate other in this formulation is God, but this contains unavoidable implications regarding the role of community in Kierkegaard's conception of faith. From here, the concept of despair is our rubric and guide.

Despair and sin are unavoidably united. Despair is a human reality, and an intensification of anxiety. Within the framework of relating, "despair is the misrelation in the relation of a synthesis that relates itself to itself."<sup>46</sup> Like anxiety, despair arises from possibility, and is a universal human sickness. Since it comes from the relation of the self to self, or a conscious reflection on one's self, it is impossible to avoid; one cannot be rid of themselves.<sup>47</sup> This is an aggregate battle, through which the person arises as a result of the finite and the infinite struggling for harmony and actualization. Kierkegaard writes that despair is a possible guide regarding the relation to God: "if there were nothing eternal in a man, he could not despair at all."<sup>48</sup> For Kierkegaard, despair is a universal human sickness, because all persons are fundamentally related to God, and are in need of internal reconciliation. Despair presents two basic choices: either one is in despair and ignores it, or one is in despair and chooses to pursue its

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<sup>44</sup> See the beginning of *The Sickness Unto Death*, especially note Kierkegaard's point—the self is an action or verb that relates, not a stagnant noun which is unmoved.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

challenge. Despair is sin, because it demonstrates that fullness of relationship with God and eternity has not yet been chosen by the individual.<sup>49</sup>

The awareness of sin via despair can potentially provide insight regarding the person's relationship with the infinite. The concepts of despair and sin possess a shared set of qualities, but are distinguished by choice—sin chooses wrongly or selfishly. A Christian must come to a fundamental awareness of their relationship with God, and all that it entails. A Christian cannot deny this reality, but must will to become a whole person.

*In order for a person to become aware of his self and of God, imagination must raise him higher than the miasma of probability, it must tear him out of this and teach him to hope and to fear—or to fear and to hope—by rendering possible that which surpasses the quantum satis [sufficient amount] of any experience.<sup>50</sup>*

In other words, the individual must embrace one of Kierkegaard's favorite values, 'inwardness,' and reflect earnestly on their relationship to God. "Sin is: before God, or with the conception of God, in despair not to will to be oneself, or in despair to will to be oneself."<sup>51</sup> Sin and despair deliver the same imperative; they are not solved through denial or reflection alone, but must be confronted by action and conversion. Kierkegaard wants to emphasize at least two specific points regarding sin, namely that it is before God, and also that one cannot confront sin without decisive action. "And what infinite reality the self gains by being conscious of existing before God, by becoming a human self whose criterion is God!"<sup>52</sup> The ordinary goals of humanity pale in comparison to the criterion of God. This expands the potential for success and failure on both ends of the spectrum, increasing the importance of reflection, earnest action and individual responsibility. In this honest and reflective context, thinking about sin fosters an awareness of the

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<sup>49</sup> Please note that the axiom, despair is sin, is not a pure tautology in Kierkegaard's thought, as is indicated by the definition of sin which follows. Not all forms of despair are necessarily sinful *de facto*, but come to be sinful through an awareness of the reality of being in despair willing not to be one's self, or by being in despair willing to be one's self before God.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 79.

difference between God and humanity, and makes possible the reality of atonement. “Orthodoxy has correctly perceived that when sin is defined negatively, all Christianity is flabby and spineless... The category of sin or how sin is defined is crucial for the category of repentance.”<sup>53</sup> It is with this framework that Kierkegaard advocates a stance which unflinchingly acknowledges the reality of sin as a chosen position. When one acknowledges this stance and despairs in the context of their relationship with God, then the act of faith is possible. It is for this reason that, “The opposite of sin is faith.”<sup>54</sup>

