

provocations



■ *spiritual writings of*

kierkegaard

Acclaim for *Provocations*

Richard Mouw, Fuller Theological Seminary

Kierkegaard's writings seem to get more "contemporary" every year. This well-selected collection of writings should be read and re-read by everyone who is attempting to minister to our present generation.

William Willimon, Duke University Chapel

Moore has done us a great service in sifting through Kierkegaard and giving us his essential writings. Here is a book to be savored, enjoyed, and yes, provoked by.

Donald Bloesch, author, *The Crisis of Piety*

An important and helpful guide to Kierkegaard's spirituality.

Gregory A. Clark, North Park University

Since Kierkegaard scholarship has become a cottage industry, it is has become possible to exchange Kierkegaard's passion for a passion for Kierkegaard's works. Moore's introduction and collection retrieve the passion that animates Kierkegaard himself. That passion, with all its force, still addresses the reflective reader.

Vernon Grounds, Chancellor, Denver Seminary

The editor needs to be congratulated on discerning in the overwhelming task of choosing the best when everything is of the highest quality. This book is an outstanding addition to Kierkegaard publications. It will influence readers to become enthusiastic students of his Christ-centered thought.

Daniel Taylor, author, *The Myth of Certainty*

I discover in Kierkegaard an honesty, passion, and insight into the human condition and the life of faith that speaks to my deepest needs. Kierkegaard is one of a small handful of thinkers with whom every reflective Christian must come to terms.

Clark H. Pinnock, author, *Flame of Love*

Provocations brings Søren Kierkegaard, a fountain of deep wisdom and radical faith, to readers who might otherwise have difficulty understanding him. Here one finds many solid and well-chosen excerpts from across the entire literary corpus of this most paradoxical prophet and insightful philosopher.

Arthur F. Holmes, author, *Fact, Value, and God*

...Provides a helpful overview of Kierkegaard's thinking that cannot be gained from reading just one or two of his books. *Provocations* captures his spirit and core concerns without neglecting lesser themes, while preserving his style and readying the reader for his major works.

Diogenes Allen, author, *Spiritual Theology*

A comprehensive selection from Kierkegaard's massive output, arranged so as to give the reader an appreciation of the main themes and preoccupations of Kierkegaard's thought.

Colin Brown, Fuller Theological Seminary

Moore has provided enough introductory material to enable the reader to understand Kierkegaard's thought in the context of his life and times. Otherwise, his judicious selection lets the texts speak for themselves. Here is a book for meditation, for quiet reading, for faith and for understanding.

Kelly James Clark, author, *When Faith Is Not Enough*

With its excellent introduction and astute selections of texts, this book unleashes the ferociously important Kierkegaard. This work admirably clarifies Kierkegaard's often opaque but passionate thoughts on faith, freedom, and the meaning of life.

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P R O V O C A T I O N S
Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard

Compiled and Edited by
Charles E. Moore

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Introduction

Søren Kierkegaard has been accused of being one of the most frustrating authors to read. He has also been praised as one of the most rewarding. Frustrating, because his style is so dense, his thought so complex, and his words so harsh. Rewarding, because embedded within his writings and journals are metaphors and truths so deep and vivid that they can overwhelm you with an almost blinding clarity. Kierkegaard is not one to be read lightly, lest you get burned.

The purpose of this collection is twofold. The first is to make Kierkegaard accessible. Even for the brightest, Kierkegaard is tough going. Walter Lowrie, Kierkegaard's most devoted biographer, writes: "Kierkegaard exacts of his reader a very great effort. He declines to make things easy for him by presenting a 'conclusion,' and he obliges him, therefore, to approach the goal by the same difficult path he himself has trod."

Even Kierkegaard's fellow Danes found him difficult. This is unfortunate. Contained within his writings are some of the richest, most illuminating passages on faith and commitment ever penned. To help unearth some of these treasures, I have taken the liberty to abridge lengthy pieces, paraphrase complex passages, and tighten and simplify convoluted constructions.

Secondly, this collection is meant to present in as concise a way as possible the "heart" of Kierkegaard. By heart I mean first those pieces that are concerned with the core themes of his pro-

lific output, second, those that exemplify the essence of his thought, and last but not least, his passion.

Kierkegaard's Central Passion

Kierkegaard wrote industriously and rapidly, and under a variety of pen-names, presenting various esthetic, ethical, and religious viewpoints on life. His writings display such a wide range of genre and style, and his thought covers such a variety of subjects that even he himself felt compelled to write a book to explain his agenda. Despite this, Kierkegaard was single mindedly driven. He writes in his Journal: “The category for my undertaking is: to make people aware of what is essentially Christian.” Two things are noteworthy. First, Kierkegaard aims to make us *aware*. “I have worked for a restlessness oriented toward inward deepening.” “My whole life is an epigram calculated to make people aware.” In short, Kierkegaard’s task was not the introduction of new ideas, a theology or philosophy of life. Rather, he said “My task is in the service of truth; and its essential form is obedience.” Kierkegaard was fundamentally existential: “to keep people awake, in order that religion may not again become an indolent habit...” His aim was to provoke the individual so as to become an individual in the truth. The last thing Kierkegaard wanted to do was to leave his reader the same – intellectually enlightened yet inwardly unchanged.

Early in his life, Kierkegaard made the discovery that one must “find a truth which is true *for me* – the idea for which I can live and die.” Part of the human predicament was that we are all interested in far too many things and thus are not decidedly committed to any one thing. As he writes in his Journal:

What I really lack is to be clear in my mind *what I am to do*, not what I am to know, except in so far as a certain understanding must precede every action. The thing is to understand myself, to see what

God really wishes *me* to do...What good would it do me if the truth stood before me, cold and naked, not caring whether I recognized her or not, and producing in me a shudder of fear rather than a trusting devotion? Must not the truth *be taken up into my life*? That is what I now recognize as the most important thing.

Kierkegaard's central task as an author, therefore, was to help the reader make the truth his own. He deliberately and carefully plotted his entire authorship to show his readers what it means to exist, and what inwardness and subjectivity signify. His strategy was to help them take a decisive stand: "I wish to make people aware so that they do not squander and dissipate their lives."

Secondly, Kierkegaard is concerned with what is essentially Christian: "Through my writings I hope to achieve the following: to leave behind me so accurate a characterization of Christianity and its relationships in the world that an enthusiastic, noble-minded young person will be able to find in it a map of relationships as accurate as any topographical map from the most famous institutes."

Of what does this map consist? In *Practice of Christianity*, Kierkegaard writes: "If anything is to be done, one must try to introduce Christianity into Christendom." The backdrop to his entire authorship was a Danish Lutheranism that had degenerated into a nominal state-religion. Three things, in particular, marred the church of his day: (1) Intellectualism – the "direct mental assent to a sum of doctrines"; (2) Formalism – "battalions upon battalions" of unbelieving believers; and (3) Pharisaism – a herd of hypocritical clergy that ignore the Christianity they were hired to preach. It was in this climate that Kierkegaard felt compelled to reintroduce Christianity. He sought to provide a kind of map that would, for the sake of Christian truth, steer people away from Christendom. "An apostle's task is to spread

Christianity, to win people to Christianity. My task is to disabuse people of the illusion that they are Christians – yet I am serving Christianity.”

By Christianity Kierkegaard did not mean a system of correct doctrine or a set of behaviors: “The struggle is not between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. My struggle, much more inward, is about the *how* of the doctrine. I say that someone can accept the whole doctrine, but in presenting it he destroys it.” Kierkegaard’s contention was that despite sound doctrine, or the *what* of faith, “the lives people live demonstrate that there is really no Christianity – or very little.” Genuine Christianity, according to Kierkegaard, is anything but doctrine. It is a way of being in the truth before God by following Jesus in self-denial, sacrifice, suffering, and by seeking a primitive relationship with God. Unfortunately, doctrine is what people want. And the reason for this is “because doctrine is the indolence of aping and mimicking for the learner, and doctrine is the way to power for the teacher, and doctrine collects people.”

Kierkegaard’s thinking originated in a violent revulsion for the spurious spirituality of his day. His difficulty was to find a way out of the confusion that consistently undermined anything truly Christian. How in the world are we to get out of the mess of Christendom, he wondered, when millions, due to the accident of geography, are Christians? How are we to get Christendom to drop its whole mass of nominal members when “it is the interest of the clergyman’s trade that there be as many Christians as possible?” How, exactly, are we to *become* Christian, especially when “one is a Christian of a sort?”

Kierkegaard’s strategy was to act as a corrective. He explains: “The person who is to provide the corrective must study the weak sides of the established order scrupulously and penetratingly and then one-sidedly present the opposite – with expert

one-sidedness.” This revelation is important to keep in mind while reading Kierkegaard. All the same he said, “a corrective made into the norm is by that very fact confusing.” Therefore, one should not lift his thought up and turn it into a norm. He felt his situation to be desperate, so he sounded the alarm accordingly. Yet he did not do this as some self-proclaimed prophet. He wrote as one who was without authority and who himself needed reforming: “What I have said to myself about myself is true – I am a kind of secret agent in the highest service. The police use secret agents, too...But the police do not think of reforming their secret agents. God does.”

Kierkegaard was adamant about his own Christian deficiency: “For my part I do not call myself a ‘Christian’ (thus keeping the ideal free), but I am able to make it evident that the others are still less than I.” This is not meant as a judgment. Kierkegaard’s hope was to arouse, to expose the deception he, as well as everyone else, was under. He never felt worthy of doing this. But he was compelled to strike out. “I want to make the crowd aware of their own ruin. Understand me – or do not misunderstand me. I do not intend to strike them (alas, one cannot strike the crowd) – no, I will constrain them to strike me.”

Kierkegaard in Context

In reading Kierkegaard it would be a mistake to ignore the inner anguish of his own personal life. The currents of his thought spring forth from within, as much as they do from his broader cultural setting. Although a complete biography of Kierkegaard is beyond the scope of this introduction, it is important for our purposes to understand the four significant crisis relationships in his life. These relationships constitute Kierkegaard the man, and grasping them is paramount in understanding him as a writer.

The Earthquake

Kierkegaard's father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, was 57, his mother, Ane Sørensdatter Kierkegaard, 45, when he was born in 1813. Outwardly his childhood was happy and calm. Morally and intellectually he was formed by his father, and he could afterwards say that "everything was done to develop his mind as richly as possible." Because he was his father's youngest child and his favorite, the intimacy between them was great. But Kierkegaard describes his upbringing as "an insane upbringing." His father was a pietistic, gloomy spirit, an old man whose melancholy sat like a weight on his children.

Kierkegaard's family was plagued by both physical and psychological instability. Only two of the children lived past age thirty-four. Three of his sisters, then two of his brothers, then his mother, had died in rapid succession. Kierkegaard's father was convinced that he would outlive all of his children, a conviction his son apparently shared. Kierkegaard's brother Peter was forced to resign his position as bishop because of emotional difficulties. Inwardly, Kierkegaard felt a gnawing sense of "silent despair." From childhood on he always felt under the power of "a monstrously brooding temperament." In an 1846 journal entry he reflects:

An old man who himself was extremely melancholy gets a son in his old age who inherits all this melancholy – but who also has a mental-spiritual elasticity enabling him to hide his melancholy. Furthermore, because he is essentially and eminently healthy of mind and spirit, his melancholy cannot dominate him, but neither is he able to throw it off; at best he manages to endure it.

Early on Kierkegaard realized that there was a strange inconsistency between his father's piety and his inner unrest. In another journal entry he writes:

The greatest danger for a child, where religion is concerned, is not that his father or teacher should be an unbeliever, not even his being a hypocrite. No, the danger lies in their being pious and God-fearing, and in the child being convinced thereof, but that he should nevertheless notice that deep within there lies hidden a terrible unrest. The danger is that the child is provoked to draw a conclusion about God, that God is not infinite love.

