

# Kierkegaard's Paradoxical Christology

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## Kierkegaard's Paradoxical Christology

In his introduction to Karl Barth's early theology, T. F. Torrance writes:

What interests Barth in Kierkegaard's teaching was the emphasis upon the explosive force that the invasion of God in his Godness in time and human existence meant, which Kierkegaard sought to express by the paradox and dialectic. This is a point that has been often misunderstood in both Kierkegaard and Barth--for the emphasis upon the infinite qualitative difference between time and eternity... was not upon some abstract and distant Deity, but precisely upon the nearness, the impact of God in all his Majesty and Godness upon man--that is the significance of Jesus that had been lost, and which Barth as well as Kierkegaard sought to recover.<sup>1</sup>

There is a lot going on in Torrance's mind when he writes this passage--much more than can be addressed in this essay. But there is one specific point that I would like to focus on and develop: that Kierkegaard's use of the "infinite qualitative difference" and "the paradox" sought to draw attention to the nearness of God in Jesus Christ.

While Torrance is not entirely clear in the above passage, I think his point is as follows. Kierkegaard's and Barth's shared emphasis on the infinite qualitative difference sought to stress, in Kierkegaard's words, that there is 'nothing whatever' that human beings can do, in and of themselves, to relate themselves directly to God.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, it must be 'God who gives everything; it is he who makes a [human being] able to have faith, etc. This is grace, and this is the major premise of [Christianity].'<sup>3</sup> For both of them, this is the reality of the situation that faces us. So, for example, to try to advance an account of the nearness of God by asserting a natural synthesis between God and creation would be confused. To

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to his Early Theology - 1910-31* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 44.

<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, vol. 5, eds. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Alastair Hannay, David Kangas, Bruce H. Kirmmse, George Pattison, Vanessa Rumble, and K. Brian Söderquist (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press) (hereafter *KJN*), 244.

<sup>3</sup> *KJN* 5, 244.

discover the truth of God's nearness to creation, we must look to the only one in whom there is full union between God and creation: Jesus Christ. For Kierkegaard,

That the human race is supposed to be in kinship with God is ancient paganism; but *that* an individual human being is God is Christianity, and this particular human being is the God-man.<sup>4</sup>

This is the significance of Jesus which, as Torrance notes above, 'had been lost, and which Barth as well as Kierkegaard sought to recover.'<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, because the nearness of this union is entirely unique to the person of Christ, and because we cannot comprehend how God could be hypostatically united with humanity, the God-humanity of Christ presents itself to us as an absolute paradox. As Kierkegaard writes, 'the God-man is... absolutely the paradox'--a position that Barth would come to develop in his own theology.<sup>6</sup> As such, the world of Christian theology should not treat Christology as a puzzle-solving exercise; the puzzle of Christ's God's-humanity is not one to which we can offer a solution.

In sum, "the infinite qualitative difference" served as a term of caution against overly systematic attempts to develop a human understanding of the relationship between God and creation. Instead, our attention should be directed to the paradoxical person of Jesus: the one 'mediator' 'who leads us to God.'<sup>7</sup>

There is much to discuss on this issue with regard to the relationship between Kierkegaard and Barth and, indeed, the relationship between Kierkegaard and Torrance. In this essay, however, I shall focus on Kierkegaard himself. More specifically, I shall concentrate on his paradoxical Christology as a position that helps us to understand God's nearness to humanity. I'll begin by looking at what Kierkegaard has to say about the union between God and humanity in Christ. I shall then turn to look at how his paradoxical understanding of the God-human relationship helps him to understand two difficult issues in theology: (1) God's relationship to Christ's suffering; and (2) the changelessness of God. Following this

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<sup>4</sup> Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. & trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) (hereafter *PC*), 82.

<sup>5</sup> Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 44.

<sup>6</sup> *PC*, 82. The main place that Barth develops a paradoxical Christology is in the second edition of his commentary on Romans. He is open about the fact that this development emerged under the influence of Kierkegaard.

<sup>7</sup> Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, vol. 2, ed. & trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967-78) (hereafter *JP*), 1432.

theological reflection, I shall examine the practical role that paradox played in his theology. Finally, I conclude by offering a brief account of how Kierkegaard's paradoxical Christology relates to the mediation of Christ--a connection that would come to be taken up in the Christocentric theologies of Barth and Torrance. What we shall find is that, despite his limited understanding of Kierkegaard, the above statement from T.F. Torrance shows a deep appreciation for Kierkegaard's theology on an issue that is often overlooked and, as Torrance puts it, misunderstood.

### ***The Paradoxical Union of God and Humanity in Christ***

For Kierkegaard, the systematic question of who exactly Jesus Christ is is one that needs to be approached cautiously, with a hesitancy to make statements about his constitution that go beyond what we are capable of saying. At the same time, there are some things that he thinks do need to be said about Christology, and we see throughout much of his later authorship. For example, while he maintains that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human, he also insists that we must not confuse these two natures--he avoids the suggestion that the incarnation involves a synthesis of God and the world.<sup>8</sup> Also, he denies that the Son needs to become less divine in order to become incarnate--which some kenotic Christologies risk suggesting. For Kierkegaard, there is no competitive relationship between humanity and divinity; there is no zero-sum game between Christ's divine and human nature, which assumes that his humanity in some way takes away from his divinity. Jesus Christ is one person, 'true God and true man', 'the lowly human being, yet God, the only begotten of the Father.'<sup>9</sup> He 'is in lowliness and in loftiness

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<sup>8</sup> For Kierkegaard, the infinite qualitative difference between God and humanity 'always remains.' *JP* 2, 1349; see also *JP* 3, 3087 and *JP* 1, 236.