Despair presents the possibility of faith and authentic community through the practice of inward reflection. Kierkegaard’s objective in the *Sickness unto Death* is to illustrate both a psychological and anthropological reality in the human person—we are before God, and this relationship is the challenge of becoming a full human self. This existential insight resides in hope and leaves no room for nihilism, as each person is responsible for their conduct—no crowd can be blamed. Faith is the goal of the Christian, because it accepts this reality and seeks its fruition. “The formula that describes the state of the self when despair is completely rooted out is this: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it [God].”<sup>55</sup> We do not suffer anxiety and despair simply to resign ourselves to fantasy, but rather, we are blessed with these reminders so that our life may become Christian.<sup>56</sup> Our whole being can acquire direction from this sickness, which is the task of faith. It is in a faithful relationship with God that human flourishing and authentic community are possible.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 96-97.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>56</sup> To be Christian... the imitation of Christ demands other-oriented, ecstatic, kenosis-based love. A weakness in Kierkegaard’s writing arises from a lack of connection between the religious writings and the hereto for discussed method of becoming a Christian. Though concepts of despair and anxiety are mentioned in the religious writings, the converse is seldom the case.

<sup>57</sup> The succinct definition is written: “Faith is: that the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God.” Ibid., 82.



## *Interlude*

The process of coming to faith, underwritten by despair, is a continual process of conversion which necessarily involves others. Once we leave *The Sickness unto Death*, the seemingly individualistic presentation of Kierkegaard's analysis takes a turn. At best, the previous psychological introspections invite the consideration of others, or at least do not preclude reflection on this subject. On another level, this must be the case in order to remain faithful to the New Testament Scriptures. At this point, at least two questions arise: In what way are others involved in the life of faith? Where is community in the theology of Søren Kierkegaard? It is clear from our previous analyses that others are not necessary in the moment of introspection, while at the same time they most certainly are faith's initial heralds. *The Philosophical Fragments* indicates that the individual relationship with God is unavoidable regarding divine truth.<sup>58</sup> However, *The Philosophical Fragments* contains the beginning of an evolving theme in the religious works, namely, that Christ teaches us faith through his example: *kenosis*.<sup>59</sup> The self-emptying model of Christ requires others, both as the means and the goal of service. Kierkegaard probably does not explicitly follow this path of development because he is responding to the individualistic illness of Christendom in his time, and is working from that reality towards the Christian ideal as modeled in Jesus Christ. Regardless, *The Philosophical Fragments* plants a seed; it establishes both a precedent and a necessary dimension for others within modern Christianity. Kierkegaard's thought follows in this succession: The path to faith comes through an awareness of the individual in sin and despair before God; once this has been

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<sup>58</sup> The *Philosophical Fragments* establishes a basic heuristic dichotomy of learning methods between the Socratic and the Godly. This text indicates that the teacher, Christ, is not merely an occasion for learning, but is simultaneous both the necessary occasion and the lesson in himself. Again, the individual's relationship with God is highlighted. While relations to other persons at best serves as a means of expediting awakening regarding the mundane, Truth in its highest sense can only come from the God.

<sup>59</sup> See my work on *Kenosis Christology* in Kierkegaard.

acknowledged, one is ready for continual conversion, which involves others. Kierkegaard would necessarily acknowledge others as the initial providers of access to faith, no matter how corrupt. As we have seen in the concepts of anxiety and despair, Kierkegaard confronts Christendom with an inward retreat towards authentic faith, a position that takes the responsibility of the individual seriously. If this process is successful, it in no way precludes the faith community, but rather necessitates an other-directed dimension of practice. Kierkegaard's better moments imply this and his worst moments do not reject such sentiments. It is with this criterion in mind that I direct our thoughts to Kierkegaard's writing on faith.