Eventually, a break occurred between Kierkegaard and his father (1835). It was no doubt related to his father's confession of his childhood cursing of God and of his sexual impropriety. (Kierkegaard's mother, his father's second wife, had been one of the family's maids. Kierkegaard's father had seduced her, discovered she was pregnant, and felt compelled to marry her.) On discovering the reality of his father's weaknesses – Kierkegaard had always admired his strict piety – he was shattered. As he described it later, the revelation was “a great earthquake, a terrible upheaval that suddenly forced on me a new and infallible interpretation of all phenomena.” At first, the discovery disturbed Kierkegaard's entire moral outlook, throwing him into a period of dissipation and despair during which he completely neglected his theological studies at the University. Eventually, however, Kierkegaard began to suspect that his life was to be spent for some extraordinary purpose.

Prior to the death of Kierkegaard's father (1838), the two managed to reconcile. Kierkegaard realized that his father had left an indelible mark on his life. His call to a life of religious service, his intellectual gifts, his sense of absolute obedience, and even his melancholy were all part of an inheritance for which he came to be grateful. He saw that he had been mistaken concerning his family's curse and now felt under obligation to redeem his promise to his father and complete his university studies, which he did over the next two years.

Broken Engagement

At this time Kierkegaard became engaged to sixteen-year-old Regine Olsen, whom he had felt attracted to for little over a year. Next to his father, no aspect of Kierkegaard's life is as important as was his relationship to Regine. The day after his engagement, however, Kierkegaard felt he had made a mistake: He saw that he could never conquer his melancholy and felt unable to confide in Regine as to the causes of it. "I would have to keep too much from her, base the whole marriage on a lie."

To break off an engagement was in those days a serious matter, and socially speaking, placed the woman in an unfavorable light. To save Regine, therefore, Kierkegaard resolved to take all the blame on himself for the broken engagement. This he did in the most bizarre manner: for the next several months he posed as an irresponsible philanderer, noisily showing off in public and striving to turn appearances against himself by every means in his power. Not surprisingly, he quickly aroused the indignation of public opinion and the disapproval of friends. Everyone was fooled, except Regine. When the break finally came in 1841, he wrote: "When the bond broke, my feeling was this: either to plunge into wild dissipation, or into absolute religiousness – though of a different kind from that of the parson's."

Kierkegaard chose the latter. But he also chose something else: the writer's life. "From that moment, I dedicated my life with every ounce of my poor ability to the service of an idea." Less than a month after breaking off his engagement Kierkegaard sailed for Berlin, where he began to write. It came over him like a torrent, driving him incessantly on during the next ten years – a period in which he produced thirty-five books and twenty volumes of journals (In 1843 he published no fewer than six books, the first being his biggest, *Either/Or*).

The “Corsair” Affair

Kierkegaard’s authorship proceeded along two lines, the aesthetic and the religious. The purpose of the first was “to represent the various life-views on existence.” Using pen-names and an “indirect method,” Kierkegaard sought to beguile his reader into the truth. His strategy was one of “entrapment” – to surround the reader with the alternatives before him, put them in contradiction to each other, and then help him see the many false ultimates by which people live their lives.

As for the second, Kierkegaard authored a string of discourses and works intended to enlighten readers by making them directly aware of what the Christian ideal really was. As far as Kierkegaard’s writing went, he was able to realize this goal; as for his reception as a thinker with something serious to say, things took an unexpected twist: *The Corsair*, a gossipy tabloid weekly, reviewed *Either/Or* in such a way that Kierkegaard felt he had been made a laughingstock.

In actual fact, Goldschmidt, the publisher of *Corsair*, admired Kierkegaard’s intellectual and writing gifts; after the publication of *Either/Or* he even hosted a banquet in Kierkegaard’s honor. Yet Kierkegaard, offended by all the attention, tried to distance himself from the “scandalous” paper and did not attend. On top of that, he sought to retaliate by publishing a caustic pseudonymous article, which let loose a fire storm of fury that lasted well over a year. Week after week Kierkegaard was ridiculed, caricatured, parodied. His long nose, thin legs and the uneven length of his trousers became a standing joke. His wealth and his alms-giving, his drives and his walks were all over-exaggerated and discussed in detail.

Kierkegaard was deeply hurt. Publicly, he displayed indifference, but his journals refer to the incident for the next three years and show a deep hurt. He became an object of ridicule,

with a nickname: “Either-or”. Secretly, he complained that his little article created “more of a sensation...than all my writing put together.” “I am positive that my whole life will never be as important as my trousers.”

The *Corsair* affair embittered Kierkegaard and drove him once and for all to pen and paper. There could be no thought of retiring to a peaceful parsonage in the country. That would be fleeing from persecution. In fact, Kierkegaard felt that the event was providential, insofar as it clarified and affirmed his assertion that Christianity and “the public” are opposite terms. He now saw that God had entrusted him with a specific mission: to speak directly to his contemporaries about the colossal deception of Christendom. In the end, the incident only “put new strength into my instrument, forced me to publish even more.”

Attack Upon Christendom

The event that brought Kierkegaard’s attack upon Christendom to a head-on collision was the death of Bishop Mynster. Mynster, the Primate of the Danish Church, had been a family friend and pastor for many years, and Kierkegaard revered him highly. But after Kierkegaard published *Practice in Christianity*, which attacks clerical Christianity, Mynster was incensed, and the two became irreparably estranged.

In January, 1854, Mynster died. Martensen, Mynster’s successor, declared Mynster to be “one of the holy chain of witnesses for the truth which extends through the centuries down from the time of the Apostles.” The claim pushed Kierkegaard over the edge. It seemed like blasphemy, a corruption of all Christian values, to speak of Mynster in such a way. “Bishop Mynster a witness for the truth!” he exploded. “You who read this, you know well what in a Christian sense is a witness for the truth... It is absolutely essential to suffer for the teaching of Christian-

ity. The truth is that Mynster was worldly-wise – weak, pleasure-seeking, and was great only as a declaimer.”

In a series of pamphlets entitled *The Instant*, Kierkegaard now turned agitator and addressed himself directly to the people. Little by little, Christianity had been weakened by removing all the difficulties of faith. “In the splendid palace chapel a stately court preacher, the cultivated public’s elite, advances before an elite circle of fashionable and cultivated people and preaches emotionally on the text of the Apostle, ‘God chose the lowly and despised’ – and nobody laughs!” “This is the falsification of which official Christianity is guilty: it does not make known the Christian requirement – perhaps because it is afraid people would shudder to see at what a distance from it we are living.” Here Kierkegaard broke with all that had gone before; he was now engaged “not in communication, but assault.” “Strictly speaking, it is not I who am ringing the alarm bell; I am starting the fire in order to smoke out illusions and knavish tricks; it is a police raid, and a Christian police raid, for, according to the New Testament, Christianity is incendiarism.”

The swiftness and mercilessness of his attack seem to have left his contemporaries without a defense. But the immense exertions of the last months shattered him too. His strength, as well as his money, was gone. After fainting in the streets of Copenhagen on October 2, 1855, he was hospitalized.

Kierkegaard died on November 11, 1855. To the end, Kierkegaard would not retract a word he wrote and refused communion from a priest. He was at peace, he said, and felt his life’s calling had been fulfilled. Dying was but a crown on his work.

Basic Themes

The story of Kierkegaard’s life is actually the inward drama of a deeply religious thinker. His relationships with his father,

Regine, Goldschmidt, and Mynster were such that they turned his inner anguish into a kind of redemptive suffering on behalf of his contemporaries. In the crucible of his melancholy and in the chamber of his own relationship with God, there emerged a vision of faith and earnestness that influenced some of the greatest thinkers in the twentieth century.

Kierkegaard's thought, however, cannot be easily categorized. Some see him as the originator of Existentialism. Others identify him as a mystic. Still others argue that he was a quintessential ascetic. One thing is clear: Kierkegaard stands against every form of thinking that bypasses the individual or enables the individual to escape his responsibility before God. He also made an absolute demand that "idea" should be translated into existence (being and doing), which is exactly what his contemporaries, in his opinion, failed to do: "Most systematizers stand in the same relation to their systems as the man who builds a great castle and lives in an adjoining shack; they do not live in their great systematic structure. But in spiritual matters this will always be a crucial objection. Metaphorically speaking, a person's ideas must be the building he lives in – otherwise there is something terribly wrong."

This does not mean that Kierkegaard advocated a loose string of contradictory ideas. Far from it! His thought possesses an intricate pattern. He carefully weaves together numerous themes, and does so in such a way that the reader is left with clear options. But these options are not in terms of beliefs or theories. These would only rob life of its tension. Again, Kierkegaard's primary aim was to excite the reader to choose – to force the reader into self-examination. This has to be kept in the forefront whenever an attempt is made to summarize his thought.

In what follows I hope to place Kierkegaard in the context of certain recurring themes in his writings, and thus provide context for the selections of this book.

The Spheres of Existence

To become a genuine self, an individual in the truest sense, was of central concern to Kierkegaard. He often wrote of “stages on life’s ways” or “spheres of existence” – different levels on which people live out their lives: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. To become genuinely human, as a Christian individual, involves a movement toward the religious sphere of existence, a sphere that includes but also transcends the other two spheres.

The aesthetic life is life immediately lived – a life lived for “the moment.” It is the lifestyle in which people are absorbed in satisfying their “natural” desires and impulses, whether physical, emotional, or intellectual. These people are solely concerned with their own happiness and believe that the key to happiness is found in externals – who they know, what they do, the roles they play, what they possess, where they live, and so on. They live for enjoyment, on the surface of life. They are observers, spectators, tasters, but not serious participants. They have no real inner life, no real self to offer to others. Their well-being is determined by the choices or moods of others and by forces that extend beyond their control. When they make decisions, they are not internalized. Thus, when things go wrong, aesthetic persons never accept responsibility or blame. Such people are apathetic, indifferent, and unintegrated. They are unable to commit themselves to any one thing. Something better might always come along, and so they split their energies in different directions.

The aesthetic life is certainly not restricted to the senses. Kierkegaard also criticizes the philosopher who is solely concerned

with ideas – intellectual systems that leave the thinker unchanged, with no reason to choose this or that. For Kierkegaard, Hegel is the typical speculative thinker. Like all intellectualizers, he confuses thought with existence. He assumes that truth can be formulated into a system of ideas or a set of doctrines. In doing this the philosopher becomes a mere observer of life. He forgets that he exists, that he must choose and act and take responsibility for what it is he knows. The speculative thinker makes Christianity into theology, instead of recognizing that a living relationship to Christ involves passion, struggle, decision, personal appropriation, and inner transformation.

To move toward authentic personal existence, to become a Christian, is to move beyond the aesthetic sphere and into the ethical. The ethical life recognizes the significance of choice. Here one accepts his duty as a moral actor. The person lays aside his many desires or impulses, his careless “freedom,” and heeds his conscience, takes responsibility, and fulfills his moral obligations. Aesthetic freedom is really enslavement to the passions and as such leads a person to the brink of despair. By contrast, ethical freedom is the enjoyment and fulfillment of doing one’s duty. The person who lives at this level tries to realize in his life what is of eternal, universal value. Such a life recognizes that within the soul there is something (i.e. the eternal) that cannot be satisfied by a sensory life. Hence the realization of enduring values – justice, freedom, peace, love – and respect for the moral law within propel the ethical self forward into a life of responsibility, of caring beyond one’s own immediate interests. Herein lies true freedom: the ability to fulfill one’s duty, to move from what is to what ought to be.

The ethical involves both choice and resolution. It also involves struggle, because the realization of ethical values takes effort and time. Therefore an authentic, fully realized indi-

vidual is one who is unified from within, whose actions are one, and who accepts responsibility for his commitments. Unlike someone who lives at the aesthetic level, the ethical individual is not swayed by his every emotion or by the opinions of others.

The key to the ethical sphere is freedom. A “bad choice,” therefore, is better than no choice at all. The aesthetic person drifts along with the currents around him. The person who lives ethically, however, determines these very currents. It is not enough to just do one’s duty. One must passionately choose the path. Life is an either/or, not just between good and evil, but between choosing and not choosing. The person who lives in the ethical sphere lives intentionally, intensively. Such a person possesses character and conviction, and is thus willing to sacrifice himself for something greater than oneself.

As admirable and as necessary as he finds the ethical sphere, however, Kierkegaard believes that life must ultimately be lived on yet another level: the religious sphere. This sphere has nothing to do with institutional religion per se. Rather, an individual lives religiously when he or she realizes that the ethical life is insufficient for solving life’s riddles and choices. The ethical life fails to adequately deal with exceptional situations. Doing one’s duty isn’t always simple, especially when different duties conflict or when one’s various obligations cannot all be fulfilled. Consequently, there is something higher than universal duty and this Kierkegaard calls the “Absolute.”