<sup>9</sup> *PC*, 160, 75. As David Law points out, Kierkegaard sometimes associates this union with the term *Sammensætning* (translated 'placing together', 'compound', 'composite'). Law, *Kierkegaard's Kenotic Christology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 218-9; *PC*, 81, 82, cf. 16. However, his use of this term should not be interpreted as suggesting a Nestorian tendency in Kierkegaard's thought. Rather, it is a way of making sure his Christology took a firm stand against Christologies that would confuse the divine and human nature. As Law also notes, 'The Nestorian impression created by *Sammensætning* is in any case corrected by Anti-Climacus' use of the term *Eenhed*, which makes clear that Anti-Climacus holds that the two natures are not merely juxtaposed but are united in the Person of Christ.' 219. (Anti-Climacus is one of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms. He represents an extraordinary Christian. Normally, it is best to draw a clear distinction between Kierkegaard and Anti-Climacus. In this essay, however, I have not done this, to try to be more straightforward. This is justifiable because Kierkegaard and Anti-Climacus seem to

one and the same.’<sup>10</sup> So, when it comes to following Christ, there is no choice ‘between Christ in lowliness and Christ in loftiness, for Christ is not divided; he is one and the same.’<sup>11</sup> Humanity and divinity are in union (*Eenhed*) in Christ.<sup>12</sup>

As we mentioned in the introduction, Kierkegaard does not think we can know how this could be the case. The logic of the incarnation is beyond human comprehension; it is absolutely paradoxical. In holding to this position, he finds himself in company with much of Christian orthodoxy. For example, Cyril of Alexandria writes: ‘[w]e see in Christ the strange and rare paradox of Lordship in servant’s form and divine glory in human abasement.’<sup>13</sup> To be clear, an emphasis on the paradoxical nature of Christology should not be taken to suggest a logical contradiction. Rather, it simply suggests that the notion of Christ’s hypostatic union appears contradictory to us in our limited finite understanding. Accordingly, Kierkegaard’s understanding of the God-man as absolute paradox seeks to emphasize the inability of human beings to possess their own systematic or representative understanding of the logic of the incarnation.<sup>14</sup> As it is written in Timothy 6.16 Christ ‘dwells in inapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see’. Or, in Kierkegaard’s words: ‘God dwells in a light from which flows every ray that illuminates the world, yet no one can force his way along the paths in order to see God since the paths of light turn into darkness when one turns toward the light.’<sup>15</sup> So, again, the divinity of Christ remains hidden from direct human perception.

At the same time, Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the paradoxical nature of Christology should not be taken to be wholly negative. When God assumes humanity, God reveals himself to the world in a mode that can be received by human beings in faith. This does not mean that everything about God is revealed

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hold the same theological position when it comes to the topics discussed in this essay. Indeed, *Practice in Christianity* was originally drafted under Kierkegaard’s own name.)

<sup>10</sup> *PC*, 161.

<sup>11</sup> *PC*, 161.

<sup>12</sup> *PC*, 160.

<sup>13</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, trans. John McGuckin (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 101.

<sup>14</sup> *PC*, 82. It has been well established by C. Stephen Evans (and widely acknowledged in Kierkegaard scholarship) that, for Kierkegaard, the paradox is not a formal or logical contradiction, but just appears to be so to speculative forms of natural human reason. See Evans, *Passionate Reason* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 97-104; *Kierkegaard’s Fragments and Postscript* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1983), 212-22.

<sup>15</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 9.

in Christ. There will always be features of God's inner life that remain hidden to us--features that are wholly consistent with his revelation. This is because there are qualities that are essential to God that cannot find representation within creation. But what it is does mean is that God provides the world with a finite object (the humanity of Jesus Christ) through which God fully communicates himself to creation according to its limits. It is in Christ that God is nearest to creation and through Christ that God positively communicates himself to the world. By the work of the Holy Spirit, this communication can be received by us in faith.<sup>16</sup>

To provide a bit more theological context for Kierkegaard's paradoxical theology and show how it finds expression in his broader theology, I shall now briefly consider how he holds together the suffering, omnipotence, and changelessness of the God-human.

### ***The One Who Suffers Omnipotently***

Reminiscent of Cyril of Alexandria's view of Mary as *Theotokos* (*θεοτόκος*),<sup>17</sup> mother of God, Kierkegaard affirms that once God allows himself 'to be born', God 'has in a certain sense bound himself once and for all'.<sup>18</sup> He writes:

[The God-man's] unrecognizability is so omnipotently maintained that in a way he himself is in the power of his own incognito, in which lies the literal *actuality* of his pure human suffering, that this is not merely

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<sup>16</sup> We do not find much reference to the Holy Spirit in Kierkegaard's writings. This is because of the way in which the Spirit had come to be associated with the Hegelian theologies of which he was so critical. That said, he does note that '[t]he Spirit brings faith, the faith--that is, faith in the strictest sense of the word, this gift of the Holy Spirit.' *For Self-Examination*, in *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself!*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 81. Also, he maintains that the Spirit must help us to know the Son, the Mediator, who directs us to the Father: God 'becomes my Father in the Mediator by means of the Spirit'. *JP* 2, 1432.

