

ON A MISSION FROM GOD: A MISSIONAL READING  
OF SØREN KIERKEGAARD AND THE ATTACK UPON CHRISTENDOM

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*Introduction*

Søren Kierkegaard offers an interesting voice to bring into dialogue with the still-developing discipline of missional theology. At first glance, there are reasons why the two would not make good dancing partners: missional theology remains inherently related to relationship, while scholars often present Kierkegaard as the champion of the individual. Missional theology directly concerns the Church, while it is sometimes doubtful that Kierkegaard possesses any use for a congregation at all. Be that as it may, Kierkegaard does not completely neglect the topic of mission. The few times Kierkegaard does address mission, mission is a very positive concept that is an integral aspect of discipleship, or one's faithful response to Christ.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, Kierkegaard did hold the concept of church to be a likewise necessary aspect of how Christian witness in the world was to be understood.<sup>2</sup> In a journal entry from 1853, Kierkegaard writes, "How cruel then, the more strictly it is taken that there is no salvation outside the church, not to become a missionary."<sup>3</sup> It can be said that the whole of Kierkegaard's work is his attempt to be a missionary.<sup>4</sup> This paper will endeavor to show that Kierkegaard, far from being unrelated to mission, offers a missional praxis of witness for the church today and especially for the Church in culturally-Christian contexts. By using Kierkegaard's articulation of "Christendom" as a lens to exegete our own culture for our missional context, it will show how Kierkegaard's category of the single individual can be read missionally to reorient the foundation of Christian witness to the person of Jesus Christ and demand of every Christian an embodied evangelism that bears witness to this truth.

While Kierkegaard's critique of the church is harsh, it is more indicative of his context than his contempt. Kierkegaard does refer to the church as the "true mother" (to the single individual, of course) and he cannot be dismissed simply as a detractor lest we miss his constructive contribution.<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard goes so far as to blame most heresies on a deficient doctrine of the church as opposed to the church itself.<sup>6</sup> As to the church's missional nature, Kierkegaard was well aware. Kierkegaard was also certainly cognizant of Christian missionary work, though it is clear that Kierkegaard was more concerned about Christian mission within

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<sup>1</sup> Pia Søltoft, "Søren Kierkegaard on Mission in Christendom: Upbuilding Language and Its Rhetoric Understood as the Fundament of Mission," *Svensk Missionstidskrift* 95:4 (2007), 396

<sup>2</sup> Aaron Edwards, "Taking the 'Single Individual' Back to Church: The Possibility of a Kierkegaardian Ecclesiology." *Theology Today* 72, no. 4 (January 2016), 437

<sup>3</sup> Søltoft, Kierkegaard on Mission in Christendom, 395

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 396

<sup>5</sup> Matthew D. Kirkpatrick, *Attacks on Christendom in a World Come of Age: Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer, and the Question of "Religionless Christianity"* (Pickwick Publ., 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. 7 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967-1968), 2:2045

Christendom than in “pagan” countries, and it is to his idea of Christendom we now turn.<sup>7</sup> The concept of Christendom is not limited to a specific historical situation of unification between the church and state. Kierkegaard’s concern focuses more on the implications of such a situation and can be defined as when the Christian faith is “in vogue and thus existentially enslaved to an external source which is not God.”<sup>8</sup> This means that the condition of Christendom has to do with a theological principle concerning the existential mission of the church rather than Kierkegaard’s (or Constantine’s) particular historical moment of Christianity’s existence. Kierkegaard’s *Attack Upon Christendom* furthers the development of a missional theology for the church in Christendom begun by Luther when he articulated a “priesthood of all believers,” and built upon by Calvin’s understanding of God’s grace effecting justification, forgiveness, and sanctification in a connected process that produces public witness in the life of the community.<sup>9</sup>

### *Christendom*

There are numerous reasons why an understanding of Christendom may inform the understanding of context for American Christians today who are concerned with missional theology. Guder points to a vocal conservative movement in the United States actively trying to restore Christendom.<sup>10</sup> Stone adds that some American Christians may neglect the largest competitor--nationalism or civil religion--precisely because “*they are us.*”<sup>11</sup> For Guder, the partnership between church and state has been replaced by the partnership of church and marketplace, and he points to both the absence of tension with entrepreneurialism as well as the exportable forms of church that are most “successful,” speaking in economic, cost/benefit terms, to illustrate this.<sup>12</sup> Stone’s diagnosis of the church as being enamored and insulated from mission by its own success finds ample agreement in the work of Kierkegaard.<sup>13</sup> The distinction Stone draws between martyrdom and chaplaincy is indeed a distinction between Kierkegaard’s true Christianity and Christendom. In speaking of the misguided state of the Church’s mission in Christendom, Kierkegaard offers this parable:

“During 1800 years, kingdoms, countries, nations, etc. have been caught, a continent became Christian and has been Christian through these many centuries—an enormous catch, enormous catch, a marvelous fulfilment of our Lord’s prophecy! Suppose a fisherman ... got an order to catch whales and then caught a million sardines—an enormous catch, an enormous catch! ... we have lowered the standard for being a Christian and thus have caught all the more. Instead of whales, we caught sardines—but

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<sup>7</sup> Olli-Pekka Vainio, “Kierkegaard, Mission and Postmodernism,” *Svensk Missionstidskrift* 95:4 (2007), 411

<sup>8</sup> Edwards, “Taking the ‘Single Individual’ Back to Church,” 443

<sup>9</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 70

<sup>10</sup> Guder, *Called to Witness*, 29

<sup>11</sup> Bryan P. Stone, *Evangelism after Pluralism: The Ethics of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 12

<sup>12</sup> Guder, *Called to Witness*, 36

<sup>13</sup> Stone, *Evangelism after Pluralism*, 3

countless millions of them ... How wonderfully our Lord's prophecies have been fulfilled"<sup>14</sup>

Put another way, "We are what is called a "Christian" nation--but in such a sense that not a single one of us is in the character of the Christianity of the New Testament."<sup>15</sup> For Kierkegaard, the economic emphasis on producing numbers is a peril and stumbling block in the way of recognizing the lack of authentic Christianity: the "big number" is meaningless if the individual little numbers are wrong.

### *The Self and the Other*

With the above example firmly in mind, reconsider the Kierkegaardian emphasis on the individual. The Kierkegaardian insistence on "the single individual" is arguably the most problematic aspect in bringing Kierkegaard into any talk concerning mission or even ecclesiology. It can be difficult to see the church as even a possibly positive influence, or why the individual need concern themselves with the Church at all.<sup>16</sup> However, far from being a short-circuiting of the missional conversation, the recovery of the single individual category may actually be a help for the contemporary church's recapturing of the core missional message and being, says Aaron Edwards.<sup>17</sup> In Kierkegaard's view, a Christendom-church in which true faith is diminishing actually illuminates the importance of individual response, in contrast to movements to reform contemporary church mission that often see individuality as a problem to be overcome.<sup>18</sup> This is rooted in the idea that individual transformation can reorient the starting point for church telos from an abstract idea of "community" back to faith in Jesus Christ. Kierkegaard saw the church as being composed of individual persons "standing before God as he is revealed in Christ," who know themselves "judged, forgiven, restored to fellowship, taken out of 'the world,' and sent back into the world as witness for service."<sup>19</sup> If this is to be true, says Kierkegaard, then the way one comes to faith is essential. One's maturation in Christianity cannot be skipped or happened upon. One cannot substitute anything in the place of following Jesus with all the energy, hard work, and time it requires.<sup>20</sup> Christendom, in effect, prevents this essential development. The success of "Christianity" leads the contemporary Christian in Christendom to assume the truth of the religion and glibly accept the claims and "beliefs" of the faith. Christians in Christendom can in effect stand on the shoulders of theological giants and leave the thinking, justification, and spiritual heavy-lifting to them. Immediately visible is how

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<sup>14</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 3:2979

<sup>15</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Attack Upon "Christendom," 1854-1855* : translated, with an introduction; classic ... reprint (London: Forgotten Books, 2018), 30

<sup>16</sup> Edwards, "Taking the 'Single Individual' Back to Church," 435

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 444

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 444

<sup>19</sup> Owen C. Thomas, "Kierkegaard's Attack upon "Christendom" and the Episcopal Church," *Anglican Theological Review* 94:1 (2012), 66