### *Faith and Conversion*

The process of coming to faith is life-long; for Kierkegaard, it cannot be achieved without inwardness. As St. Augustine wrote, and Kierkegaard reiterates, faith is the self resting transparently in God. This is an unattainable goal by human standards, and thus for Kierkegaard, faith is impossible without total reliance on grace. However, most members of Christendom misperceive their closed and hubristic ways as open and humble avenues—they remain “spiritless;” they are irresponsible.<sup>60</sup> Thus Kierkegaard's preoccupation isn't so much with the way of faith itself, but rather his concern is how Christians must walk the path.<sup>61</sup> He perceives inwardness as the surest way of discovering the correct course. Inwardness receives great prominence in the process of coming to faith, because it wrestles with the eternity in a person and fosters honesty or responsibility along with humility. This quality is Kierkegaard's inoculation against the crowd mentality, as he writes, “without inwardness, an adherent of the most rigid orthodoxy may be demonic.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, faith can fail without sufficient internal

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<sup>60</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard*. Ed. Charles Moore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 135.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

attention to the God relation. Anxiety and despair can then be constructive of both individual and communal paths of faith via inwardness, healing the person's sensibilities to reject the tyranny of the crowd. Inwardness does not deny truth or attempt to possess it, but rather allows it to permeate.<sup>63</sup> It is in this immersion that one comes face to face with the reality of who they are and who they could be. Kierkegaard would also argue that inwardness is not a purely isolating endeavor. It allows the development of self which then can be given for others. This *examen* or prayerful self survey is often a contradiction for the modern person, as Kierkegaard writes, "[the contemporary person] does not die *with* deliberation but *from* deliberation."<sup>64</sup> Kierkegaard challenges his contemporaries to develop themselves as subjects, growing from the pains of anxiety and despair. In this state of awareness, a person encounters choice and possibly conversion; it is the moment when faith is possible.

The moment is a progressively developing theme throughout Kierkegaard's authorship and is the capstone of his late writings. It encapsulates several issues in the human response to God, specifically, freedom, conversion, and the leap.<sup>65</sup> Kierkegaard writes that, "only when the man is there, and when he ventures as it must be ventured...then is the moment—and then the circumstances obey the man of the moment."<sup>66</sup> The moment is a state of awareness, where one encounters inherent finitude and infinity as a choice; freedom and decision can become transcendent. In short, the moment is the decisive location of encounter with the paradox of Christ. "The moment is heaven's gift... a Christian says: to the believer."<sup>67</sup> It is in this moment given by God, that a person applies their inwardness towards becoming fully human. Faith

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>64</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age and of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper Perennial, 1962), 33.

<sup>65</sup> The moment is the critical point of decision as illustrated in the *Philosophical Fragments*. It is the instant when decision meets actuality, and where potency and choice define a person.

<sup>66</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Moment and Late Writings, Kierkegaard's Writings, XXIII*. Ed. and trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 338.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 339.

relates itself as possibility in the moment.<sup>68</sup> This presents the individual Christian with the opportunity to appropriate the findings of inwardness, to be permeated by truth, and to be transformed by the grace of God. Kierkegaard suggests in his late writings that action in the moment can verify the Christian claim. Furthermore, he argues that the aforementioned path aims towards an authentic community. When truth becomes visible in that instant, the choice of action determines whether one can aid the building up of a faith community. For Kierkegaard, faith is a dynamic engagement with one's relationality, a wrestling that espouses resignation to God and the religious well-being of others.

The process of coming to faith, or responding to the grace of God in the moment, is a never ending task. It requires ongoing acceptance of the eternal as the criterion for life over the lesser human criterion of understanding.<sup>69</sup> When Christ, the God-man is encountered as an offense to reason, the higher criterion of his existence makes the relationship between the individual and God possible. This interaction invites the individual to participate rather than to withdraw in repulsion or laxity. To have faith is to imitate Christ: he is a lowly criminal to the understandings of men, but savior in the eyes of eternity. Choosing God means letting go of one's need to understand the divine other and adopt Godly criteria for the continuing process of conversion. This action orients reason towards the *telos* of union with God. This process is always ongoing and is marked by fear and trembling, because understanding is inadequate to grasp the God-man. In short, infinite resignation and continual wrestling are the requirements of faith in this prescription, directing the will to surrender to the divine other.