<sup>17</sup> Cyril asks: 'How could we confess in the rule of faith that we believe in the Son of God who was born of the virgin Mary, if it wasn't the Son of God but the son of man who was born of the virgin Mary?' Sermon 186. 1, *Sermons*, vi, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 1995), 25.

<sup>18</sup> *PC*, 131. Earlier, Kierkegaard writes: 'When God chooses to let himself be born in lowliness, when he who holds all possibilities in his hand takes upon himself the form of a lowly servant, when he goes about defenceless and let people do to him what they will, he surely must know well enough what he is doing and why he wills it; but for all that it is he who has people in his power and not they who have power over him'. *PC*, 34.

appearance but in a certain sense is the assumed incognito's upper hand over him. Only in this way is there in the profoundest sense earnestness concerning his becoming true man; this is also why he suffers through the utmost suffering of feeling himself abandoned by God. He is not, therefore, at any moment beyond suffering but is actually in suffering, and this purely human experience befalls him, that the actuality proves to be more terrible than the possibility, that he who freely assumed unrecognizability yet actually suffers as if he were trapped or had trapped himself in unrecognizability...[The divine incognito] was maintained to such an extent that [the God-man] himself suffered purely humanly under the unrecognizability.<sup>19</sup>

Kierkegaard describes this dynamic as

...a strange kind of dialectic: that he, omnipotent, binds himself and does it so omnipotently that he actually feels bound, suffers under the consequence of his loving and free decision to become an individual human being--to that degree there was earnestness in his becoming an actual human being.<sup>20</sup>

In these passages, Kierkegaard makes it clear that the God-man subjects himself to human suffering in a way that really is caught up in the suffering of creation. This is possible because with 'everything divinely in his power', Christ is free 'to suffer humanly, every moment divinely capable of changing everything.'<sup>21</sup> In other words, the God-man suffers omnipotently--a perspective reminiscent of the Cyrilline view that the incarnate Word suffered impassibly.<sup>22</sup> For Cyril, as Paul Gavrilyuk writes,

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<sup>19</sup> *PC*, 131-32.

<sup>20</sup> *PC*, 132.

<sup>21</sup> *JP* 4, 4610. Drawing on Mt. 26.53, Kierkegaard asserts 'that [Christ], the abased one, at all times had it in his power to ask his Father in heaven to send legions of angels to him to avert this most terrible thing [his death]'. *PC*, 177.

<sup>22</sup> For further discussion of the notion that Christ suffered impassibly, see Thomas Weinandy, 'Cyril and the Mystery of the Incarnation', in Thomas Weinandy and Daniel Keating (eds.), *The Theology of Cyril of Alexandria* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2003), 49-53.

...both qualified divine impassibility and qualified divine possibility were necessary for a sound theology of incarnation. That affirmation of the impassibility was a way of protecting the truth that the one who became incarnate was truly God. Admitting a qualified passibility secured the point that God truly submitted himself to the conditions of the incarnation.<sup>23</sup>

Like Cyril, the words of Phil 2.5-11 resonate throughout Kierkegaard's depiction of Jesus Christ. For example, in one of his upbuilding discourses, he writes:

He who was equal with God took the form of a lowly servant, he would command legions of angels, indeed could command the world's creation and its destruction, he walked about defenceless; he who had everything in his power surrendered all power and could not even do anything for his beloved disciples but could only offer them the very same conditions of lowliness and contempt... if this is not self-denial, what then is self-denial.<sup>24</sup>

What does Kierkegaard mean by self-denial here? He does not think that the Son (the one 'who was equal with God') denies his essential divinity (or Godness) by taking the form of a lowly servant.<sup>25</sup> Rather, God chooses to express his power through a powerlessness that we might not naturally associate with God. Moreover, for Kierkegaard, God cannot express his power through an apparent "powerlessness" without assuming a new form. God reveals himself in an act that is not characterized by the kind of transcendent glory that characterizes the other

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 150.

<sup>24</sup> Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 224-5. Kierkegaard also writes, 'Jesus Christ 'learned obedience and was obedient, obedient in everything, obedient in giving up everything (the glory that he had before the foundation of the world was laid), obedient in doing without everything (even that on which he could lay his head), obedient in taking everything upon himself (the sin of humankind), obedient in suffering everything (the guilt of humankind), obedient to subjecting himself to everything in life, obedient in death.' Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 85.