A fully actualized person has to see himself “before God,” to see himself as he really is. When this occurs, the wide chasm between oneself and God becomes apparent, both because of the sins one has committed but also because of one’s failure to fulfill completely his moral duty. The ethical individual, if he is truly honest with himself, is one who lives in constant fear and dread precisely because of his inability to fulfill the moral law

and his hesitation to give himself absolutely. In fact, the most ethical person is precisely the one who feels most inadequate. As the image of God, each person instinctively knows that God is higher than the moral law and greater than any set of values. His conscience tells him that the highest commitment one can make is to God – the very ground of every moral value. God’s will, not some abstract law, is what finally matters. And because no human can measure the demands of God, one must ultimately surrender to God in a leap of faith.

To illustrate the difference between the ethical and religious spheres, Kierkegaard cites Abraham, the “father of all those who believe.” Abraham, a righteous man, is the paragon of faith because instead of heeding the moral law – “Thou shall not kill” – he heeded God’s command to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham acted as a true individual because his relationship to God, not to the moral law, was primary in his life. He did not merely perceive God through morality or reduce God to the moral law. As a man of faith, Abraham subjected everything, including his ethical actions, to God. He was willing to sacrifice Isaac for the sake of his own relationship to God. He acted because God commanded him to act. He stood before God, answering to no one but God.

When an individual stands before God he no longer sees himself as self-sufficient. He recognizes his own inability to transform himself. The religious person strives to allow himself to be transformed by God. Such transformation includes three things: (1) Infinite resignation – dying to the world, the willingness to sacrifice any finite good for the sake of God. (2) Suffering – undergoing a transformation of the self, though not by the self. It is the process of undergoing “self-annihilation” so that God, not self, can do his transforming work. (3) Guilt – the feeling of one’s inability to give oneself completely, unreservedly, to God.

The religious person, though committed to many of the same ethical ideals as the ethical person, believes that those ideals are ultimately incapable of fulfillment, not because of external barriers but because of his own inner condition. He recognizes his sinful state. The person of faith relates himself to God not in self-confident action, but in repentance. He knows that he not only fails to fulfill his chosen ideals, but that he fails to have ideals of sufficient worth. To put it differently, he knows that his chosen “ideals” are themselves insufficient and incomplete. Thus Kierkegaard says: “An ethic which ignores sin is an absolutely idle science.” Allowing oneself to be transformed by God is, in short, more important than fulfilling one’s duty.

Herein lies the significance of Christianity and the gospel. Genuine Christian existence is different from religious existence in general. The religious person believes that the key to finding God is to recognize and realize his own guilt and need. The true Christian, however, recognizes that he, by himself, cannot do even this. He realizes that even his understanding of God, let alone of himself, is incomplete and thus defective. He acknowledges that there is an abyss between him and God, an “infinite qualitative difference between man and God.” True awareness of sin comes not from within but only through God’s revelation to the individual. Sin’s corruption is total, and one’s ability to choose is itself a gift. The distinguishing mark of a truly Christian existence is, according to Kierkegaard, the central paradox of the Gospel – the fact that God, the Eternal, becomes a human being. This, unlike the truths of the ethical life or religious insight, cannot be known by means of intuition only. It comes in revelation and is received by faith: the highest passion of inwardness.

Subjectivity and Truth

Kierkegaard expends great efforts contrasting objective thinking and subjective truth. For him, faith is not a belief but a certain way of being in the truth that extends beyond reason's ability to grasp. By "subjectivity" Kierkegaard does not mean subjectivism: a belief is true because one believes it to be true. He is concerned with the degree to which a person "lives within" the truth he confesses. To him subjectivity means turning away from the objective realm of facts – that can be learned by detached observation and abstract thinking – and immersing oneself in the subjective, inward activity of discovering truth for oneself. At its highest pitch, subjectivity culminates in faith – an infinite passion that is both rationally uncertain and paradoxical. Faith requires risk, which objective certainty abhors. But this is the distinctive mark of Christian faith. Faith means to wager everything and to suffer for the truth, despite the offenses of the Incarnation and the Cross.

Faith, therefore, requires a leap. It is not a matter of galvanizing the will to believe something there is no evidence for, but a leap of commitment. "The leap is the category of decision" – the decision to commit one's being totally to a God whose existence is rationally uncertain and whose redemption is utterly an offense. This is why, according to Kierkegaard, all proofs for the existence of God and the deity of Christ fail. To try and prove God's existence by means of a purely neutral, objective standpoint is completely backwards. It is to go back to the aesthetic sphere. To the contrary, God is known by way of passionate, undivided commitment. Besides, Christianity is not a doctrine to be taught, but rather a life to be lived. "Proofs" are thus not only unconvincing but irrelevant. God is spirit and therefore can only be known in a spiritual (i.e., subjective, inward) way.

The how of one's existence is what is decisive. Herein lies the importance of commitment; an act of the will that transcends reason's requirement.

Again, we may refer to Abraham. Here was a man willing to commit infanticide in the name of God. "How then did Abraham exist? He believed. This is the paradox which keeps him upon the sheer edge and which he cannot make clear to any other person, for the paradox is that he as the individual puts himself in an absolute relation to the Absolute." God requires of each of us this degree of commitment: an absolute relation to the Absolute. Such commitment can be terrifying as God leads us "out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water." And just as Jesus Christ produced certain effects on his contemporaries, to be his in faith one must be a contemporary of his and have vital, decisive contact with him now. There is no such thing as a second-string disciple.

The Single Individual

Kierkegaard understood that the key to the inwardness of faith was the individual. The "single individual" is paramount in his thought and contains several meanings. First, it means to stand alone before God and come to an awareness of God. The sooner I realize that I stand naked before God, the more authentic I will become. Second, an individual is a unified, integrated self ordered by a single purpose. "Purity of heart," Kierkegaard explains, "is to will one thing." Third, an individual is a responsible self, who in freedom gives account for one's decisions or failures to decide. One's true self is constituted by the decisions one makes. Lastly, to be an individual is to exist as a unique self that possesses a dignity above the race, the crowd.

In each of the above senses, Kierkegaard is careful to point out that before God the individual stands over and against the crowd. In his mind, “It is impossible to edify or be edified en masse.” Being an individual resists the conformity-ideals of the crowd and its ideologies. “A crowd in its very concept is the untruth, by reason of the fact that it renders the individual completely impenitent and irresponsible, or at least weakens his sense of responsibility by reducing it to a fraction.” Inauthenticity lies precisely in the attempt to live “as a numeral within a crowd, a fraction within the earthly conglomeration.” For Kierkegaard, where there is the crowd, “there is externality, and comparison, and indulgence, and evasion.”

Wherein lies salvation? There is salvation in only one thing, in becoming a single individual. The truly spiritual person is able to endure isolation, to pause “to deepen oneself in inwardness” before God and his Word. Although in this life one may find solace in the crowd from God’s radical demands, “In eternity you will look in vain for the crowd. You will listen in vain to find where the noise and the gathering is, so that you can run to it.” In actual fact, “For the Infinite One, there is no place, the individual is himself the place.”

Passion and Existence

The backdrop of the above themes provides the framework for Kierkegaard’s insistence that the modern age, including the church, lacks passion: “Our age is without passion. Everyone knows a great deal, we all know which way we ought to go and all the different ways we can go, but nobody is really willing to move.” Kierkegaard understood present society as a mass of spectators who live vicariously at second and third hand. His own image of society is of a drunken peasant who lies asleep in the wagon and lets the horses take care of themselves: “When

you listen to what he says in a cold and awful dread, you scarcely know whether it is a human being, or a cunningly contrived walking stick in which a talking machine has been concealed.”

The malady of our age is mediocrity. It is easy to think that with all the busyness of modern life people are actually living engaged lives. In actual fact, however, very few live with passion, or on the basis of conscience. Everything is calculated in a way that whatever we do is reduced to the reasonable or unreasonable, or worse yet, to the law of least resistance. Suffering is to be avoided at all costs. In the name of unconditional freedom options remain open, but in the process, people drift along. “There are many people who arrive at conclusions in life much the way schoolboys do; they cheat their teachers by copying the answer book without having worked the problem themselves.”

This cheating one’s way through life is perhaps exemplified in today’s preoccupation with the external and with one’s temporal circumstances. Kierkegaard reminds us that “in the world of spirit, to change place is to be changed oneself.” This, however, is precisely what scientific man abhors. We believe the key to happiness lies outside ourselves. We are thus obsessed with material benefits and results. We make our happiness dependent on situations outside ourselves and blame others in the process if things don’t turn out well. “In all our ‘freedom,’ we seek one thing: to be able to live without responsibility.”

Kierkegaard is convinced that Christendom is nothing but a lifeless outer shell of mediocrity. “Think of a very long railway train – but long ago the locomotive ran away from it. Christendom is like this... Christendom is tranquillity – how charming, the tranquillity of not moving from the spot.” Kierkegaard argues that true Christianity is first and foremost a demand. “It is the deepest wound that can be dealt to a person designed to collide with everything on the most appalling scale.” In short, faith

is the passion of sacrifice and self-denial, a way of being in the world that suffers ridicule and persecution from the established order with its religious hypocrisy. For this reason, “The will of Christ is this: an examination in which one cannot cheat.”

With these thoughts as a backdrop, the reader will note several things in the selections that follow. First, since Kierkegaard’s primary concern is with Christian existence, the selections that follow are explicitly oriented in that direction. Kierkegaard is not interested in a general theory of human existence, religious or otherwise. His aim is to compel the reader to live contemporaneously with Christ. Second, some of Kierkegaard’s terminology is technical. You may find it helpful, therefore, to turn to the final section where the selections are shorter and often easier to understand. But as you read, keep in mind the overarching thrust behind his thought. It is less important to grasp every nuance of his thought than to respond inwardly to his appeal. Lastly, read slowly. Allow yourself to undergo self-examination. As Kierkegaard reminds us: “It is true that a mirror has the quality of enabling a person to see his image in it, but to do this he must stand still.”

Charles E. Moore
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I | T O
W I L L
O N E
T H I N G

1 | Dare to Decide

Can there be something in life that has power over us which little by little causes us to forget all that is good? And can this ever happen to anyone who has heard the call of eternity quite clearly and strongly?

If this can ever be, then one must look for a cure against it. Praise be to God that such a cure exists – to quietly make a decision. A decision joins us to the eternal. It brings what is eternal into time. A decision raises us with a shock from the slumber of monotony. A decision breaks the magic spell of custom. A decision breaks the long row of weary thoughts. A decision pronounces its blessing upon even the weakest beginning, as long as it is a real beginning. Decision is the awakening to the eternal.

One could say that all this is very simple. It is just a matter of moments, make a decision and all is well. Dare like a bold swimmer to plunge into the sea, and dare to believe that the weight of the swimmer will go to the goal against all opposing currents.

Yet, our approach must begin differently from this. First, we must reject the devil's web of deception. Making decisions is often dangerous, or rather, talking about them is. Before you learn to walk you have to crawl on all fours; to try to fly right before walking is a dangerous set-up. Certainly there must be great decisions, but even in connection with them the important thing

is to get under way with *your* decision. Do not fly so high with your decisions that you forget that a decision is but a beginning.

How wretched and miserable it is to find in a person many good intentions but few good deeds. And there are other dangers too, dangers of sin. With all your good intentions, you must not forget your duty, neither should you forget to do it with joy. And strive to carry your burdens and responsibilities in a surrendered way. If you don't, there is a danger of losing your decisiveness; of going through life without courage and fading away in death.

So what about the decision, which was after all meant so very well? A road well begun is the battle half won. The important thing is to make a beginning and get under way. There is nothing more harmful for your soul than to hold back and not get moving.

The path of an honest fighter is a difficult one. And when the fighter grows cool in the evening of his life this is still no excuse to retire into games and amusement. Whoever remains faithful to his decision will realize that his whole life is a struggle. Such a person does not fall into the temptation of proudly telling others of what he has done with his life. Nor will he talk about the "great decisions" he has made. He knows full well that at decisive moments you have to renew your resolve again and again and that this alone makes good the decision and the decision good.

