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Kierkegaard and the Freedom of the Will

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Abstract

Mid-nineteenth century Denmark was a center of Lutheran Christianity characterized by dry, passionless, ritualism. All citizens were member of the state church, and thus considered Christian, but the churches themselves did not proclaim the Gospel in a way commensurate with their namesake, Martin Luther. Into this spiritual wasteland stepped Soren Kierkegaard. An outspoken critic of the Danish Church, Kierkegaard sought to proclaim the true Christianity to the people of Denmark. Generally, Kierkegaard's writings reflect the central theological tenets of the reformer himself, but many places in his writing *appear* to reflect some sort of synergistic position with regards to salvation. On the one hand, he admits that humans can do nothing towards salvation, but on the other that a committed act of the will is necessary in one's relation to God. The goal of this paper is to show that Kierkegaard affirmed a legitimate personal freedom with regard to salvation. It will also be shown that his affirmation of this freedom does not mean that he thought man could cooperate with God to effect salvation (synergism). These goals will be achieved through an examination of the relevant material in the works of Kierkegaard. Properly understood, those passages in the published works which appear to affirm synergism really affirm no such position. It is not until 1852, after the published corpus, that Kierkegaard begins to affirm synergism.

Kierkegaard and the Freedom of the Will

Soren Kierkegaard is one of the most misunderstood and controversial thinkers in modern history. He was born in Denmark in 1813. The philosophical era into which he was born and grew up was the golden age of German idealism. His own philosophical thought, although difficult to place neatly in the flow of the history of philosophy, was largely a response to the Hegelianism of his time. Hegelianism, as Kierkegaard saw, touted universality over individuality. Kierkegaard's response was the radical emphasis on individuality, on the self. It is in this sense that he can be made to fit into this period of philosophical development.[1] Nevertheless, despite the historical placement of Kierkegaard, he defies more specific categorizing and spurns assimilation into a philosophical school of thought of that time period.[2]

It is precisely in the nature of his reaction to Hegelianism that Kierkegaard defies classification. His response, which championed the individual over the collective, quickly evolved into a Christian polemic. The Lutheran state church had long since departed from the foundations of the faith as interpreted by the reformer Martin Luther himself. Kierkegaard, commenting on the dismal state of affairs within the church, noted that a Dane could live by principles antithetical to Christianity, in fact even deny the existence of God, and still call himself a Christian and be given a Christian burial when the time comes.[3] Kierkegaard thus aimed his pen at the Danish church, which he

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[1] Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy,* vol. 7, *From the Post Kantian Idealists to Marx, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche* (New York: Image Books, 1963), 337.

[2] Roger Poole, "The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth-Century Receptions," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, eds. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 48-75.

[3] Soren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as An Author,* trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 22-23.

believed was no representative of true, biblical Christianity. So, his philosophical individualism turned into a radical theological individualism in which the individual was wholly committed to Christ. He states in his journal, "But before God, the infinite spirit, all the millions who have lived and live now do not form a mass; he sees only individuals."[4] Therefore, Kierkegaard may be considered just as much a theologian as a philosopher. And he was staunchly Lutheran in his theology. And as a Lutheran, he held, among other things, that man had done and could do nothing good in order to merit salvation. God does it all, and nothing concerning salvation can be attributed to man. Concerning the relationship between God and man, he writes, in his journal:

DIVISIO

> There is an infinite, radical, qualitative difference between God and man.
> This means, or the expression for this is: the human person achieves absolutely nothing; it is God who gives everything; it is he who brings forth a person's faith, etc.
> This is grace, and this is Christianity's major premise. (X^1 A 59 [JP 2:1383])

Kierkegaard sees God and man as qualitatively distinct. His commentaries on the relationship between man and God demonstrate his enmity toward both the speculative philosophy of his day and the ritualistic, impassionate church of Denmark. God can neither be reached by a gradual process of the intellect nor by jumping through certain ecclesiastical hoops in a particular order (baptism, confirmation, marriage, and burial).

Despite this entry and several other places in his works that echo this point, there are just as many places where Kierkegaard seems to be an advocate of human freedom.

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[4]Soren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers: A Selection,* trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 506.