<sup>25</sup> Reflecting on John 12:32, Kierkegaard refers to the uplifted one as 'God's only begotten Son, our Lord, who from eternity was with God, was God, came to the world, then ascended into heaven, where he now sits at the Father's right hand, glorified with the glory he has before the world was.' *PC*, 222.



acts of God which we read about elsewhere in Scripture. When 'divine glory...take[s] on a lowly form',<sup>26</sup> God gives himself to relate personally to human beings in a new way, such that there would seem to be a sense in which the incarnation involves 'something new for God.'<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Kierkegaard is willing to go so far as to say that 'God suffers' in and through the humanity of Jesus Christ.<sup>28</sup> What we see here, in the words of Cyril, is a paradoxical understanding of Jesus Christ as one 'who as God transcends suffering, suffered humanly in his flesh.'<sup>29</sup> For Kierkegaard, this is possible by way of an omnipotence that 'can withdraw itself at the same time it gives itself away'.<sup>30</sup>

### ***The Changelessness of God***

There are a number of things that Kierkegaard has to say about the nature of God without getting caught up with systematic debates about the extent of God's attributes, their mutual compatibility, their precise definition etc. For him, such debates tend to go beyond the remit of human theologizing, which, he believed, should be very slow to advance an overly systematic doctrine of God or an overly rigid description of God's attributes--especially if such description risks getting in the way of affirming positions that he took to be central to Christian orthodoxy. It was with this attitude that he approaches the changelessness of God. He was clear that there was an important sense in which we need to maintain divine changelessness. At the same time, he does not commit himself to a doctrine of this attribute that stops him, for example, from being able to affirm what he wanted to say about the way in which God involves himself in the history of creation.

The place where Kierkegaard gives particular attention to divine changelessness is in his sermon on 'The Changelessness of God', where he offers

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<sup>26</sup> Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 303.

<sup>27</sup> Paul R. Sponheim, 'Relational Transcendence in Divine Agency', in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Practice in Christianity*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 53.

<sup>28</sup> JP 4, 4610. Kierkegaard also notes that Christ entered into the world *in order to suffer*'. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 597.

<sup>29</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *De symbolo*, 24, in L.R. Wickham, *Cyril of Alexandria: Selected Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 123.

<sup>30</sup> JP 2, 1251.

a reflection on James 1.17-21, particularly verse 17: 'Every good and perfect gift is from above and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variableness or shadow or turning.'<sup>31</sup> The message of this sermon closely corresponds to its title, and it would be hard to walk away from this sermon thinking that he was willing to call into question the immutability of God. For example, in the opening prayer of this sermon, he refers to God as the 'Changeless One, whom nothing changes!'<sup>32</sup> He then goes on to write: 'no variation touches [God], not even the shadow of variation; in unchanged clarity, he, the Father of lights, is eternally unchanged.'<sup>33</sup>

At the same time, in his opening prayer, he also writes: 'you who in infinite love let yourself be moved, may this our prayer also move you to bless it so that the prayer may change the one who is praying into conformity with your changeless will, you Changeless One!'<sup>34</sup> Here, he does not suggest that God changes who he essentially is or what he essentially wills. Yet he does acknowledge that God allows himself to be moved by human prayers. For Kierkegaard, God is always free to interact with that which he creates--albeit without the kind of emotional changeableness that characterizes human interaction. In recognizing this, he does not hold to a diminished view of God's immutability but simply allows his understanding of God's immutability to be shaped by what he sees in Scripture, particularly in the person of Jesus Christ--even if this offends some of our immediate expectations about what God should be like.

Again, Kierkegaard does not develop a systematic account of how exactly we can align divine changelessness with the various accounts we have of God interacting with creation. Not possessing divine changelessness himself, and not having access to it, he does not think that the complexities of divine providence are within the purview of human understanding. Indeed, he was highly critical of those who sought to think abstractly about God's changelessness, who enter into a 'a phantom-battle about the predicates of God'.<sup>35</sup> When emphasizing God's changelessness, he was primarily concerned with recognizing that God is

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<sup>31</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Moment and Late Writings*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) (hereafter *M*), 263-82.

<sup>32</sup> *M*, 269.

<sup>33</sup> *M*, 272.

<sup>34</sup> *M*, 269.

<sup>35</sup> *JP* 2, 1348.

unchangeably good, true, and loving etc. He did not view God's changelessness as 'an abstract something'--like the changelessness of the sun.<sup>36</sup> If God existed in this way, then he does not think there would be any possibility of a reciprocal relationship with God, involving both parties. For him, God is a free subject whose personal activity expresses God's changeless truth in a way that is lively and animated in ways that prevent it from being conceptualized by human reason. And, in his changelessness, he believes that Scripture presents God as one who freely chooses to be responsive to creation.

So, in a certain respect, Kierkegaard would seem to think that the actual interactions God has with creation make a difference to God--especially in the case of the incarnation. Apart from creation, God does not share a relationship with that which is not God, and so clearly does not find union with that which is not God. On the other side, apart from the incarnation, creation is not fully united with God in the way that is established in Christ. This again means that there is something entirely unique to the person of Christ--that is, again, absolutely paradoxical to human reason. At the same time, Kierkegaard does not think that such change makes a difference to who God essentially is. This means that, paradoxically, the unchangeable God is able to bring about change in his relationship with creation.