In the end, the archenemy of decision is cowardice. Cowardice is constantly at work trying to break off the good agreement of decision with eternity. When the minister preaches a sermon against pride, he has many listeners. But if he wants to warn his listeners against cowardice, things look very different. His listeners look around to see if there is any such miserable fellow among them. A cowardly soul – after all, that is the most miserable thing one can imagine, that is something one simply can't

endure. We can put up with one who is spoiled or decadent in some way or another, even if he is proud, but only if he is not a coward.

And yet the separation of cowardice and pride is a false one, for these two are really one and the same. The proud person always wants to do the right thing, the great thing. But because he wants to do it in his own strength, he is fighting not with man but with God. He wants to have a great task set before himself and to carry it through on his own accord. And then he is very pleased with his place. Many have taken the first leap of pride into life, many stop there. But the next leap is different.

How? The proud person, ironically, begins looking around for people of like mind who want to be sufficient unto themselves in their pride. This is because anyone who stands alone for any length of time soon discovers that there is a God. Such a realization is something no one can endure. And so one becomes cowardly. Of course, cowardice never shows itself as such. It won't make a great noise. No, it is quite hidden and quiet. And yet it joins all other passions to it, because cowardice is very comfortable and obliging in associating with other passions. It knows very well how to make friends with them.

Cowardice settles deep in our souls like the idle mists on stagnant waters. From it arise unhealthy vapors and deceiving phantoms. The thing that cowardice fears most is decision; for decision always scatters the mists, at least for a moment. Cowardice thus hides behind the thought it likes best of all: the crutch of time. Cowardice and time always find a reason for not hurrying, for saying, "Not today, but tomorrow", whereas God in heaven and the eternal say: "Do it today. Now is the day of salvation." The eternal refrain of decision is: "Today, today." But cowardice holds back, holds us up. If only cowardice would appear in all its baseness, one could recognize it for what it is and fight it immediately.

Cowardice wants to prevent the step of making a decision. To accomplish this it takes to itself a host of glorious names. In the name of caution cowardice abhors any over-hastiness. It is against doing anything before the time is ripe. Besides, “Is it not best to speak of a continued endeavor, which is by far the superior act, rather than of a sudden decision?” Ah, not decision, but continual striving, continuous endeavor; what a glorious expression. What a glorious deception!

Whereas decision reminds us of the end to come, cowardice turns us away from finality. Hence, cowardice is adaptable and takes pride in being able to meet various opinions in different ways. If, for example, someone’s ideas are first-rate, then cowardice will argue: “Well if such a one as you is so well equipped, then why hurry? Why limit yourself so?” What pride! And the thing of it is that for such a person it is not that the task is too easy but that it is too difficult.

Or consider the person whose advantages are few. Cowardice is now quick to sing a different tune: “What you’ve got is far too little to make a good beginning.” This, of course, is particularly stupid. If we always need more to begin with we would never begin. But “God does not give us the spirit of cowardice, but the spirit of power, and of love and of self-control” (1 Tm. 1:7). Cowardice does not come from God. One who wants to build a tower sits down and makes an estimate as to how high he can build it. But if no decision is ever made then no tower is ever built. A good decision is our will to do everything we can within our power. It means to serve God with all we’ve got, be it little or much. Every person can do that.

In the end, failure to decide prevents one from doing what is good. It keeps us from doing that great thing to which each of us is bound by virtue of the eternal. This does not mean that everything is decided once a decision is made, nor does it mean

that only in great decisions is one lifted to a higher plane – a place where one now no longer needs to bother about little things, petty things. Such thinking amounts to nothing more than a fine show.

We must not support high and important things while ignoring the practical, daily stuff of life. Indeed, decision is something truly great; the life of eternity shines over decision. But the light of eternity does not shine on every decision. Decision may be once and for all; but decision itself is only the first thing. Genuine decision is always eager to change its clothes and get down to practical matters. The real significance of decision is that it gives us an inner connection. Decision gets us on our way, and here there are no longer little things. Decision lays its demanding hand on us from start to finish. Cowardice, on the other hand, wants only to concern itself with the really important, big things, not in order to carry something out wholeheartedly but to be flattered by doing something that is noble and great. Yet hiding behind the exalted is nothing but an excuse for not conquering all the little things one has omitted, simply because they were little.

Therefore, don't be fooled. It may well be that with great decisions others will marvel at you. All the same, you miss the one thing that is needful. You may be honored in this life, remembered by monuments set up in your honor, but God will say to you: "You unhappy person. Why did you not choose the better path? Confess your weakness and face it."

Perhaps just in this weakness God will meet you and come to your aid. This much is certain: the greatest thing each person can do is to give himself to God utterly and unconditionally – weaknesses, fears, and all. For God loves obedience more than good intentions or second-best offerings, which are all too often made under the guise of weakness.

Therefore, dare to renew your decision. It will lift you up again to have trust in God. For God is a spirit of power and love and self-control, and it is before God and for him that every decision is to be made. Dare to act on the good that lies buried within your heart. Confess your decision and do not go ashamed with downcast eyes as if you were treading on forbidden ground. If you are ashamed of your own imperfections, then cast your eyes down before God, not man. Better yet, in weakness decide and go forth!

2 | **Either/Or**

A choice! Do you, my listener, know how to express in a single word anything more magnificent? Do you realize, even if you were to discuss year in and year out how you could mention nothing more awesome than a choice, what it is to have choice! For though it is certainly true that the ultimate blessing is to choose rightly, yet the faculty of choice itself is still the glorious prerequisite. What does it matter to the young lover to take inventory of all the outstanding qualities of her fiancé if she herself cannot choose? And, on the other hand, whether others praise her beloved's many perfections or enumerate his faults, what more magnificent thing could she say than when she says, He is my heart's choice!

A choice! Yes, this is the pearl of great price, yet it is not intended to be buried and hidden away. A choice that is not used is worse than nothing; it is a snare in which a person has trapped himself as a slave who did not become free – by choosing. It is a good thing that you can never be rid of it. It remains with you, and if you do not use it, it becomes a curse. A choice – not between red and green, not between silver and gold – no, a choice between God and the world! Do you know anything in comparison to choice? Do you know of any more overwhelming and humbling expression for God's condescension and extravagance towards us human beings than that he places himself, so to say, on the same level of choice with the world,

just so that we may be able to choose; that God, if language dare speak thus, woos humankind – that he, the eternally strong one, woos sapless humanity? Yet, how insignificant is the young lover’s choice between her pursuers by comparison with this choice between God and the world!

A choice! Or is it perhaps an imperfection in the choice under discussion here that a human being not only *can* choose but that he *must* choose? Would it not be to the young lover’s advantage if she had a zealous father who said, “My dear girl, you have your freedom, you yourself may choose, but you must choose.” Or would it be better that she had the choice but coyly picked and picked and never really chose?

No, a person must choose, for in this way God retains his honor while at the same time has a fatherly concern for humankind. Though God has lowered himself to being that which can be chosen, yet each person must on his part choose. God is not mocked. Therefore the matter stands thus: If a person avoids choosing, this is the same as the presumption of choosing the world.

Each person must choose *between God and the world, God and mammon*. This is the eternal, unchangeable condition of choice that can never be evaded – no, never in all eternity. No one can say, “God and world, they are not, after all, so absolutely different. One can combine them both in one choice.” This is to refrain from choosing. When there is a choice between two, then to want to choose both is just to shrink from the choice “to one’s own destruction” (Heb. 10:39). No one can say, “One can choose a little mammon and also God as well.” No, it is presumptuous ridicule of God if someone thinks that only the person who desires great wealth chooses mammon. Alas, the person who insists on having a penny without God, wants to have a penny all for himself. He thereby chooses mammon. A

penny is enough, the choice is made, he has chosen mammon; that it is little makes not the slightest difference.

The love of God is hatred of the world and love of the world hatred of God. This is the colossal point of contention, either love or hate. This is the place where the most terrible fight must be fought. And where is this place? In a person's innermost being. Whether the struggle is over millions or over a penny, it is a matter of loving and preferring God – the most terrible fight is the struggle for the highest. What immeasurable happiness is promised to the one who rightly chooses. If anyone is unable to understand this, the reason is that he is unwilling to accept that God is present in the moment of choice, not in order to watch but in order to be chosen. Therefore, each person must choose. Terrible is the battle, in a person's innermost being, between God and the world. The crowning risk involved lies in the possession of choice.

Whatsoever a person chooses, when he does not choose God he has missed the either/or, or rather he is in perdition with his either/or. So then: either God/...What does this either/or signify? What does God demand by this either/or? He demands obedience, unconditional obedience. If you are not obedient in everything unconditionally, without qualification, you don't love him, and if you don't love him – then you hate him. If you are not obedient in everything unconditionally, then you are not bound to him, and if you are not bound to him then you despise him.

If you can become absolutely obedient, then when you pray, "Lead us not into temptation" there will be no ambiguity in you, you will be undivided and single before God. And there is one thing that all Satan's cunning and all the snares of temptation cannot take by surprise – an undivided will. What Satan spies with keenness of sight as his prey, what all temptation

aims at certain of its prey, is the ambiguous. When unclarity resides, there is temptation, and there it proves only too easily the stronger. Wherever there is ambiguity, wherever there is wavering, there is disobedience down at the bottom.

Where there is no ambiguity, Satan and temptation are powerless. But with the merest glimpse of wavering, Satan is strong and temptation is enticing, and keen-sighted is the evil one whose trap is called temptation and whose prey is called the human soul. Of course, it is not really from Satan that temptation comes, but ambiguity cannot hide itself from him. If he discovers it, temptation is always at hand. But the person who surrenders absolutely to God, with no reservations, is absolutely safe. From this safe hiding-place he can see the devil, but the devil cannot see him. And if with absolute obedience he remains in his hiding-place, then he is "delivered from the evil one."

There is a tremendous danger in which we find ourselves by being human, a danger that consists in the fact that we are placed between two tremendous powers. The choice is left to us. We must either love or hate, and not to love is to hate. So hostile are these two powers that the slightest inclination towards the one side becomes absolute opposition to the other. Let us not forget this tremendous danger in which we exist. To forget is to have made your choice.

3 | Under the Spell of Good Intentions

There is a parable in the Scriptures that is seldom considered yet very instructive and inspiring. “There was a man who had two sons. The father went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ And he answered, ‘I will not’; but afterward he changed his mind and went. And the father went to the second son and said the same and he answered, ‘I will go, sir,’ but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” (Mt. 21:28–31). We could also ask in another manner: which of these two was the prodigal son? I wonder if it was not the one who said “Yes,” the one who not only said “Yes,” but said, “I will go, sir,” as if to show his unqualified, dutiful submission to his father’s will.

Now, what is the point of this parable? Is it not meant to show us the danger of saying “Yes” in too great a hurry, even if it is well meant? Though the yes-brother was not a deceiver when he said “Yes,” he nevertheless became a deceiver when he failed to keep his promise. In his very eagerness in promising he became a deceiver. When you say “Yes” or promise something, you can very easily deceive yourself and others also, as if you had already done what you promised. It is easy to think that by making a promise you have at least done part of what you promised to do, as if the promise itself were something of value. Not at all!

In fact, when you do not do what you promise, it is a long way back to the truth.

Beware! The “Yes” of promise keeping is sleep-inducing. An honest “No” possesses much more promise. It can stimulate; repentance may not be far away. He who says “No,” becomes almost afraid of himself. But he who says “Yes, I will,” is all too pleased with himself. The world is quite inclined – even eager – to make promises, for a promise appears very fine at the *moment* – it inspires! Yet for this very reason the eternal is suspicious of promises.