From the aforementioned development, two points are noteworthy: An explicitly vertical dimension exists in Kierkegaard's writings about faith, and the expressions Kierkegaard has

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 339.

<sup>69</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity: Kierkegaard's Writings, XX*. Ed. and trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 116.

chosen are directed towards the individual reader. From the upbuilding psychological discourses (*The Concept of Anxiety*, *The Sickness unto Death*) to the edifying religious works (*Works of Love*, *Practice in Christianity*), Kierkegaard's concern as an author is exclusively directed to his individual reader. When a person is before God, that individual alone is accountable, *de facto*. His continual reference to individual responsibility leaves, superficially, no room for others in the midst of the God relation. As it is in the practice of confession, the individual alone is responsible before God; in this sense, the individual is alone before God. Within Kierkegaard's texts, this relationship receives dramatic emphasis for two basic reasons. First, he perceives hypocrisy in a claim to Christian faith which does not revolve primarily around God. Second, the ill of the modern age in Kierkegaard's eyes is the dilution of Christianity into Christendom via the permissive, crowd mentality. Thus, Kierkegaard writes to each individual, addressing the issue at its core. It is a fallacy of logic, however, to associate the methodology and content of his writings as identical—they are not homogenous.

### *Community in Kierkegaard*

There exists within the framework of Kierkegaard's approach an implicit message on the communal dimension of faith. Michael Plekon writes that Kierkegaard espouses an incarnational optimism which does not shy away from the rigors of the Christian life. Within this context, Plekon argues that Kierkegaard is a genuinely orthodox, catholic theologian. He has a foundation in creation that reflects an essentially trinitarian conceptualization, evidenced in the opening prayer to the *Works of Love*, and his interpretations of Saints John and Paul.<sup>70</sup> Kierkegaard's conceptions are Christological, paschal, and aimed towards deification, or 'building up' to use his term. "For Kierkegaard, to do the works of love, like God, is to act as God does. It is to

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<sup>70</sup> Michael Plekon, "Kierkegaard the Theologian: The Roots of His Theology in Works of Love", *Foundations of Kierkegaard's Vision of Community: Religion, Ethics, and Politics in Kierkegaard*, Ed. Connell, George and Evans, C. Stephen (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1992), 7-9.

presuppose love to be there in the omnipresent neighbor.”<sup>71</sup> Regarding the current project, Plekon notes that Kierkegaard, “does not dichotomize the love of God and the love of neighbor. These always intersect and interpenetrate”<sup>72</sup> It is because of Kierkegaard’s firm scriptural grounding that Plekon can argue for this essentially Christian inclusion of community within the relationship to God. “With God’s creation, incarnation, and the Spirit, nothing is neutral any longer... for Kierkegaard, there is nothing that God has not taken to Himself.”<sup>73</sup> In other words, every one is touched by the primary relation of the self to God. It is on this basis that Plekon boldly writes:

*Contrary to so much of the hyperindividualism of which he is accused, Kierkegaard’s theological optimism is essentially communal or social... If the life of the Church and of every Christian is the life of God, then it must be communal. The holy Trinity is the community of love, and the image of God is formed in every person, in every neighbor.*

Plekon perceives this reading as consistent with Kierkegaard’s intentions as an author, and sees the importance of community as an essential, if underdeveloped notion. Plekon encourages others to look into the non-academic, less prominent religious writings of Kierkegaard, which are not veiled with the same intention of social rehabilitation. It is amidst these negations that the core of Kierkegaard’s religious writings emerge: “God’s communion/relation with his community and the communion of each, of all that community with Him.”<sup>74</sup>

Louise Carroll Keeley critically notes that Kierkegaard distinguishes between love, and the works of love. “Love’s proper referent, [Kierkegaard] notes repeatedly, is the eternal... The work of love, as distinct from love itself, is love’s outward direction made manifest in the