### ***The Role of Paradoxical Christology***

As we saw in the previous two sections, Kierkegaard's paradoxical theology allowed him to maintain views about God's relationship to creation that are beyond what we can comprehend with our limited minds. However, given his commitment to the paradoxicality of Christianity, this did not concern him in the least. Before turning to consider the role of Kierkegaard's paradoxical Christology, it is important to be clear that the role that paradox played in his thought was not simply functional but was also theological--it was grounded in his understanding of who God is and who we are before God. At the same time, while his approach was not designed for the sake of addressing the problems he saw in Denmark, he did see this theology as providing a firm basis for enabling him to diagnose and address some of the key problems he saw in his surrounding culture.

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<sup>36</sup> *JP* 2, 1348.

What were the problems he faced? In his later writings, Kierkegaard sought to challenge the kind of abstract speculation about Jesus Christ that distracted persons from relating to Christ in a way that would lead them into lives of discipleship. For him, this was not only a problem in his immediate context. It is one that hinders much of the history of Christological reflection, right from the very beginning when the Pharisees were blinded by their theologistic analysis of Jesus Christ--an analysis that was undergirded by the reigning theological orthodoxies. In Kierkegaard's own day, this problem expressed itself in a proclivity to think about Christianity in purely abstract terms that distracted Christians from responding to Christ's call to discipleship.<sup>37</sup> This contributed to the illusion that the heart of Christianity was to be found in doctrinal statements, which turned Christianity into a religion for the elite and the bourgeois. Not only did this move take Christianity out of the hands of the poor and marginalized of society; it turned Christianity against them--it turned Christianity into a luxury that was barely within their means. He writes:

Theory and doctrine are a fig leaf, and by means of this fig leaf a professor or clergyman looks so portentous that it is terrifying. And just as it is said of the Pharisees that they not only do not enter into the kingdom of heaven themselves but even prevent others from entering, so also the professor prevents the unlearned man by giving him the idea that it depends on doctrine and that consequently he must try to follow along in a small way. This, of course, is to the professor's interest, for the more important the doctrine becomes, the more important the professor becomes as well, and the more splendid his occupation and the greater his reputation. Generally speaking, the professor's and pastor's spiritual counselling is a hoax, for it is calculated to prevent people from entering the kingdom of heaven.<sup>38</sup>

For Kierkegaard, there is a tendency in Christian scholarship to become so preoccupied with transposing Christian truths 'into the sphere of the intellectual' that they ignore the "Truth" who stands right in front of them, calling them to

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<sup>37</sup> *KJN* 1, 247.

<sup>38</sup> *JP* 4, 3870.

leave their nets and follow him.<sup>39</sup> For him, this points to a failure to recognize the essence of Christianity. As he saw it, where there is no Christian living, there is no Christian understanding. '[W]hen the truth is the way, being the truth is a life-- and this is indeed how Christ speaks of himself: I am the Truth and the way and the Life.'<sup>40</sup> Therefore, if a particular kind of theological discourse risks being detrimental to the liveliness of a person's discipleship, then something has gone very wrong.

At various points in his writings, Kierkegaard became so caught up in his critique of the intellectualization of Christianity that he ended up being critical of any amount of reflection on Christian doctrine. Indeed, in one journal entry, he goes so far as to write: 'I do not have a stitch of doctrine—and doctrine is what people want. Because doctrine is the indolence of aping and mimicking for the learner, and doctrine is the way to sensate power for the teacher, for doctrine collects men.'<sup>41</sup> From what we have seen (and could see), he clearly had more than a stitch of doctrine, and he would not have wanted to advance a theology that fell out of line with Christian orthodoxy. Nevertheless, he did not think that further theological digging and probing should have been the priority that it was for theologians in Denmark. For him, in his particular context, there was no immediate need for so much attention to be given to "progress" on this front--in many respects, he seemed to think that we would be fine with nothing more than a kind of mere Christianity, to use Richard Baxter's phrase.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, in his view, the ongoing speculative pursuit of theological progress was leading to digression.

One of the prime targets that Kierkegaard had in his sights, was the systematic Christology of Hegelianism. To oversimplify matters, this project attempted to make progress in Christology by trying to work out the logic of the incarnation by way of philosophical mediation (*Mediering*) or reconciliation (à la Hegel)--a form of mediation that sought to hold the divine and human together within a single system of human understanding.<sup>43</sup> Under this project, for Kierkegaard, the person of Jesus Christ came to be reduced to (or subsumed

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<sup>39</sup> *JP* 4, 4953.

<sup>40</sup> *PC*, 207.

<sup>41</sup> *JP* 6, 6917.

<sup>42</sup> While this phrase originated with Richard Baxter, it received new popularity through C. S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*.

<sup>43</sup> See *PC*, 136.

under) a systematic doctrine for intellectual stimulation. For him, this could not be more backward. Rather than seeing Christology as a witness that directs our attention to Jesus Christ, the person of Jesus Christ was being treated as a person who directs our attention to speculation over Christological puzzles--a pursuit that kept systematic theologians in business. This led him to emphasize that 'it is not a doctrine that [Jesus Christ] communicates to you--no he gives you himself.'<sup>44</sup> He also writes:

The Savior of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ, did not come to the world in order to bring a doctrine; he never lectured. Since he did not bring a doctrine, he did not try by way of reasons to prevail upon anyone to accept the doctrine, nor did he try to authenticate it by proofs. His teaching was really his life, his existence...[O]ne does not become a Christian by hearing something about Christianity, by reading something about it, by thinking about it, or, while Christ was living, by seeing him once in a while or so by going and staring at him all day long. No, a *setting* [*Bestedelse*] (*situation*) is required--venture a decisive act; the proof does not precede but follows, is in and with the imitation that follows Christ.<sup>45</sup>

For Kierkegaard, God speaks a person to creation, and that person bespeaks God. This person is to be loved and followed, and it is by so doing that a person comes to know God. In this relationship, Jesus Christ must not be reduced to a set of human ideas or principles without losing out on the essential truth of who he is.<sup>46</sup> Kierkegaard's particular focus on the person of Jesus Christ is not one that is often associated with him and it has come to be more commonly associated with Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his emphasis on the importance of the "who" question.