<sup>20</sup> Mark A. Tietjen, *Kierkegaard: A Christian Missionary to Christians* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2016), 1875

incongruous this is with Christianity as “the way,” that is, a necessity of existentially walking a certain path.<sup>21</sup> Kierkegaard points out the visible mismatch between mission and Christendom:

“Where is the scripture text that substantiates the rightness, the authorization, of any such galimatias as the established order of Christendom? According to the New Testament, Christianity is a continuing mission, every Christian a missionary: Go out and proclaim my teaching - and nowadays we are all Christians in such a way that it never even remotely occurs to any one of us to become missionaries, except for a few unfortunate characters who grab at it as the last way out - horrible satire.”<sup>22</sup>

In this way one can see how Kierkegaard could view even calls to church reform as ways for people to keep themselves preoccupied from existential reformation. Thus, individuality of its members is essential for the Church, says Kierkegaard. Stone in very similar language points out the approach to an ecclesial ethic begins with the distinctiveness of Jesus Christ and his way and the particularity of a people “called and empowered to give themselves over to that way.”<sup>23</sup>

### *The Church Militant, the Church Missional*

Kierkegaard’s critique of pastors in Christendom is a missional critique that sums up many central concerns to the argument of this paper. His critiques are (1) their lives do not reflect the sermons they preach, (2) they do not really believe what they preach and so their preaching “jams the lock on imitation,” (3) pastors promote doctrine over imitation of Christ and thus faith is intellectualized, (4) pastors do not understand nor do they care to understand the non-Christian forms of existence in the context where they live, and (5) pastors offend for the wrong reasons.<sup>24</sup>

The ministers in Christendom receive special attention in Kierkegaard’s work, but the critique stands for the entire Church in Christendom.

In contrast to the church in Christendom, the “Church Triumphant,” Kierkegaard refers to true expression of Christianity as the Church Militant.<sup>25</sup> This term does not equate to a kind of wholesale antagonism towards wider culture, it simply recognizes the constant struggle against the temptation to place ourselves or anything else about Christ’s reign over the lives of Christians.<sup>26</sup> The Church Militant may be faithfully interpreted as the Church Missional. This way of the Christian life is defined by its way of self-denial and death to self. One of the reasons this is challenging is the way in which this witness is received by those who are not of the same faith.<sup>27</sup> This life gives witness to the gospel in action. To this witness some may respond in faith, and others most certainly will not.

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<sup>21</sup> Tietjen, 1861

<sup>22</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, Journals and Papers, Pap. X5 A122 /JP 2731

<sup>23</sup> Stone, *Evangelism after Pluralism*, 22

<sup>24</sup> Tietjen, *Kierkegaard: A Christian Missionary to Christians*, 1811

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 1910

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 1917

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 1903

This witness sooner or later comes to the question of offense. Kierkegaard identifies counterfeit Christianity as appealing to the carnal pleasures, offering “syrupy sweets,” looking to numb any offense or paradox in the faith to make it palatable.<sup>28</sup> Kierkegaard distinguishes between offense that is essentially Christian and offense that is non-essential. By way of explanation, essential Christian offense occurs at a particular and exclusive feature of the Christian faith (e.g., the idea of the incarnation) while nonessential offense most often concerns a certain morality, being defined as offense in something other than the person of Christ. We must examine nonessential offense to qualify its place in Christian witness, but Kierkegaard is not suggesting it has no place, only that nonessential offense outside the service of Christ can veer into moralism and a lack of grace, and such a presentation can harm.<sup>29</sup> Kierkegaard provides us a way to communicate the doctrine of sin, a doctrine that is sure to offend, in a way different than it is presented in Christendom. Existential communication of contrition and shared reflection on one’s own sin in solidarity with others communicates humility, repentance, and forgiveness as essential aspects of the doctrine of sin.<sup>30</sup> This is of course because for both Kierkegaard and others attempting to articulate a faithful missional theology, the “truth” is not divorced from nor can it precede truthful embodiment. When love is not only the content but the medium, we are far more likely to imitate Christ in compelling others to live Christian lives.<sup>31</sup>