Now suppose that neither of the brothers did his father’s will. Then the one who said “No” was surely closer to realizing that he did not do his father’s will. A “no” does not hide anything, but a *yes* can very easily become a deception, a self-deception; which of all difficulties is the most difficult to conquer. Ah, it is all too true that, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

It is the most dangerous thing for a person to go backwards with the help of good intentions, especially with the help of promises; for it is almost impossible to discover that one is really going backwards. When a person turns his back on someone and walks away, it is easy to see which way he is going. That is that! But when a person finds a way of turning his face towards him who he is walking away from, and in so doing walks backwards while appearing to greet the person, giving assurances again and again that he is coming, or incessantly saying “Here I am” – though he gets farther and farther away by walking backwards – then it is not so easy to become aware. And so it is with the one who, rich in good intentions and quick to promise, retreats backwards farther and farther from the good. With the help of intentions and promises, he maintains the honest impression that he is moving towards the good, yet all the while he moves farther and farther away from it. With every renewed

intention and promise it seems as if he is taking a new step forward but in reality he is only standing still, no, he is really taking another step backward.

The good intention, the “Yes,” taken in vain, the unfulfilled promise leaves a residue of despair, of dejection. Beware! Good intention can very soon flare up again in more passionate declarations of intention, but only to leave behind even greater desperation. As an alcoholic constantly requires stronger and stronger drink, so the one who has fallen under the spell of good intentions and smooth-sounding declaration constantly requires more and more good intentions. And so he keeps himself from seeing that he is walking backwards.

We do not praise the son who said “No,” but we need to learn from the gospel how dangerous it is to say, “Lord, I will.” A promise with respect to action is somewhat like a changeling (an infant secretly changed for another) – one needs to be very watchful. In the very moment a child is born the mother’s joy is greatest, because her pain is gone. When because of her joy she is less watchful – so says the superstition – evil powers come and put a changeling in the child’s place. In the crucial initial moment when one sets out and begins, a dangerous time indeed, enemy forces come and slip in a changeling promise, thus hindering one from making a genuine beginning. Alas, how many have been deceived in this manner, yes, as if cast under a spell!

4 | The Greatest Danger

Imagine a kind of medicine that possesses in full dosage a laxative effect but in a half dose a constipating effect. Suppose someone is suffering from constipation. But – for some reason or other, perhaps because there is not enough for a full dose or because it is feared that such a large amount might be too much – in order to do something, he is given, with the best of intentions, a half dose: “After all, it is at least something.” What a tragedy!

So it is with today’s Christianity. As with everything qualified by an either/or – the half has the very opposite effect from the whole. But we Christians go right on practicing this well-intentioned half-hearted act from generation to generation. We produce Christians by the millions, are proud of it – yet have no inkling that we are doing just exactly the opposite of what we intend to do.

It takes a physician to understand that a half dose can have the opposite effect to that of a full dose. Common sense, cool-minded mediocrity never catches on. It undeviatingly continues to say of the half-dosage: “After all, it is something; even if it doesn’t work very well, it is still something.” But that it should have an opposite effect – no, mediocrity does not grasp that.

The greatest danger to Christianity is, I contend, not heresies, heterodoxies, not atheists, not profane secularism – no, but the kind of orthodoxy which is cordial drivel, mediocrity

served up sweet. There is nothing that so insidiously displaces the majestic as cordiality. Perpetually polite, so small, so nice, tampering and meddling and tampering some more – the result is that majesty is completely defrauded – of course, only a little bit. And right here is the danger, for the infinite is more disposed to a violent attack than to becoming a little bit degraded – amid smiling, Christian politeness. And yet this politeness is what our Christianity amounts to. But the very essence of Christianity is utterly opposed to this mediocrity, in which it does not so much die as dwindle away.

Today's orthodoxy essentially has its abode in the cordial drivel of family life. This is utterly dangerous for Christianity. Christianity does not oppose debauchery and uncontrollable passions and the like as much as it opposes this flat mediocrity, this nauseating atmosphere, this homey, civil togetherness, where admittedly great crimes, wild excesses, and powerful aberrations cannot easily occur – but where God's unconditional demand has even greater difficulty in accomplishing what it requires: the majestic obedience of submission. Nothing is further from obeying the either/or than this sweet family drivel.

Consider what Christ thinks about mediocrity! When the apostle Peter, for instance, with good intentions wanted to keep Christ from being crucified, Christ answered: "Get behind me, Satan! You are an offense to me" (Mk. 8:33).

In the world of mediocrity in which we live it is assumed that only crackpots, fanatics, and the like should be deplored as offensive, as inspired by Satan, and that the middle way is the right way, the way that alone is exempted from any such charge. What nonsense! Christ is of another mind: mediocrity is the worst offense, the most dangerous kind of demon possession, farthest removed from the possibility of being cured. To "have" religion on the level of mediocrity is the most unqualified form of perdition.

The advantages and benefits of earthly life are bound up in mediocrity. But genuine religion has an inverse relationship to the finite. Its aim is to raise human beings up so as to transcend what is earthly. It is a matter of either/or. Either prime quality, or no quality at all; either with all your heart, all your mind, and all your strength, or not at all. Either all of God and all of you, or nothing at all!

We clever humans, however, prefer to treat faith as if it were something finite, as if it were something for the betterment and enjoyment of temporal life. It is supposed to bring us meaning and fulfillment, happiness and direction. This kind of religion is nothing but a deception. If you were honest and if you would look at it more closely, you would see that this really is contempt for religion, a dangerous and culpable irreligion. True faith insists on being an either/or. To treat it as if it were like drink and food is fundamentally to scorn it. But this is precisely the way of mediocrity.

5 | The Task

Why is it that people prefer to be addressed in groups rather than individually? Is it because conscience is one of life's greatest inconveniences, a knife that cuts too deeply? We prefer to "be part of a group," and to "form a party," for if we are part of a group it means goodnight to conscience. We cannot be two or three, a "Miller Brothers and Company" around a conscience. No, no. The only thing the group secures is the abolition of conscience.

It is the same with busyness. A person can very well eat lettuce before it has formed a heart, yet the tender delicacy of the heart and its lovely coil are something quite different from the leaves. Likewise, in the world of spirit, busyness, keeping up with others, hustling hither and yon, makes it almost impossible for an individual to form a heart, to become a responsible, alive self. Every life that is preoccupied with being like others is a wasted life, a lost life.

A sparrow, a fly, a poisonous insect is an object of God's concern. It is not a wasted or lost life. But masses of mimickers, a crowd of copycats are wasted lives. God has been merciful to us, demonstrating his grace to the point of being willing to involve himself with every person. If we prefer to be like all the others, this amounts to high treason against God. We who simply go along are guilty, and our punishment is to be ignored by God.

By forming a party, by melting into some group, we avoid not only conscience, but martyrdom. This is why fear of others dominates this world. No one dares to be a genuine self; everyone is hiding in some kind of “togetherness.” Sensitive organs are shielded and not in immediate contact with objects, so ordinary people are afraid to come into personal, immediate contact with the eternal. Instead, we rely on traditions and the voice of others. We are content to be a specimen or a copy, living a life shielded against individual responsibility before the Truth.

True individuality is measured by this: how long or how far one can endure being alone without the understanding of others. The person who can endure being alone is poles apart from the social mixer. He is miles apart from the man-pleaser, the one who manages successfully with everyone – he who possesses no sharp edges. God never uses such people. The true individual, anyone who is going to be directly involved with God, will not and cannot avoid the human bite. He will be thoroughly misunderstood. God is no friend of cozy human gathering.

Yes, in the purely human world the rule is this: Seek out the help and opinion of others. Christ says: Beware of men! The majority of people are not only afraid of holding a wrong opinion, they are afraid of holding an opinion *alone*. In the physical world water puts out fire. So too in the spiritual world. The “many”, the mass of people, put out the inner fire – beware of men!

According to the New Testament to be a Christian means to be salt. Christianity addresses this question to each individual: Are you willing to be salt? Are you willing to be sacrificed, instead of belonging to the crowd, which seeks to profit from the sacrifice of others? Here again is the distinction: to be salt or to melt into the mass; to let others be sacrificed for us on behalf of

the Truth or to let ourselves be sacrificed – between these two lies an eternal qualitative difference.

The deep fault of the human race is that there are no individuals any more. We have become split in two. When a book has become old and shabby, the binding separates and the pages fall out. Similarly, in our time we are disintegrated. Our understanding, our imaginations do not bind us in character. We are spineless wimps who only flirt with the highest. How can we ever possibly avoid the dizziness that comes from fear of people in the midst of this whirlpool of millions where everything is either crowds or movements? What faith it takes to believe that one's life is noticed by God and that this is enough!

Wanting to hide in the crowd, to be a little fraction of the group instead of being an individual, is the most corrupt of all escapes. Granted, it will make life easier, but it will do so by making it more thoughtless. Yet the question is that of the responsibility of each single individual – that each of us is an authentic, answerable self. It is a cop-out to make a racket along with a few others for a so-called conviction. We ought, before God, to make up our own minds about our convictions, and then live them out regardless of the others. Eternity will single each person out as individually responsible – the busy one who thought he was safe in some group or some enterprise, and the poorest wretch who thought he was overlooked.

Every person must render account to God. No third person dares venture to intrude upon this accounting. God in heaven does not talk to us as to an assembly; he speaks to each individually. This is why the most ruinous evasion of all is to be hidden away in a herd in an attempt to escape God's personal address. Adam attempted this when his guilty conscience led him to imagine that he could hide himself among the trees. Similarly, it may be easier and more convenient, and more cowardly too, to

hide yourself among the crowd in hope that God will not recognize you from the others. But in eternity each shall individually render an account. Eternity will examine each person for all that he has chosen and done as an individual before God.

It will be horrible on judgment day, when all souls come to life again, to stand utterly alone, alone and unknown by all, and yet candidly, exhaustively known by him who knows all. No one may ever pride himself at being more than an individual. Nor can anyone despondently think that he is not an individual. No, each one can and shall render account to God. Each one has the task of becoming an individual.

6 | Against the Crowd

We warn young people against going to dens of iniquity, even out of curiosity, because no one knows what might happen. Still more terrible, however, is the danger of going along with the crowd. In truth, there is no place, not even one most disgustingly dedicated to lust and vice, where a human being is more easily corrupted – than in the crowd.

Even though every individual possesses the truth, when he gets together in a crowd, untruth will be present at once, for the crowd *is* untruth. It either produces impenitence and irresponsibility or it weakens the individual's sense of responsibility by placing it in a fractional category. For instance, imagine an individual walking up to Christ and spitting on him. No human being would ever have the courage or the audacity to do that. But as part of a crowd, well then they somehow have the "courage" to do it – dreadful untruth!

The crowd is indeed untruth. Christ was crucified because he would have nothing to do with the crowd (even though he addressed himself to all). He did not want to form a party, an interest group, a mass movement, but wanted to be what he was, the truth, which is related to the single individual. Therefore everyone who will genuinely serve the truth is by that very fact a martyr. To win a crowd is no art; for that only untruth is needed, nonsense, and a little knowledge of human passions. But no witness to the truth dares to get involved with the crowd.

His work is to be involved with all people, if possible, but always individually, speaking with each and every person on the sidewalk and on the streets – in order to split apart. He avoids the crowd, especially when it is treated as authoritative in matters of the truth or when its applause, or hissing, or balloting are regarded as judges. He avoids the crowd with its herd mentality more than a decent young girl avoids the bars on the harbor. Those who speak to the crowd, coveting its approval, those who deferentially bow and scrape before it must be regarded as being worse than prostitutes. They are instruments of untruth.

For this reason, I could weep, even want to die, when I think about how the public, with its daily press and anonymity, make things so crazy. That an anonymous person, by means of the press, day in and day out can say whatever he wants to say, what he perhaps would never have the courage to say face-to-face as an individual to another individual, and can get thousands to repeat it, is nothing less than a crime – and no one has responsibility! What untruth! Such is the way of the crowd.

7 | Suspending the Ethical

The ethical dimension of existence has to do with the universal, of doing what is unconditionally right. The ethical applies to everyone and at every moment. It possesses its own validity. That is, it has nothing outside itself as its end or purpose. It has no further to go. By contrast, the single individual is the particular that has its purpose in the universal. The individual's task is always to express himself within the confines of duty, to limit his particularity and to forgo his own interests so as to fulfill his universal duty. Thus, as soon as an individual wants to assert himself in his particularity, in direct opposition to the universal, he sins. Only by recognizing this can he again reconcile himself with the universal. He can free himself only by surrendering to the universal in repentance.