In his lectures on Christology, Bonhoeffer stresses that when we approach Jesus Christ, we must resist the temptation to reduce the person of Jesus Christ to our own Christologies--ideas that are contained within human systems of

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<sup>44</sup> Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, ed. and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) (hereafter *WA*), 187.

<sup>45</sup> Kierkegaard, *Judge for Yourself!*, in *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself!*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) (hereafter *JFY*), 191.

<sup>46</sup> *JP* 2, 1904.

understanding. When Christ is displaced by Christology, our commitment to Christ becomes fixated on “how” questions that become trapped within the immanent sphere of human understanding. We focus on such questions about “how is it possible for Jesus Christ to exist?”. As a result, Christ becomes an object that is defined by human demands, rather the one who himself demands the transformation of human beings. This makes it all too easy for us to become caught up in pursuing and conforming to our own systematic ideas about Christology; concepts and principles that do not transform our lives in the way that the person of Jesus Christ does. Accordingly, Bonhoeffer stressed that we need to approach Jesus Christ by asking “who are you?”, which is a question that recognizes the ‘otherness of the other.’<sup>47</sup> As we ask this question, we are called to look beyond ourselves to the risen and ascended Jesus Christ.

The connection between Bonhoeffer’s Christology and Kierkegaard’s is a result of the decisive impact that Kierkegaard had on Bonhoeffer. When Bonhoeffer emphasizes the “who” question, he is channeling Kierkegaard.<sup>48</sup> By so doing, he gave Kierkegaard’s Christology a voice that it had not found from Kierkegaard himself, which is why this emphasis is normally associated with Bonhoeffer.<sup>49</sup> Why was it that Kierkegaard was unable to give this position a greater hearing? Why did his message find so much more gravitas under the conveyance of Bonhoeffer? There are many possible reasons for this, but there is one in particular that is worth mentioning here. Arguably, Kierkegaard’s greatest weakness was his tendency to overstate his case, and, as we have already seen, this was a particular problem when it came to his critique of Christian doctrine. The disdain he had for theology in Denmark, particularly in his later life, did not do him any favors, and made it difficult for him to be taken seriously. Simultaneously, and partly because

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<sup>47</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin, 1932–1933* (Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 12,) ed. L. Rasmussen, trans. I. Best and D. Higgins (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 303; see also 300–8.

<sup>48</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, trans. Edwin Robertson (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 27. Notably, the more recent translation of Bonhoeffer’s lectures on Christology (cited above) does not show Bonhoeffer’s reference to Kierkegaard because, as Christiane Tietz explains in her excellent chapter on Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer, ‘this new edition follows only one student’s notes instead of being a compilation of several like the earlier edition was.’ Christiane Tietz, ‘Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Standing “in the tradition of Christian Thinking,” in Jon Stewart, ed., *Kierkegaard’s Influence on Theology – Tome I: German Protestant Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 47 n.14.

<sup>49</sup> Also, on a related note, it was not only Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the person of Jesus Christ that had such a major impact on Bonhoeffer, his emphasis on the importance of following and imitating Jesus Christ was a cornerstone for Bonhoeffer’s *The Cost of Discipleship*.

of his particular tack, Kierkegaard's theology was overshadowed by the likes of Hans Lassen Martensen who, Kierkegaard comments, 'sits there arranging a system of dogmatics' '[w]hile the whole of existence is disintegrating.'<sup>50</sup>

What does this have to do with the role of Kierkegaard paradoxical Christology? First, at risk of being repetitive, it is worth reiterating that Kierkegaard's Christology relies heavily on the Christian tradition. Indeed, his very use of paradoxical Christology calls into question the extent of his critique of Christian doctrine.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, his paradoxical Christology also stressed the inability of human understanding to grasp the logic of the incarnation: to know how we might hold together the propositions "Jesus Christ is fully human" and "Jesus Christ is fully God." It therefore called for a halt to overly speculative approaches to Christology--to what we might call the quest for the incarnate Jesus (a quest to discover the hidden intricacies of the incarnation).<sup>52</sup> For him, the logic of the incarnation is to be believed and confessed, by faith: 'the divine and the human have to be *believed* together, something only faith is capable of doing'.<sup>53</sup> Christology, therefore, is not a venture in problem-solving: a project wherein scholars try to make the incarnation fit into a human system of logic. He writes:

To *believe* is to believe the divine and human together in Christ. To *comprehend* him [God] is to comprehend his life humanly. But to comprehend his life *humanly* is so far from being more than believing that it means to lose him if there is not believing in addition, since his life is what it is for faith, the *divine*-human. I can understand *myself* in *believing*... but comprehend faith or comprehend Christ, I cannot. On the contrary, I can understand that to be able to comprehend his life in every respect is the most absolute and also the most blasphemous misunderstanding.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> *KJN* 6, 151.