In the same journal entry in which he writes that man and God are qualitatively different, he adds:

SUBDIVISIO

> Although, of course, there can be nothing meritorious, unconditionally nothing, in any action whatsoever, any more than faith could be meritorious (for then the DIVISIO or major premise is dissolved and we are in the minor premise), this nevertheless does mean daring in childlikeness to be involved with God.
>
> If the DIVISIO is everything, then God is so infinitely sublime that there is no intrinsic or actual relationship between God and the individual human being.
>
> Therefore attention must be paid scrupulously to the SUBDIVISIO, without which the life of the single individual never gets off the ground. (X^1 A 59 [JP 2:1383])

To some it may seem that Kierkegaard's theology smacks of synergism. If this were in fact the case, Kierkegaard would be less than Lutheran. Throughout his writings, Kierkegaard clearly defines the freedom he posits, and it is well within Christian orthodoxy, and more particularly within the Lutheran fold, at least when compared with the so-called Danish Lutheran Church of his day. In reality, Kierkegaard both affirms legitimate human freedom in salvation and rejects the idea that humans cooperate with God's grace to achieve salvation (known as synergism).

Liberum Arbitruim

In a lengthy journal entry in the later part of his life, dated 1849 (which is the same year in which the above entry was penned), Kierkegaard writes:

> There is a pious suspicion about subjectivity, that as soon as the least concession is made to it will promptly become something meritorious – this is why objectivity must be emphasized.
>
> Fine. In order to constrain subjectivity, we are quite properly taught that no one is saved by works, but by grace – and corresponding to that – by faith. Fine.
>
> But am I therefore unable to do something myself with regard to becoming a believer? Either we must answer this with an unconditioned "no," and then we have fatalistic election by grace, or we must make a little concession. The point is this – subjectivity is always under suspicion, and when it is established that we

> are saved by faith, there is immediately the suspicion that too much has been conceded here. So an addition is made: But no one can give himself faith; it is a gift of God I must pray for.
>
> Fine, but then I myself can pray, or must we go further and say: No, praying (consequently praying for faith) is a gift of God which no man can give to himself; it must be given to him. And what then? Then to pray aright must again be given to me so that I may rightly pray for faith, etc.
>
> There are many, many envelopes – but there must still be one point or another where there is a halt at subjectivity. Making the scale so large, so difficult, can be commendable as a majestic expression for God's infinity, but subjectivity cannot be excluded, unless we want to have fatalism. (X^2 A 301 [JP 4:4551])

What is this "little concession" which must be made in order to avoid fatalism? Kierkegaard calls is "subjectivity," and, as will be shown, there are many places where he clearly speaks of human freedom as having a role in salvation, but how great is this role, how little is the concession?

In another journal entry, this one dated 1852, Kierkegaard notes that one must die to the world to become a Christian, and that dying is an "act of freedom."[5] Two other entries, X^5 59 and 79 (JP 3: 3770 and 3774) assign a role to freedom in salvation, as does a passage in *Practice in Christianity*.[6] These are just a few of the passages where human freedom in salvation is affirmed. These teachings have led some people to maintain that Kierkegaard was in fact a synergist. Kierkegaard has been called an Arminian.[7] Evans, while acknowledging that faith and sin-consciousness are not produced by acts of the will, comes back and claims that they are nevertheless only produced in the individual if

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[5]Soren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers,* vol. 3, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), entry 3769.

[6] Soren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 171.

[7] Timothy Jackson, "Arminian Edification: Kierkegaard on Grace and Free Will," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, eds. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 252.

the individual wills it.[8] Perhaps this is Evans' understanding of the little "concession." However, for Kierkegaard to be put in the ranks of the synergists, he would have to espouse liberum arbitrium, because this view of the will is the foundation for synergism.[9] Evans calls this type of freedom "formal freedom."[10] This is the freedom in which the will is not influenced one way or another by any causal agent. The will is right in the middle of the two options. Jackson, while he admits that Kierkegaard does not speak highly of the concept of liberum arbitrium, claims that Kierkegaard really only rejects this concept when taken in isolation.[11] In order to hold that Kierkegaard was a synergist, one must elevate his teachings on freedom of the will above his teachings on grace and man's relation to God. This is the elevation of the SUBDIVISIO over the DIVISIO, and while Kierkegaard acknowledged that the two must be taken together, he definitely asserted that, in the end, the DIVISIO must take precedence over the SUBDIVISIO. After all, grace is Christianity's "major premise."

Trying to put Kierkegaard in the ranks of synergists by claiming that he did not reject outright liberum arbitrium is to ignore what he wrote about the subject. In 1842-43 Kierkegaard wrote in his journal, "A perfectly disinterested will (equilibrium) is nothing, a chimera…"[12] In another journal entry he records, "Freedom means to be *capable*.

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[8] C. Stephen Evans, "Salvation, Sin and Human Freedom in Kierkegaard," in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man: The Case for Arminianism*, ed. Clark Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1989), 188.

[9] Craig Q. Hinkson, "Kierkegaard's Theology: Cross and Grace. The Lutheran and Idealist Traditions in His Thought." (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1993), 150.