### *Can I Get a Witness?*

This missional idea of witness is paramount to Kierkegaard’s articulation of true Christianity; it is not simply ultimately a self-concerned inward struggle. One of the more interesting ways to illustrate this is by considering the forms and methods of Kierkegaard’s writings themselves. Such considerations can prove paramount to interpreting Kierkegaard’s intentions. As one example, Kierkegaard can be interpreted as a religious pluralist as to his comparisons between “false Christians” and “true pagans” in his *Postscript*. However, Kierkegaard chooses to write as the pseudonym of Johannes Climacus, who becomes a character in his own right as someone who is not a Christian but is somewhat willing to possibly become a Christian someday, although for now he is deeply disappointed in the expression of Christianity in his context. Kierkegaard chooses to take up the position as an outside observer, and of this we must ask why. Kierkegaard’s aim is not to relativise the content of belief, but rather to show the importance of one’s personal, active relations to the beliefs: “While implying that there is “more truth” in a pagan who prays in truth than in a Christian who prays in untruth, he is not claiming that a sincere pagan has reached the highest point of existence.”<sup>32</sup> Kierkegaard’s use of Climacus implicitly shows a missional concern with witness as its lens. Admittedly, this is as direct as Kierkegaard will be as to mission, as it is nowhere dealt with as concrete relation to non-Christians outside of literary irony--only as a theological consequence of struggling in relation to people already Christian.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Malcolm Yarnell, “Global Choices for Twenty-First Century Christians: Bringing Clarity to Missional Theology.” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 55:1 (2012), 35

<sup>29</sup> Tietjen, *Kierkegaard: A Christian Missionary to Christians*, 1957

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 1964

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 2020

<sup>32</sup> Vainio, “Kierkegaard, Mission and Postmodernism,” 407-408

<sup>33</sup> Søltoft, “Kierkegaard on Mission in Christendom,” 397

Kierkegaard's use of the pseudonym Johannes Climacus in his mission to reintroduce Christianity into a nation of Christendom also points to the manner of communication that is required for this kind of presentation. In short, the hearer must grasp not only the content of what is being said but also the implications of the communication for how the hearer's life should be lived.<sup>34</sup> Kierkegaard referred to this evocative intent as "indirect communication." When Newbigin discusses the doctrine of revelation and the challenges to it, he argues that true knowledge is fundamentally personal. "In this context," he says, "the knowledge of God is pictured as a gift of Grace imparted to those who would receive it. It is not a piece of metaphysical information, but a personal revelation of the loving will of the Creator who Longs for his creatures to be reconciled to him."<sup>35</sup> This is in contrast to the contemporary ideal of knowledge as "something that can be stored in an electronic computer."<sup>36</sup> When Stone speaks of people encountering the good news of Jesus, he says that Christians seek to faithfully embody it in tactile, physical ways, so that it can be taken seriously. Then, he says, the choices others are left with are rejection or adoption; that is to say, to not embody the message is to reject it.<sup>37</sup>

To be clear, Kierkegaard is committed to this inherent definition of witness and gospel: In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* as well as his journals, Kierkegaard describes Christianity as an "existence-communication."<sup>38</sup> Christianity is nothing apart from something lived, and this thing called Christianity is by the nature of itself something that must be witnessed to through existence.<sup>39</sup> It is impossible to share the "good news" or join in the mission of God in a disembodied or gnostic way. Knowing cannot exist apart from doing. To say "Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life," is to say that the truth is not a true or false statement, but the personal lived life of Jesus godself: Kierkegaard writes, "Truth in the sense in which Christ is the truth is not a sum of statements, not a definition, etc., but a life." This is the case for Jesus' followers: "The being of truth is the redoubling of truth within yourself, within me, within him, that your life, my life, his life expresses the truth."<sup>40</sup> Any attempt by Christian scholarship or philosophy to make the intellectual understanding of religion or morality more important than the doing of those doctrines is undone.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Thomas, "Kierkegaard's Attack upon 'Christendom' and the Episcopal Church," 72

<sup>35</sup> Lesslie, Newbigin, *Lesslie Newbigin: Missionary Theologian: A Reader*, compiler Paul Weston (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2006), 26

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 33

<sup>37</sup> Stone, *Evangelism after Pluralism*, 7

<sup>38</sup> Tietjen, *Kierkegaard: A Christian Missionary to Christians*, 1824

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 1824

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 1824

<sup>41</sup> John W. Elrod, *Kierkegaard and Christendom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