<sup>51</sup> We learn to embrace Christ in all his paradoxicality by align ourselves with the Symbol of Chalcedon, which affirms that Jesus Christ is 'to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably'. In the person of Jesus Christ, there is distinction in unity and unity in distinction: the *two* natures, divine and human, are 'concurring in *one* Person', 'God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ'. *Symbolum Chalcedonense*, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 62.

<sup>52</sup> *JP* 2, 1340.

<sup>53</sup> *JP* 4, 4610.

<sup>54</sup> *WA*, 65 (emphasis original).



Christology, for Kierkegaard, is the study of the first-order logic (or Logos) who makes sense of our humanity by reconciling us into faithful relationship with God. Once a person is halted from trying to exceed their ability to systematise Christ for themselves--upon recognising the absolute paradoxicality of Jesus Christ--then one is able to focus on the more important task at hand: following and imitating Jesus Christ, and thereby growing in one's loving and faithful devotion to Christ.

One of the problems and ironies with paradoxical presentations of Jesus Christ, however, is that they can incite the very speculation they seek to subvert--paradoxes are, after all, apparent contradictions that are prone to be disputed. The curious and controlling nature of fallen human reason is such that it is stubborn about letting go of the desire to see theological matters explained in terms that satisfy human systematic frameworks--that satisfy our "how" questions.<sup>55</sup> As such, paradoxical Christology has a tendency to beg "how" questions about the union between Christ's divinity and humanity. The history of such projects, Kierkegaard notes, have been fraught with confusion:

In the first period of Christendom, when even aberrations bore an unmistakable mark of one's nevertheless knowing what the issue was, the fallacy with respect to the God-man was either that in one way or another the term "God" was taken away (Ebionitism and the like) or the term "man" was taken away (Gnosticism). In the entire modern age, which so unmistakably bears the mark that it does not even know what the issue is, the confusion is something different and far more dangerous. By way of didacticism, the God-man has been made into the speculative unity of God and man *sub specie aeterni* [under the aspect of eternity] or made visible in that nowhere-to-be-found medium of pure being, rather than that the God-man is the unity of being God and an individual human being in a historically actual situation. Or Christ has been abolished altogether, thrown out and his teaching taken over, and finally he is almost regarded as one

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<sup>55</sup> Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* in *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, ed. and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 42-3.

regards an anonymous writer: the teaching is the principle thing, is everything.<sup>56</sup>

As this passage suggests, systematic approaches to Christology have led to: (1) zero-sum games between Christ's human and divine nature; (2) the development a 'speculative unity of God and man' that directs our attention to an overarching realm within which God and humanity are united; (3) the setting aside of the person of Christ to focus on his teachings. What is Kierkegaard's fourth option? On the one hand, for Kierkegaard, we cannot teach persons to comprehend Christ in the way that we can teach persons how to solve philosophical problems.<sup>57</sup> '[Christ] knows that no human being can *comprehend* him, that the gnat that flies into the candlelight is not more certain of destruction than the person who wants to try to comprehend him or what is united in him: God and man.'<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, we do need to come to *know* him because 'he is the Savior, and for no human being is there salvation except through him.'<sup>59</sup>

What Kierkegaard's paradoxical Christology seeks to direct our attention towards is the person rather than a doctrine--someone to be loved and respected, not simply observed and speculated over. So he does not seek to direct our attention to a paradox; again, his insistence on the paradox seeks to halt conversations that speculate over what we cannot (and should not try to) comprehend. Faith in Christ 'does not consist in choosing either one side of the contrast [his lowliness/humanity or his loftiness/divinity] but in choosing a unity of both sides.'<sup>60</sup> It consists in believing and trusting in a person and giving him the kind of attention that was given to him by his apostles:

In the conversation of the apostles one continually gets the impression that they had been personally in the company of Christ, had lived with him as with a human being. Therefore their speech is very human, although they never do forget the infinite qualitative difference between the God-man and other human beings.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> *PC*, 123.

<sup>57</sup> *PC*, 77.

<sup>58</sup> *PC*, 77.

<sup>59</sup> *PC*, 77.

<sup>60</sup> *PC*, 161.

<sup>61</sup> *JP* 2, 1385.