If this is the highest that can be said of our existence, then the ethical and a person's happiness are identical. The philosopher is proved right. The ethical is the universal and, in turn, the divine. The whole of human existence is entirely self-enclosed, and the ethical is at once the limit and completion of our lives. Doing one's duty becomes sufficient, with the result that God becomes an invisible, vanishing point, an impotent thought unrelated to my life. His being is no more than the ethical itself, which fills all existence.

But what about the question of faith? Is the ethical the final reality? No. The philosopher goes wrong when it comes to this

question. Actually, he fails to protest loudly and clearly enough against the honor and glory given to Abraham as the father of faith. If the ethical is final, if it is the ultimate determination of life's meaning, then Abraham should really be remitted to some lower court for trial and exposed as the murderer he is.

Now faith is just this paradox, that the single individual, though under the demands of the universal, is higher than the universal. If that is not faith, then Abraham is done for and faith has never existed in the world. If the ethical life is the highest and nothing incommensurable is left over, except in the sense of what is evil, then one needs no other categories than those of the philosophers. Goodbye to Abraham! But faith is just this paradox, that the single individual, though bound by the universal, is higher than the universal. As a single individual, as the particular, he stands in an absolute relation to the Absolute. The ethical is thus suspended. Faith *is* this paradox.

The story of Abraham contains just such a suspension of the ethical. Abraham acts on the strength of the absurd. As a single individual before God he found himself to be higher than the universal. This paradox cannot be mediated – there is no middle-term to explain it. If Abraham had tried to find an explanation, he would have been in a state of temptation, and in that case he would have never sacrificed Isaac, or if he had done so he would have had to return as a murderer repentant before the universal.

In his action Abraham overstepped the ethical altogether. He had a higher aim outside it in relation to which he suspended it. How else could one ever justify Abraham's action? Not in terms of the ethical. How could any point of contact ever be discovered between what Abraham did, or planned to do, and the universal other than that Abraham overstepped it? It was not to save a nation that Abraham went to sacrifice Isaac, nor to appease angry gods. Abraham's whole action stands above and

apart from the universal. It is ultimately a private undertaking, an act of purely personal conscience. To judge Abraham's action according to the ethical – in the sense of the moral life – is therefore quite out of the question. In so far as the universal was there at all, it was latent in Isaac, concealed as it were in his loins, and it would have to cry out from Isaac's mouth: "Don't do it, you are destroying everything."

Then why does Abraham do it? For God's sake, and what is exactly the same, for his own. He does it for the sake of God because God demands this proof of his faith. He does it for his own sake in order to be able to produce the proof.

Abraham's situation is a kind of trial, a temptation. But what does that mean? What we usually call a temptation is something that keeps a person from carrying out a duty, but here the temptation is the ethical itself ("Thou shalt not kill") which would keep him from doing God's will. But what then is duty? In Abraham's case, duty is found in the doing of God's will, which is itself higher than the universal. His duty transcends the ethical.

Now when the ethical is suspended, as in Abraham's case, how or in what way, does the individual in whom it is suspended exist? Does this mean he sins? Not necessarily. Take a child for example. In one sense a child's bad behavior is not sin because the child is not yet fully conscious of its own existence. Looked at ideally, however, the child sins; he falls short from the demands of the ethical. Does this mean Abraham also sinned? No. Then how did Abraham exist? He had faith. He lived by and in faith. That is the paradox that kept him at the summit and which he could not explain or justify to himself or to anyone else. His faith was grounded in the paradox that as the single individual he was higher than the universal. He had an absolute

relation to the Absolute. Was he justified? His justification is, once again, the paradox. He was not justified by being virtuous, but by being an individual submitted to God in faith.

This doesn't mean that the ethical is to be done away with. No. Only that it receives an entirely different expression, so that for example, love of God can cause the knight of faith to love his neighbor in a way that is quite opposite from what is usually demanded by the ethical. Unless this is how it is, faith has no place in existence. Faith becomes a temptation, and Abraham, since he gave into it, is done for.

But faith's paradox is precisely this, that the single individual is higher than the universal, that the individual determines his relationship to the universal through his relation to the Absolute (i.e. God), not his relation to the Absolute through his relation to the universal. That is, to live by faith means that one has an absolute duty to God and to God alone. In this tie of obligation the individual relates himself absolutely, as the single individual, to the Absolute – the God who commands. This duty alone is absolute and for this reason the ethical, for the person of faith, is relegated to the relative. In fear and trembling, this is faith's paradox – the suspension of the ethical.

Any way we look at it, Abraham's story contains a suspension of the ethical. He has, as the single individual, become higher than the universal. This is the paradox of faith that cannot be explained. How Abraham got himself into it is just as inexplicable as how he stayed in it. If this is not how it is with Abraham, then he is not even a tragic hero, but a murderer. To want to go on calling him the father of faith, to talk of this to those who are only concerned with words, is thoughtless. A tragic hero can become a human being by his own strength, but not the knight of faith. When a person sets out on the tragic hero's arduous path there are many who are ready to lend him advice.

But he who walks the narrow path of faith no one can advise, no one can understand. Faith is a miracle, and yet no human being is excluded from it.

8 | To Need God Is Perfection

With respect to physical existence, one needs little, and to the degree that one needs less, the more perfect one is. In a human being's relationship with God, however, it is inverted: the more one needs God the more perfect he is. To need God is nothing to be ashamed of but is perfection itself. It is the saddest thing in the world if a human being goes through life without discovering that he needs God!

For what is a human being after all? Is he just one more ornament in the vast array of creation? And what is his power? What is the highest he is able to will? Well, we do not want to defraud the highest of its price, but we cannot conceal the fact that the highest is realized only when a person is fully convinced that he himself is capable of nothing, nothing at all. What rare dominion – not rare in the sense that only one individual is born to be king, since everyone is born to it! What rare wisdom – not rare because it is offered to just a few who are educated, but because it is offered to all, and accessible to all! True, if a person turns outward, it will probably seem as if he were capable of accomplishing something amazing, something that satisfies him, something that draws enthusiastic admiration. From a human perspective, humankind may well be the most glorious creation, but all its glory is still only in the external and for the external. Does not the eye aim its arrow outward every time passion and desire tighten the bowstring? Does not the hand

grasp outward, is not his arm outstretched, and is not his ingenuity all-conquering? Deception!

A human being is great and at his highest only when before God he recognizes that he is nothing in himself. Consider Moses or the so-called works of Moses. What is the deed of even the greatest hero; what are demolishing mountains and filling rivers compared with having darkness fall upon all Egypt! But these were not really Moses' works. Moses was capable of nothing at all, for the work was the Lord's. Do you see the difference? Moses – he did not make decisions and formulate plans while the council of the common sense listened attentively – Moses was capable of nothing at all. If the people had said to him, “Go to Pharaoh, because your word is powerful, your voice is triumphant, your eloquence irresistible,” he would have answered, “Oh, you fools! I am capable of nothing, not even of giving my life for you if the Lord does not so will. I am capable only of submitting everything to the Lord.” Or if the people who thirsted in the desert had appealed to Moses, saying, “Take your staff and order the rock to give water,” would not Moses have answered, “What is my staff but a stick?”

A person who knows himself perceives that he, in and of himself, is actually capable of nothing. The same applies to the internal world. Are any of us capable of anything there, either? If a capability is actually to be a capability, it must have some kind of opposition. Without opposition, one is either all-powerful or one's capability is something entirely imaginary. In the internal world of spirit, opposition can come only from within. In this way, we struggle with ourselves. If a person does not discover this conflict, his understanding is faulty and consequently his life is imperfect; but if he does discover it, he will understand that he *himself* is capable of nothing at all.

Such self-knowledge we are referring to is really not complicated. But is one not able, then, to overcome oneself by oneself?

How can I be stronger than myself? When we speak of overcoming oneself by oneself, we really mean something external, so that the struggle is unequal. Take, for example, someone who has been tempted by worldly prestige but who conquers himself so that he no longer reaches out for it. If he is to guard his soul against a new vanity, he will have to admit that he is not really able to overcome himself. He understands that with will power alone he creates in his innermost being temptations of glory, fear, despondency, of pride and defiance, and sensuality greater than those he meets in the external world. For this reason he struggles with himself. Victory proves nothing with regard to this greater temptation. If he is victorious in facing the temptation with which the surrounding world confronts him, this does not prove that he would be victorious if the temptation were as terrible as he is able to imagine it. He knows deep within himself that he is capable of nothing at all.

In one sense, to need God and to know that this is a human being's highest perfection, makes life more difficult. However, insofar as a person does not know himself, he does not actually become conscious in the deeper sense that God *is*. The person who realizes that he is capable of nothing cannot undertake the slightest thing without God's help, without becoming conscious that God is. We sometimes speak of learning to know God from the events of past history. We open up the chronicles and read and read. Well, that may be fine, but how much time it takes, and how dubious the outcome frequently is! But someone who is conscious that he is capable of nothing has every day and every moment the precious opportunity to experience that God lives. If he does not experience it often enough, he knows very well why that is. It is because his understanding is faulty and he believes that he himself is, after all, capable of something.

This does not mean that a person's life becomes easy simply because he learns to know God in this way. On the contrary, it can become that much more difficult. But in this difficulty his life acquires a deeper meaning. Should it mean nothing to him that he continually keeps his eyes on God, knowing that he himself is capable of nothing at all, yet with the help of God he is indeed capable? Should it mean nothing to him that he is learning to die to the world, to esteem less and less the things that fade away? Finally, should it not have meaning for him that he most vividly and confidently understands that God is love, that God's goodness passes all understanding?

We are not saying that to need God is to sink into a dreaming admiration and some visionary contemplation. No. God does not let himself be taken in vain in this way. Just as knowing ourselves in our own nothingness is the condition for knowing God, so knowing God is the condition for the sanctification of a human being by God's assistance and according to his intention. Wherever God is, there he is always creating. He does not want a person to be spiritually soft and to bathe in the contemplation of his glory. He wants to create a new human being. To need God is to become new. And to know God is the crucial thing. Without this knowledge a human being becomes nothing. Without this knowledge, he is scarcely able to grasp that he himself is nothing at all, and even less that to need God is his highest perfection.

9 | Purity of Heart

Purity of heart is to will one thing: “Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded” (Jas. 4:8). Only the pure in heart can see God, and therefore, draw near to him. And only by God’s drawing near to the pure in heart can they maintain this purity.

The person who in truth wills only one thing can will only the Good, and the person who wills only one thing when he wills the good can will only the Good in truth. Let your heart, therefore, will in truth only one thing, for therein is the heart’s purity.

In a certain sense only a few words are needed to describe the Good. The Good, without condition, qualification, or compromise, is absolutely the only thing that a person can and should undividedly will. The person who tries to will anything else will discover that he does not truly will one thing. It is a delusion, an illusion, a deception to try and do so. For in his innermost being he is, and is bound to be, double-minded. The Good alone can be willed *as* one thing.

Although pleasure, honor, riches, and power and all that this world has to offer appear to be one thing, they are not. These can never in all circumstances remain the same. They are always subject to constant change. Each in its own way consists of a multitude of things, a dispersion, the sport of changeableness,

and the prey of corruption! For example, in the pursuit of pleasure, look at how so many seek for one pleasure after another. In such a pursuit, variety is the watchword. But this is utterly futile. How can one will one thing that can never in itself remain the same thing? When a person wills in such a fashion he not only becomes double-minded, but self-divided; at complete odds with himself. He wills first one thing and then immediately another, and sometimes the opposite, and so and so on. What does such a person really will? New pleasures; something new! change! change! Ask him now if he really wills one thing. Ask him if he wills at all!

The fact is that the worldly ideal is not one thing at all. In essence it is unreal. Its so-called unity is actually nothing but emptiness concealed by a multiplicity. In the short-lived moment of experience the worldly goal is nothing but a vacuous diversion. For what else is desire in its boundless extreme but nausea? What else is earthly honor at its dizzy pinnacle but contempt for existence? What else is the overabundance of wealth but poverty? No matter how much all the earth's gold hidden in covetousness may amount to, it is infinitely less than the tiniest bit hidden in the contentment of the poor! What else is worldly power other than dependence? What slave in chains is as unfree as a tyrant!