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 14.

world.”<sup>75</sup> Therefore Keeley aptly notes that the community does not precede the relationship with God as the source of faith, but rather the two relate in the act of loving, which proceeds from God. Thus, Keeley’s distinction is not contrary to Plekon’s, but rather aids a more faithful reading of Kierkegaard’s priorities. Gouwens adds to this criticism, noting that Kierkegaard’s notion is properly Christian, and as such is theocentrically defined. “Kierkegaard never reduces *agape* to human relations, so that if one loves other people, then one has exhaustively ‘loved God.’”<sup>76</sup> An individual cannot substitute or avoid the primacy of the relationship with God, and it is impossible to love another in isolation, since both proceed from God as gift. Søren Kierkegaard’s fear is that theology and faith may continue to be regarded on a purely anthropological level. His response is the presentation of authentic Christianity, thus “love of the neighbor is the paradigmatic form of Christian love,” and is neither alien, nor a miss-reading of Kierkegaard’s intentions.<sup>77</sup> One comes to love God and others from the gift of faith, and this dynamic process matures the open individual for the formation of community. Keeley’s criticism does invite caution regarding a reflexive reading of insights such as Plekon’s back on to Kierkegaard’s unmistakably prescriptive structure. Gouwens reminds us that Kierkegaard is committed to an orthodox position regarding the relation with God. Other relationships stem from this central relation, which forms a dialectic point of ecstasy and return. In light of these authors, a hyperindividualist critique of Kierkegaard seems inconsistent with his deeper intentions. Further, his writings not only lean towards a distinctive place for others within the

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<sup>75</sup> Louise Carroll Keeley, “Subjectivity and World in Works of Love,” *Foundations of Kierkegaard’s Vision of Community: Religion, Ethics, and Politics in Kierkegaard*. Edited by George Connell and C. Stephen Evans (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1992), 96.

<sup>76</sup> David Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 193.

<sup>77</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Kierkegaard’s Writings*, XVI. Ed. and trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 90.

Christian context, but are founded on this premise. That said: what image (if such a conception exists) might Kierkegaard favor for the authentic Christian community?

Restlessness exists in the human person, and may find direction via an earnest application of inwardness. This aids the interpersonal and extra-personal dialectic between Christ and community. This conversation moves back and forth between inwardness, and outward praxis. “Love as the fruit of faith, binds persons together; as a ‘quality’ it is by definition ‘for others.’”<sup>78</sup> Gouwens notes that Kierkegaard’s understandings of Christianity in the later writings are profoundly social, and this is either a radical break from his early work or a subsequent development.<sup>79</sup> Kierkegaard wants to preserve the individual’s relation with God over and above the secular criteria of Christendom, so that it is unmistakably different in appearance from lesser agendas. In this way he identifies idols and makes a redirection towards authentic Christianity possible. It becomes the individual’s task to appropriate the *telos* of God, and to reflect the life of Christ. This necessarily means that to truly love one’s neighbor, concern ought to primarily reflect the relationship with God.<sup>80</sup> To love another, is to recognize the primacy of the relationship with God in the neighbor and in the self, acting to build up these relations.

### *The Works of Love, the Christian Deliberation*

Perhaps the single richest text for insight into Kierkegaard’s thoughts on community is the *Works of Love*. It was written with the social implications of faith in mind, but did not develop these thoughts explicitly.<sup>81</sup> However, this text does suggest a possible basis for developing a Kierkegaardian notion of authentic community. This is paramount because an inauthentic reading of Kierkegaard would produce unmaleable structures of community,

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<sup>78</sup> David Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 226.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 209-232.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.