By giving primacy to the person of Christ, Kierkegaard directs our attention to the one who can be known personally within the limits of our creaturely mode of reference, so that we can relate to him in a way that is comparable to the way in which the apostles related to Jesus Christ. To be clear, this is not simply to turn attention to Christ's teaching because, for Kierkegaard, what makes the teaching so important is the one from whom they come, and, therefore, the one to whom they witness.<sup>62</sup> Kierkegaard notes that if 'someone says that Christ's life is extraordinary because of the results, then this is again a mockery of God because Christ's life is the in-itself-extraordinary.'<sup>63</sup> He then adds: 'The emphasis does not fall upon the fact that a human being has lived. Only God can attach that much importance to himself, so that the fact that he has lived is infinitely more important than all the results that are registered in history.'<sup>64</sup>

### ***The Paradoxical Mediator***

...there is one God, there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human. (1 Tim. 2:5)

It is hard to think of another verse from Scripture that does a better job of capturing Kierkegaard's Christological vision than 1 Tim. 2:5. Yet he never cites this verse and he only rarely refers to the mediation of Jesus Christ. Why is this? There are a number of major theological themes that receive surprisingly little attention in Kierkegaard's writings and, much of the time, it is because of the way that these themes had come to be associated with the Hegelian philosophy of which he was so critical. The Holy Spirit, the Trinity, the mediation of Christ,

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<sup>62</sup> As such, I would argue it is an overstatement for David Law to write: 'Kierkegaard's primary concern is with Christ's existential significance. He simply accepts the Christ-event as a brute fact and then attempts to work out the existential consequences of this fact. The decisive issue is not 'Who or what is Christ?' but 'What does Christ mean to me?' Consequently, issues such as the relation between Christ's divinity and humanity, etc., recede into the background.' David Law, *Kierkegaard as Negative Theologian*, 183. One can appreciate what Law is trying to say here--that Kierkegaard did not commit much of his energy to developing a nuanced systematic Christology. However, as I have tried to show, Kierkegaard is quite clear that who Jesus Christ is, the God-man, is of decisive significance.

<sup>63</sup> *JP* 2, 1385.

<sup>64</sup> *PC*, 32.

participation in Christ, reconciliation (and we could go on) receive very little mention in his writings because of the way they connoted Hegelian theology. The particular difficulty with these terms was that they were being used by Hegelianism to synthesise "God" with humanity. Such synthesising, for Kierkegaard, was a cornerstone of the cultural Christianity of Denmark. It not only allowed but encouraged the Gospel to be chopped and changed to fit its particular milieu.

One of the ways in which Kierkegaard pushed back against the synthesizing of God and humanity was by insisting 'that there is an infinite qualitative difference between God and man.'<sup>65</sup> Moreover, he goes so far as to suggest that there is a sense in which 'we cannot speak of fellowship with God, and man cannot endure the fellowship, cannot endure continually having only the impression of God's presence.'<sup>66</sup> This statement can seem quite out of place for Kierkegaard—who was highly committed to emphasizing the decisiveness of a loving relationship with God. One could put these words down to rhetorical flourish, especially since they appear in the form of a journal entry. However, it would also be possible to interpret this passage in a way that is entirely consistent with his theological vision. For Kierkegaard, direct or immediate fellowship with God, in all his transcendent glory, really is beyond the scope of human possibility. The infinite qualitative difference 'always remains'.<sup>67</sup> So, the relationship with God requires the mediation of the Son. Drawing on John 6.45, he writes: 'God directs us to the Son, to the Mediator' and pronounces: 'In the Mediator I can be a father to you.'<sup>68</sup> And by assuming human flesh, the eternal Son mediates God to humanity, thereby allowing human beings to know God according to the limits of their finitude. In this way, 'the glory is not directly known as glory but, just the reverse, is known by inferiority, debasement'.<sup>69</sup> In the person of Christ, the glory of God is mediated to the lowliness of the world—to a world that is unable to contain God in his transcendent glory.

Through the mediation of Christ, persons are to be delivered into a life of fellowship with God in which the infinite qualitative difference no longer functions as an alienating difference. The person of Christ enables there to be

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<sup>65</sup> *JP* 2, 1416.

<sup>66</sup> *JP* 2, 1416.

<sup>67</sup> *JP* 2, 1349.

<sup>68</sup> *JP* 2, 1432

<sup>69</sup> *JFY*, 161.

correspondence between God and human beings across the divide. In Christ, God creates a real yet mediated relationship between human beings and God as beings who are infinitely qualitatively different from one another but who are also fully united with one another in Christ.<sup>70</sup> For Kierkegaard, we relate to God by sharing in a faithful relationship with the *person* of Jesus Christ: the God-human, in whom there is *both* mediation between God and humanity *and* reconciliation from the sin that totally alienates us from God.

Again, however, Kierkegaard hesitated to use the language of the mediation to talk about God's relationship to creation. Instead, he primarily chose to talk about Christ's mediatorial role in terms of his paradoxicality. Rather than simply focusing on the way that Christ created unity between God and humanity, which risked Hegelian connotations, he presented Jesus Christ as one who incomprehensibly and unsettlingly brings God and humanity together, without confusing the creator-creature distinction. For him, it was a paradoxical Christology that was best able to draw attention to this message. The presentation of Jesus Christ as absolute paradox sought to bring a halt to the systematic and depersonalizing attempts to comprehend the logic of Jesus Christ and, instead, focus attention on the person who invites us to come and follow him. However, as soon as the language of paradox has served this purpose, it should be dropped from discussion. From then on, the discussion should be left to be attentive to the primary theologian (or God-talker): Jesus Christ, God's Word made flesh. It is in this way, to return to our opening quote from Torrance, that come to know 'the nearness, the impact of God in all his Majesty and Godness upon man.'<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> See *JP 2*, 1383, *JP 3*, 3646, *JP 5*, 6076; *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 113-24; and *PC*, 139-40.

<sup>71</sup> Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 44.