Everyone who in truth wills one thing will eventually be led to will the Good. Though it may sometimes be that a person innocently begins by willing one thing that is not in the deepest sense the Good, he will, little by little, be transformed so as to will the Good. For example, romantic love has sometimes helped a person along the right road – he faithfully tries to will one thing, namely, the happiness of his love. In the deepest sense, however, falling in love is still not the Good. At best it is a formative educator that will lead to the willing of one thing and to the willing of the Good.

Only the Good is one thing. It alone is one in its essence and the same in each of its expressions. Take true love as an illustration. One who genuinely loves does not love but once. Nor does he offer part of his love, and then again another part. No, he loves with all of his love – not a bit here and a bit there. It is wholly present in each expression. He continues to give it away as a whole, and yet he keeps it intact as a whole, in his heart. Wonderful riches! When the miser has gathered all the world's gold in sordidness – then he has become poor. Yet when the lover gives away his whole love, he keeps it entire – in the purity of the heart.

If we in truth will one thing, then this one thing must be such that it remains unconditionally unaltered. In willing it we can win eternal constancy. If, however, what we will continually changes, then we become double-minded and unstable. This is nothing else than impurity. The one who wills anything other than the Good will become divided. And as the coveted object is, so becomes the coveter.

Let us not be deceived in this matter of willing one thing. The one who desires the Good, for instance, for the sake of some reward also fails to will one thing. He is double-minded. This is not difficult to see. The Good is one thing; the reward is something else. To will the Good for the sake of reward is not to will one thing but two. If a man loves a woman for the sake of her wealth, who will call him a lover? To will the Good for the sake of reward is hypocrisy – sheer duplicity! The person who in truth wills the Good thinks only of the Good, not of some resulting benefit. For the Good is its own reward. In fact, the pure in heart understands that here on earth the Good is often rewarded by ingratitude, by lack of appreciation, by poverty, by contempt, by many afflictions, and now and then by death. Of course, these are inconsequential for the one who in truth wills only one thing.

Neither can one who wills the Good do so out of fear of punishment. In essence, this is the same thing as willing the Good for the sake of a reward. The one who wills in truth one thing fears only doing wrong, not the punishment. In fact, he who does wrong, yet sincerely wills the Good, actually desires to face the consequences – so that the punishment, like medicine, may heal him. He understands that punishment only exists for the sake of the sinner. It is a helping hand. It goads one to press on further toward the Good, if one really wills it. On the other hand, the one who is divided considers punishment or hardship as a sickness. He fears all worldly setback for there is nothing eternal in him.

True, fear deceptively offers to help us. It too offers to keep us on the right track. Yet the one who strives in fear never becomes God's friend. Fear is a deceitful aid. It can sour your delight, make life arduous and miserable, make you old and decrepit; but it is never able to help you toward the Good. The Good will not tolerate any alien helper.

Those who live in fear may indeed desire heaven but not for itself. They anxiously do what they really would rather not do, or at least what they have no pleasure in doing. Their satisfaction consists solely in avoiding, never gaining, something. What emptiness! They are blinded to the fact that the Good wants only that they humbly and gladly follow its beckoning. For the Good there exists no limitation. It contains the impetus of eternity and possesses the Infinite's open road before it. Fear, on the other hand, is a dry nurse for the child – it has no milk. It is an anemic disciplinarian for the youth – it has no lasting beckoning power. Only one thing can help us to will the Good in truth: the Good itself.

As the Good itself is only one thing, so it alone wishes to be what helps us along. But the Good is not something external to

us, like a slave who comes against his will when the master uses the whip. The place and the path are within each of us. And just as the place is the blessed state of the striving soul, so the path is the striving soul's continual transformation.

10 | Emissaries from Eternity

Providence watches over each one of us as we journey through life providing us with two guides: repentance and remorse. The one calls us forward. The other calls us back. Yet they do not contradict each other, these two guides, nor do they leave the traveler in doubt or confusion. Rather, these two guides eternally understand each other. For the one calls forward to the Good, the other back from the evil. This is precisely why there are two of them, because in order to make our journey secure we must look ahead as well as look back.

When a long procession is about to start, there is first a call from the person who is in the lead, but everyone waits until the last one has answered. The two guides call to a person early and late, and if he pays attention to their calls he finds the road and can know where he is. Likewise, Eternity's two guides call out to us early and late, and when we listen to their call, we know where we are and where we are going. Of these two, the call of remorse is perhaps the better. For the eager traveler who travels casually and quickly along the way does not get to know it as well as does the traveler with his burden. The eager traveler hurries forward to something new, away from experience, but the remorseful one, the one who comes along afterward, laboriously gathers up the experience.

These two guides call to us early and late. And yet, no, when remorse calls out it is always late. The call to find the road again

by seeking God in the confession of sins is always at the eleventh hour. When remorse awakens guilt, whether it be in one's youth, or in the twilight of one's life, it does so always at the eleventh hour. It does not have much time at its disposal. It is not deceived by a false notion of a long life. For in the eleventh hour one understands life in a wholly different way than in the days of youth or in the busy time of adulthood or in the final days of old age. If we repent at any other hour of the day we fool ourselves – we fortify ourselves by a false and hasty conception of the insignificance of our guilt.

True repentance does not belong to a certain period of life, as fun and games belong to childhood, or as the excitement of romantic love belongs to youth. It does not come and disappear as a whim or as a surprise. No, no. There is a sense of reverence, a holy fear, a humility, a pure sincerity which insures that repentance does not become vain and overhasty.

From the point of view of the eternal, repentance must come "all at once," where in one's grief there is not even time to utter words. But the grieving of repentance and the heartfelt anxiety that floods the soul must not be confused with impatience or the momentary feeling of contrition. Experience teaches us that the right moment to repent is not always the one that is immediately present. Repentance can too easily be confused with a tormenting agonizing or with a worldly sorrow; with a desperate feeling of grief in itself. But by itself, sorrow never becomes repentance, no matter how long it continues to rage. However clouded the mind becomes, the sobs of contrition, no matter how violent they are, never become tears of repentance. They are like empty clouds that bear no water, or like convulsive puffs of wind. This kind of repentance is selfish. It is sensually powerful for the moment, excited in expression – and, for this very reason, is no real repentance at all. Sudden, quick repentance wants only to drink down the bitterness of sorrow in a single

draught and then hurry on. It wants to get away from guilt, away from every reminder of it, and fortify itself by imagining that it does not want to be held back in the pursuit of the Good. What a delusion!

There is a story about a man who by his misdeeds deserved to be punished according to the law. After he had served his sentence he went back into ordinary society, reformed. He went to a foreign country, where he was unknown and where he became known for his upright conduct. All was forgotten. Then one day a fugitive appeared who recognized him from the past. The reformed man was terrified. A deathlike fear shook him each time the fugitive passed. Though silent, his fear shouted with a loud voice, until it became vocal in that dastardly fugitive's voice. Despair suddenly seized him and it seized him just because he had forgotten his repentance. His self-improvement had never led him to surrender to God so that in the humility of repentance he might remember what he had once been.

Yes, in the temporal and social sense, repentance may come and go. But in the eternal sense, it is a quiet daily commitment before God. In the light of eternity, one's guilt is never changed, even if a century passes by. To think anything of this sort is to confuse the eternal with what it is least like – human forgetfulness. One can tell the age of a tree by looking at its bark. One can also tell a person's age in the Good by the intensity and inwardness of his repentance. It may be said of a dancer that her time is past when her youth is gone, but not so with a penitent. Repentance, if it is forgotten, is nothing but immaturity. The longer and the more deeply one treasures it, however, the better it becomes.

Repentance must not only have its time, but also its time of preparation. And herein lies the need of confession, the holy act that ought to be preceded by preparation. Just as a person

changes his clothes for a celebration, so a person preparing for confession is inwardly changed. But if in the hour of confession one has not truly made up his mind he is still only distracted. He sees his sin with only half an eye. When he speaks, it is just talk – not true confession.

We mustn't forget that the One who is present in confession is omniscient. God knows everything, remembers everything, all that we have ever confided to him, or what we have ever kept from his confidence. He is the One "who sees in secret," with whom we speak even in silence. No one can venture to deceive him either by talk or by silence. When we confess to God, therefore, we are not like a servant that gives account to his master for the administration entrusted to him because his master could not manage everything or be everywhere at once. Nor when we confess are we like one who confides in a friend to whom sooner or later he reveals things that his friend did not previously know. No, much of what you are able to keep hidden in darkness you only first get to know by revealing it to the all-knowing One. The all-knowing One does not get to know something about those who confess, rather those who confess find out something about themselves.

11 | God Has No Cause

There are those who talk about God's cause, and about wanting to serve that cause. This is all very fine, but how, exactly, is this to be interpreted? The common view thinks that God has a cause in the human sense of the word, that he is some kind of advocate, interested in having his cause win and therefore eager to help the person who would serve his cause, and so forth. If we follow this line of thinking God becomes a minor character who arrives at the embarrassing dilemma of needing human beings.

No, no! God has no cause, is no advocate in this sense. For God everything is infinitely nothing. Any second he wills it, everything, including all opposition to his cause, becomes nothing. Wanting to serve God's cause can never mean the same thing as coming to his aid. No, to serve God's cause is to face examination. If someone wants to serve his cause, it is not God who loses his balance and sublimity; no, he fixes his attention upon this volunteer – observantly – and sees how he conducts himself, whether he has integrity and resolve. Because God is not interested in temporal causes, because he is infinitely the conquering Lord, precisely for that reason he examines. He is quite able to accomplish his will alone.

This is why the more one is involved with God the more rigorous everything becomes. It is out of God's infinite love that he involves himself with every human being. The very fact that

God permits evil people to thrive in this world is a mark of his infinite majesty. Do you not understand this frightful punishment, that God overlooks them? God's punishment is upon those he chooses to have nothing more to do with. And yet he always accomplishes what he wills.

We usually think that when we honestly want to serve God's cause, God will also help us along. Well, how? In a material way? By a successful outcome, prosperity, earthly advantage, or the like? But in that case everything gets turned around and it no longer remains *God's* cause but a finite endeavor. Besides, maybe I am only a cunning fellow, who really does not want to serve God but in a deceptive, pious way to cheat God to my advantage. Perhaps I even think that God is in a bind and is made happy as soon as someone volunteers to serve his cause. Utter nonsense and blasphemy! No, God is spirit – and our task is to be transformed into spirit. But spirit is absolutely opposed to being related to God by way of temporal benefits. Such is God's sublimity – and yet this is the infinite love of God!

Yes, infinite love, so infinite that God desires to involve himself with every human being, with every weak, foolish, carnal heart who tries to make him into a nice uncle, a really fine grandfather whom we can make good use of.

God is infinite love and for this reason has no cause. He will not suddenly overpower a person and demand that he instantly become spirit. If that were the case we would all perish. No, he handles each person gently. His is a long operation, an upbringing in love. Yes, there are times when one gasps and God strengthens with material blessings. But there is one thing God requires unconditionally at every moment – integrity – that one does not reverse the relationship and try to prove his relationship to God or the truth of his cause by good fortune, prosperity, and the like. God wants us to understand that material

blessings are a concession to our weakness and very likely something he will withdraw at some later date to help us make true progress, not in some finite endeavor but in passing the examination.

12 | An Eternity in Which to Repent

Let me tell a story. Somewhere in the Orient there lived a poor old couple. They possessed nothing but poverty. Naturally, anxiety about the future increased as they grew older. They did not assail heaven with their prayers, for they were too pious for that; but nevertheless they continually cried to heaven for help.

Then it happened one morning that the wife, going out to the oven, found a precious stone of great size upon the hearth. She immediately showed the stone to her husband, who saw at once that they were well supplied for the rest of their life. A bright future for this old couple – what joy! Yet, God-fearing as they were, and content with little, they resolved that since they had enough to live upon for another day, they would sell the jewel not that day, but the following. And then a new life would begin.

That night the woman dreamed that she was transported to paradise. An angel took her around and showed her all the glories an oriental imagination could invent. Then the angel led her into a hall where there were long rows of armchairs adorned with pearls and precious stones, which, the angel explained, were for the devout. Finally the angel showed her the chair that was intended for her. Looking more closely, the woman saw a large jewel was missing from the back of the seat. She asked the angel how that had come about.