organization of Christians, or ecclesiology—things which he fought to reform. Kierkegaard addresses the false paradigms, perpetuated within Christendom, and points the way towards authentic Christianity. This task can only be subjective, and requires each individual to reflect on their relationship with God. As demonstrated, this also means that each individual must also reflect with maturity on this relation and recognize it as located and practiced through human relationships. This is best captured by Kierkegaard's own words in the *Works of Love*:

“Youthfulness wants to be the only *I* in the whole world; maturity is to understand this *you* personally, even if it were not even addressed to a single other person. *You*, shall, *you* shall love the neighbor.”<sup>82</sup> To become a Christian is to reflect with earnestness upon the task of loving, which is not selfish, but is directed towards God and others. This kind of reflection and action will be alien to our age as it was to his. To love is ecstasy in the classical sense; it is not centered solely on pleasure or possession, but overflows and spills out onto others. Kierkegaard reminds Christians and the members of Christendom that human beings are not alone in the life of faith, and that being a Christian requires attentiveness to others. The temptation is and always will be to retreat into self satisfaction, and thereby alienate self from God and others—to be in despair, unwilling to be one's self. The possibility, however, is equally magnanimous. Gouwens writes that Christian love does not treat, “the other person as the ‘neighbor,’ loved... by virtue of special attractiveness, but simply as ‘the Other.’”<sup>83</sup> For Søren Kierkegaard, by the grace of God, the human person can become whole, thrive in a community of love, and rest transparently in God—this is the Gospel message. But to live as wholly Christian before God, the individual

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<sup>82</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 90.

<sup>83</sup> Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 187.

cannot exist for themselves, but must exist in community for the sake of others and their relationship with God.<sup>84</sup>

In the *Practice in Christianity*, Kierkegaard focuses upon an individual-directed approach, which is both unsystematic and also seemingly unconcerned with the appearance of Christian community. As Johnson writes in the introduction to the *Attack upon Christendom*, “I too maintain that, measured by the New Testament concept of the Church, Kierkegaard’s ecclesiology is defective.”<sup>85</sup> That said, one of Kierkegaard’s most fundamental tenants in the *Practice in Christianity* is the Christian’s necessary imitation of Christ. “Only the imitator is the true Christian.”<sup>86</sup> In Kierkegaard’s eyes, an imitator moves beyond the infinitely distant observations of an admirer, seeking to mimic the object of admiration, or in this case, Christ, the object of faith. “An Imitator is or strives to be what he is, and an admirer keeps himself personally detached.”<sup>87</sup> This means that we must do as he did, and live an ecstatic existence of self-emptying love. Being an imitator of Christ leaves no room for selfish desires or detached admiration, but rather restores the Thou, the other as worthy of reverence.<sup>88</sup> The Gospel message is a testament of upbuilding love, rather than individualizing laxity. The example of Jesus provides the image for understanding the authentic Christian community, implicit within Kierkegaard’s writings. “The Kingdom is not of this world.”<sup>89</sup> Kierkegaard, however, reiterates

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<sup>84</sup> Dr. William Cahoy argues that the polemic within *The Two Ages* reveals an essential dimension of community within Kierkegaard’s vision of faith. The authentic community is made of individuals, and guides their process of formation. “The issue is not whether we can or should relate to others. Kierkegaard has made it clear that as Christian we are *commanded* to love others and witness to them. The issue is rather *how* we are to relate to them—the concern of the subjective thinker.” *The Self in community: Søren Kierkegaard’s thought on the individual and the church*. (A Dissertation presented to the faculty of the graduate school of Yale University, 1989), 455-488, here: 467. Reproduced with permission.

<sup>85</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack upon “Christendom.”* Trans. by Walter Lowrie (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1968), XIX.

<sup>86</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 256.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

the Gospel imperative, to labor as a militant church, struggling with conversion towards the greater reconciliation of relationships with God and others.