*Missionaries to the Church Today*

One implication of this message of embodiment is that the church is freed from any defensiveness at self-critique aimed at identifying where the gospel remains unembodied. The Church in Christendom must bristle at any threat of critique as it undermines its truth, power, and authority. Newbigin points out that any interpersonal contact where witness is concerned necessitates the need for judgment and correction. Our Christianity is “at risk.”<sup>42</sup> Taken seriously, theology of embodied witness means it is essential that the church’s mission must be self-directed as much as it is directed toward any external “target” audience. To be sure, verbal communication and proclamation does remain a part of this embodied witness. This is a communication pointed toward actuality, a determination of a concrete action.<sup>43</sup>

Kierkegaard’s consideration of rhetoric and language is best understood against this backdrop of embodied witness; it is the reason Kierkegaard is highly critical of apologetics.<sup>44</sup> Of sermons, Kierkegaard writes bluntly, “we should not hesitate to preach against Christianity in Christian sermons.”<sup>45</sup> Kierkegaard’s critique of Christian worship and sermons is illustrated by his parable of the geese:

Every Sunday they gathered together and a goose preached. The gist of the sermon was as follows: “What a high destiny geese have, to what a high goal the creator . . . had appointed geese. With the help of their wings they could fly away to distant regions, blessed regions, where they really had their homes, for here they were but alien sojourners.” . . . There were a few individual geese among them who looked poorly and grew thin. The other geese said among themselves: “There you see what happens when you take seriously this business of wanting to fly.” Kierkegaard concludes, “So also with Christendom’s worship services.”<sup>46</sup>

Kierkegaard’s critique has to do with how Christian worship in this context actually runs counter to its missional purpose. In his own words, “And now with regard to preaching! Should it not be just as earnest! The person who is going to preach out 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 extemporaneously without specific preparation.”<sup>47</sup> Kierkegaard implicitly considers mission an inherent part of the church's character. As he focuses first and foremost on mission among those already considered Christian, sermon plays an important role.<sup>48</sup> This is one avenue where the single individual is understood

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<sup>42</sup> Newbigin, *Missionary Theologian*, 2941

<sup>43</sup> Michael Frost & Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003).

<sup>44</sup> Tietjen, *Kierkegaard: A Christian Missionary to Christians*, 2020

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 1811

<sup>46</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, vol. 3, L-R, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1975), 391

<sup>47</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard’s Writings, XXI: For self-examination; Judge for yourself* ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1990), 9

<sup>48</sup> Søltoft, “Kierkegaard on Mission in Christendom,” 398

not as an *isolated* individual, but as being in relationship, as preaching is a dialogical form between speaker and auditor.<sup>49</sup> Kierkegaard explicitly emphasizes that one person ought to influence the religious life of others.<sup>50</sup> Much attention is paid to the question of linguistics, and his publications and journals have myriad references to Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle’s work of linguistics and rhetoric.<sup>51</sup> This kind of mission in Christendom necessitates attention to speech.<sup>52</sup> The “preacher” who is a missionary in Christendom is linked to the message and the relationship to the auditor: mission is here conceived as struggling with the difficulties of life and set against the background of finding occasion to speak but also, “the existence from which he goes forth to preach and to which he comes back from preaching.”<sup>53</sup> This is, of course, a requirement not for the professional clergy but for every Christian. In his *Journals and Papers*, Kierkegaard says,

“But if I lived some place where everybody is a true Christian (an impossibility), then the answer must be: If this were the case (although it cannot be) - then you are *eo ipso* a missionary. But we have completely forgotten that to be a Christian means essentially to be a missionary. Christianity in repose is *eo ipso* not Christianity. As soon as anything of that sort appears, it means: become a missionary.”<sup>54</sup>

In summation, a Kierkegaardian praxis of mission is vital to the church in places of “Christendom.” Kierkegaard helps Christians to resist the temptation to extract from the incarnation of Christ any kind of disembodied philosophical “truth” to which one can simply intellectually assent and gives the church an incarnational framework for understanding its missional calling especially in culturally-Christian contexts. When heard in the missional conversation, Kierkegaard gives us helpful ways to destabilize the mission and methods of Christendom compromised by colonialism. His work harmonizes with more modern missional voices that have again shown the missional de-stigmatization of cultures, respect of the other, humility of the self of the missionary, and the person of God in Christ as the center of mission.

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 398

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 397

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 400

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 396

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 399

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 403

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