Now be alert, here comes the story! The angel answered, “That was the precious stone you found on the hearth. You received it in advance, and so it cannot be inserted again.”

In the morning the woman related the dream to her husband. She felt they should hold on to the stone for a few years longer rather than let the precious stone be absent throughout eternity. And her devout husband agreed. So, that evening they laid the stone back on the hearth and prayed to God that he would take it back. In the morning, sure enough, it was gone. Where it had gone the old couple knew: it was now in its right place.

Oh, remember this well! You may perhaps be cunning enough to avoid suffering and adversity in this life, you may perhaps be clever enough to evade ruin and ridicule and instead enjoy all the earth’s goods, and you may perhaps be fooled into the vain delusion that you are on the right path just because you have won worldly benefits, but beware, you will have an eternity in which to repent! An eternity in which to repent, that you failed to invest your life upon that which lasts: to love God in truth, come what may, with the consequence that in this life you will suffer under the hands of men.

Therefore do not deceive yourself! Of all deceivers fear most yourself! Even if it were possible in relation to the eternal to take something in advance, you would yet be deceiving yourself by taking something in advance – and gain an eternity in which to repent.

II | T R U T H

A N D

T H E

P A S S I O N

O F

I N W A R D N E S S

13 | Truth Is the Way

Truth is not something you can appropriate easily and quickly. You certainly cannot sleep or dream yourself into the truth. No, you must be tried, do battle, and suffer if you are to acquire truth for yourself. It is a sheer illusion to think that in relation to truth there is an abridgment, a short cut that dispenses with the necessity of struggling for it. With respect to acquiring truth to live by, every generation and every individual must essentially begin from the beginning.

What is truth, and in what sense was Christ the truth? The first question, as is well known, was asked by Pilate (Jn. 18:38), and it is doubtful whether he ever really cared to have his question answered. Pilate asks Christ, “What is truth?” That it did not occur to Pilate that Christ was the truth demonstrates precisely that he had no eye at all for truth. Christ’s life was the truth (Jn. 14:6). To this end was Christ born, and for this purpose did he come into the world, that he should bear witness to the truth. What, then, is the fundamental confusion in Pilate’s question? It consists in this, that it occurred to him to question *Christ* in this way; for in questioning Christ he actually denounced himself; he revealed that Christ’s life had not illumined him. How could Christ enlighten Pilate with words when Pilate could not see through Christ’s own life what truth is!

Pilate’s question is extremely foolish. Not that he asks, “What is truth?” but that he questions Christ, he whose life is expressly

the truth and who at every moment demonstrates more powerfully by his life what truth is than all the most profound lectures of the cleverest thinkers. Though it makes perfect sense to ask any other person, a thinker, a teacher, or whoever, “What is truth?” to ask Christ this it is the greatest possible confusion. Obviously Pilate is of the opinion that Christ is just a man, like everyone else. Poor Pilate! Pilate’s question is the most foolish and confusing question ever asked by man. It is as if I were to ask someone standing right before me, “Do you exist?” How can that person reply? So also with Christ in relation to Pilate. Christ is the truth. “If my life,” he might say, “cannot open your eyes to what truth is, then what can I say? For I *am* the truth.”

As with Pilate, in our day Christ as the truth has also been abolished: we take Christ’s teaching – but abolish Christ. We want truth the easy way. This is to abolish truth, for Christ the teacher is more important than the teaching. Just as Christ’s life, the fact that he lived here on earth, is vastly more important than all the results of his life, so also is Christ infinitely more important than his teaching.

Christ is the truth in the sense that to *be* the truth is the only true explanation of it; the only true way of acquiring it. Truth is not a sum of statements, not a definition, not a system of concepts, but a life. Truth is not a property of thought that guarantees validity to thinking. No, truth in its most essential character is the reduplication* of truth within yourself, within me, within him. Your life, my life, his life expresses the truth in the striving. Just as the truth was a life in Christ, so too, for us truth must be lived.

**Reduplication* is Kierkegaard’s term meaning to exist in what one understands, to manifest the truth in one’s life. It means to live out in life the challenges of thought, to be what one says.

Therefore, truth is not a matter of knowing this or that but of being in the truth. Despite all modern philosophy, there is an infinite difference here, best seen in Christ's response to Pilate. Christ did not know the truth but was the truth. Not as if he did not know what truth is, but when one is the truth and when the requirement is to be in the truth, to merely "know" the truth is insufficient – it is an untruth. For knowing the truth is something that follows as a matter of course from being in the truth, not the other way around. Nobody knows more of the truth than what he is of the truth. To properly know the truth is to be in the truth; it is to have the truth for one's life. This always costs a struggle. Any other kind of knowledge is a falsification. In short, the truth, if it is really there, is a being, a *life*. The Gospel says that this is eternal life, to know the only true God and the one whom he sent, the truth (Jn. 17:3). That is, I only know the truth when it becomes a life in me.

Truth is not a deposit of acquired knowledge, the yield. This might have been if Christ had been, for example, a teacher of truth, a thinker, one who made a discovery. But Christ is the way as well as the truth. His teaching is infinitely superior to all the inventions of any and every age, an eternity older and an eternity higher than all systems, even the very newest. His teaching is the truth – not in terms of knowledge, but in the sense that the truth is a way – and as the God-man he is and remains the way; something that no human being, however zealously he professes that the truth is the way, dare assert of himself without blasphemy.

Christ compares truth to food and appropriating it to eating it (Jn. 6:48–51). Just as food is appropriated (assimilated) and thereby becomes the sustenance of life, so also spiritually, truth is both the giver and the sustenance of life. It is life. Therefore one can see what a monstrous mistake it is to impart or represent

Christianity by lecturing. The truth is lived before it is understood. It must be fought for, tested, and appropriated. Truth is the way. And when the truth is the way, then the way cannot be shortened or drop out unless the truth itself is distorted or drops out. Is this not too difficult to understand? Anyone will easily understand it if he just gives himself to it.

14 | The Road Is *How*

There is a generally accepted metaphor that compares life to a road. To compare life to a road can indeed be fruitful in many ways, but we must consider how life is unlike a road. In a physical sense a road is an external actuality, no matter whether anyone is walking on it or not, no matter how the individual travels on it – the road is the road. But in the spiritual sense, the road comes into existence only when we walk on it. That is, the road *is* how it is walked.

It would be unreasonable to define a highway by how it is walked. Whether it is the young person who walks it with his head held high or the old decrepit person who struggles along with head bowed down, whether it is the happy person hurrying to reach a goal or the worrier who creeps slowly along, whether it is the poor traveler on foot or the rich traveler in his carriage – the road, in the physical sense, is the same for all. The road is and remains the same, the same highway. But not the road of virtue. We cannot point to the road of virtue and say: There runs the road of virtue. We can only show how the road of virtue is walked, and if anyone refuses to walk that way, he is walking another road.

The dissimilarity in the metaphor shows up most clearly when the discussion is simultaneously about a physical road and a road in the spiritual sense. For example, when we read in the Gospel about the good Samaritan, there is mention of the

road between Jericho and Jerusalem. The story tells of five people who walked “along the same road.” Spiritually speaking, however, each one walked his own road. The highway, alas, makes no difference; it is the spiritual that makes the difference and distinguishes the road. Let us consider more carefully how this is.

The first man was a peaceful traveler who walked along the road from Jericho to Jerusalem, along a lawful road. The second man was a robber who “walked along the same road” – and yet on an unlawful road. Then a priest came “along the same road”; he saw the poor unfortunate man who had been assaulted by the robber. Perhaps he was momentarily moved but went right on by. He walked the road of indifference. Next a Levite came “along the same road.” He saw the poor unfortunate man; he too walked past unmoved, continuing his road. The Levite walked “along the same road” but was walking his way, the way of selfishness and callousness. Finally a Samaritan came “along the same road.” He found the poor unfortunate man on the road of mercy. He showed by example how to walk the road of mercy; he demonstrated that the road, spiritually speaking, is precisely this; *how* one walks. This is why the Gospel says, “Go and do likewise.” Yes, there were five travelers who walked “along the same road,” and yet each one walked his own road.

The question “how one walks life’s road” makes all the difference. In other words, when life is compared to a road, the metaphor simply expresses the universal, that which everyone who is alive has in common by being alive. To that extent we are all walking along the road of life and are all walking along the same road. But when living becomes a matter of truth, then the question becomes: How shall we walk in order to walk the right road on the road of life? The traveler who in truth walks life’s road does not ask, “Where is the road?” but asks how one ought to

walk along the road. Yet, because impatience does not mind being deceived it merely asks where the road is, as if that decided everything as when the traveler finally has found the highway. Worldly wisdom is very willing to deceive by answering correctly the question, “Where is the road?” while life’s true task is omitted, that spiritually understood the road is: how it is walked.

Worldly sagacity teaches that the road goes over Gerizim, or over Moriah, or that it goes through some science or other, or that the road is certain doctrines, or certain behaviors. But all this is a deception, because the road is how it is walked. It is indeed as Scripture says – two people can be sleeping in the same bed – the one is saved, the other is lost. Two people can go up to the same house of worship – the one goes home saved, the other is lost. Two people can recite the same creed – the one can be saved, the other is lost. How does this happen except for the fact that, spiritually speaking, it is a deception to know where the road is, because the road is: how it is walked?

15 | Two Ways of Reflection

There are two ways of reflection. For objective reflection, truth becomes an object, and the point is to disregard the knowing subject (the individual). By contrast, in subjective reflection truth becomes personal appropriation, a life, inwardness, and the point is to immerse oneself in this subjectivity. Now, then, which of the ways is the way of truth that matters for an existing person?

The way of objective reflection turns the individual into something accidental, and thus turns existence into an indifferent, vanishing something. The way of objective truth turns away from the knowing subject. The subject and subjectivity become unimportant, and correspondingly, the truth is a matter of indifference. Objective validity is paramount. Any personal interest is subjectivity. For this reason the objective way is convinced that it possesses a security that the subjective way does not have. It is of the opinion that it avoids the danger that lies in wait for the subjective way, and at its extreme this danger is madness. In its view, a solely subjective definition of truth make lunacy and truth indistinguishable. But by staying objective one avoids becoming a lunatic. However, is not the absence of inwardness also lunacy?

It is true that subjective reflection turns inward, but in this inward deepening there is truth. Lest we forget, the subject, the individual, is an *existing* self, and existing is a process of becom-

ing. Therefore truth as the identity of thought and being is an illusion of the abstract. The knower is first and foremost an existing person. In other words, thinking and being are not automatically one and the same. If the existing person could actually be outside himself, the truth would then be something concluded for him. However, for the truly existing person, passion, not thought, is existence at its very highest: true knowing pertains essentially to existence, to a life of decision and responsibility. Only ethical and ethical-religious knowing is essential knowing. Only truth that matters to me, to you, is of significance.

Let me clarify the difference between objective and subjective reflection. True inwardness in an existing subject involves passion, and truth as a paradox corresponds to passion. In forgetting that one is an existing subject, one loses passion, and in turn, truth ceases to be a paradox. If truth is the comprehensible, the knowing subject shifts from being human to being an abstract thinker, and truth becomes an abstract, comprehensible object for his knowing. When the question about truth is asked objectively, what is reflected upon is not the relation but the *what* of the relation. As long as what one relates oneself to is the truth, the subject is supposedly in the truth. But when the question about truth is asked subjectively, the individual's *relation* to the truth is what matters. If only the *how* (not the *what*) of this relation is in truth, then the individual is in truth, even if he in this way were to relate himself to untruth.

When approached objectively, the question of truth is only about categories of thought. Approached subjectively, however, truth is about inwardness. At its maximum, the how of inwardness is the passion of the infinite, and the passion of the infinite is the essential truth. Decision exists only in subjectivity. Thus the passion of the infinite, not its content, is the deciding factor,

III | T H E

W O R K S

O F

L O V E

IV | A N X I E T Y

A N D

T H E

G O S P E L

O F

S U F F E R I N G

V | CHRISTIAN
COLLISIONS

VI | T H O U G H T S

T H A T

R A D I C A L L Y

C U R E :

E X C E R P T S

A N D

A P H O R I S M S