### *Criticism and Adaptation*

At this stage, I would like to demonstrate several potential difficulties with the theology of Kierkegaard regarding community. As previously discussed, his individual directed methodology was conceived and carried out for a particular illness of Christendom in Copenhagen during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. The crowd mentality continues to pervade modern societies and reduce faith to a lax state, not to mention that Copenhagen has not arisen as a pillar of Christian virtue, despite the labors of Kierkegaard. The concepts of anxiety, despair and faith under his vision are essentially Christian, as they place responsibility on the individual. However, I argue that they are also potentially unchristian idols for the increasingly individualized contemporary world.<sup>90</sup> While the present era faces similar difficulties as Kierkegaard's, I must acknowledge his lack of adaptations and recommend a course that is more collective in nature. Kierkegaard's primary conviction is necessary: "achievement of the unity within the human self requires that the self be in unity with the transcendent eternal."<sup>91</sup> However, it is insufficient in an age when faith education is minimal and literalism is rife.

I propose that Kierkegaard's insights regarding the individual are best tempered by the icon of authentic Christian community. The necessity of a catechetical formation which maintains the two strands of communal and individual formation in procreative tension cannot be overemphasized. Proper faith formation maintains the responsibility of the individual and the primacy of the relationship with God, while additionally requiring the role and sanctifying potential of the faith community as indicated by Matthew 23: where two or more are gathered, I

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<sup>90</sup> I make this argument on the basis of Christ's example as a gatherer of persons into a faith community.

<sup>91</sup> Arnold B. Come, *Kierkegaard as Theologian*, 181.

am in their midst.<sup>92</sup> Kierkegaard's thinking begs for the addition of a contemporary extension. The inclusion of a communal theology in Kierkegaard's paradigm allows an already sound Christological perspective to achieve praxis in a viable ecclesial model. This proposal will eliminate the deficit as indicated in Johnson's critique, while also accenting the strengths presented by Gouwens, Keeley and Plekon. Further, this proposal would counter the unforeseen results of both lax Christianity and radical isolation through a productive dialectic between individuals via the priority of the God relation. This ideal preserves the unique development of each individual subject, while placing such growth in the context of the mutual development of others in the community, rather than apart from them. Above all, I make this proposition on the basis of Kierkegaard's conviction to the Gospel as written in the *Works of Love*. The message of Christ is not one of laxity or self-righteousness, but of wholeness with God and others—this is the Christian vocation. The interdependence of both the vertical and horizontal dimensions cannot be overemphasized in the praxis of authentic Christian faith.

The authorship of Kierkegaard reveals the heart of what it means to be a Christian, namely, to be Christ for others. This is a founding principle of Christian community, and ought to underscore further developments. Beyond this principle, the philosophical theology of Kierkegaard delivers a potent psychological/spiritual path for our age. His analysis of anxiety, despair, and the general restlessness of humanity are existentially vivid and especially poignant for ailing Christian institutions in our modern era. These developments prove to be essential medicinal aids for the greater tasks of developing personhood, faith, and community. Søren Aabye Kierkegaard has not proposed a systematic notion of Christian community, but has made it clear that this community begins with each individual's relationship with God, the reason for

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<sup>92</sup> Which Bible?

such a community's fellowship.<sup>93</sup> The goal of one's inward reflection and relationship with God does not remain enclosed, but becomes ecstatic as imaged in Christ. Each member of this community imitates Christ through *kenosis*, or self emptying works of love, and is likewise called to inwardly discern their responsibilities as an individual subject. Beyond this, Kierkegaard's theological position on community remains imprecise, worthy of debate, and essentially open for adaptation. I conclude that the theology of Kierkegaard has one unavoidable implication for the identity of a Christian community: the Christian response to faith demands the commitment to love others on the basis of one's relationship with God as imitator of Christ. Kierkegaard has directed our focus to God, who tells us this: "*You, shall, you shall love the neighbor.*"<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Dr. William Cahoy remarks that this is precisely the difference between the crowd and the Christian community—the priority of relationship with God. See p.465.

<sup>94</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 90.

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