[10] Evans, 185.

[11] Jackson, 249.

[12] Soren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers,* vol. 2, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), entry 1241.

Good and evil exist nowhere outside freedom, since this very distinction comes into existence through freedom."[13] Writing under the pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis in *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard asserts that liberum arbitrium "no more existed in the world in the beginning than in a late period, because it is a nuisance for thought."[14] Not even Adam was neutrally poised between the choices which represented freedom. Adam's will, while originally not in bondage to sin, was not neutral in the sense that it was unaffected and uninfluenced by something. Hinkson notes, "...wherever one turns in Kierkegaard's writings one encounters the denial that freedom is **ever** indifferent to the object that it chooses; either it immediately chooses the good and is materially determined by that choice, or it has chosen evil and become irrevocably stamped thereby."[15]

Kierkegaard maintains that "sin came into the world by a sin."[16] This sin was a free act, but it occurred precisely because of Adam's captivation with his own freedom to choose between: liberum arbitrium. Haufniensis writes, "Hence anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself. Freedom succumbs in this dizziness....In that very moment everything is changed, and freedom, when it again rises, sees that it is guilty."[17]

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[13] *Journals and Papers,* vol. 2, trans., entry 1249.

[14] Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety,* trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 49.

[15] Hinkson, 152. (emphasis his)

[16] *The Concept of Anxiety,* 32.

[17] *The Concept of Anxiety*, 61.

Thomte comments, "Kierkegaard accepts the dogma that original or inherited sin is guilt."[18] Yet Kierkegaard asserts that inherited sin itself is paradoxical and that the only way sin can be understood to any extent is through Christianity.[19] In the *Fragments,* Kierkegaard, writing under the guise of Johannes Climacus, addresses the bondage of the will which affects man and how seriously the will is affected. Man's choice to sin was a free choice, but one that was irrevocable. Freedom came at a price, as did unfreedom, and for both the price was the soul's free choice and the surrender of the choice. Once the price was paid, the deal was final. There could be no refunds, so to speak. By his free choice, man's will was made a slave to sin and thus unable to come to God; indeed, it is unwilling to come to God. So bad is the corruption, that the will actually wars against the Truth.[20] In no sense is it now in the position freely to choose between good and evil.

So it can be seen that Kierkegaard vehemently denies liberum arbitrium yet maintains a freedom which has real material content and is determined by that content. These claims about the two types of freedom extend all the way back to Adam and can be seen to continue into the present. So, in order to see how this material freedom relates to grace (and still exists), we must always keep in mind the assertion that the major premise in Christianity is grace. All of Kierkegaard's statements about freedom's place in salvation must be subordinated to, and understood in the light of, his teachings on grace.

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[18] Reidar Thomte, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1948), 164.

[19] *Journals and Papers,* vol. 2, entry 1530.

[20] Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 15-17.

The Necessity and Primacy of Grace

In the journals Kierkegaard acknowledges that man is saved by grace (X^3 A 269, X^5 A 64, XI^2 A 182). This grace is God doing all in salvation; man does nothing which merits this grace or aids it. Thus grace is necessary for salvation, and it is necessary precisely because of the qualitative distinction between man and God. This distinction is a result of a qualitative leap away from God, which is sin. In *Sickness unto Death,* Kierkegaard writes, "As a sinner, man is separated from God by the most yawning qualitative abyss."[21]

In order for a man to come to Christ and be saved, the gap must be bridged. Recall that only through the revelation which is Christianity can sin be understood. In *Fragments,* Climacus writes, "The teacher, then, is the god himself, who, acting as the occasion, prompts the learner to be reminded that he is untruth and is that through his own fault. But this state – to be untruth and to be that through one's own fault – what can we call it? Let us call it *sin.*[22] This revelation of sin-consciousness is an act of grace, and the consciousness of sin is absolutely necessary to becoming a Christian. In fact, only by this way can one enter into to Christianity.[23]

The Offense

The individual must encounter Christ in the right way in order for the revelation of sin-consciousness to occur.[24] However, in order to reveal that truth to man and to reveal Himself as the Absolute, it was necessary for the One outside of space and time to

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[21] Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 155.

[22] *Fragments*, 15.

[23] *Practice in Christianity*, 67-68.

[24] "Salvation, Sin, ...," 188.

come into both space and time. As Evans argues, "In developing these concepts Climacus suggests that the God's historical appearance would be essential if a total transformation of the person is to be effected."[25] Yet this is inherently paradoxical to the natural man because his fallen reason cannot comprehend the concept of the God-Man. Climacus asserts, "Defined as the absolutely different, it [the Paradox] seems to be at the point of being disclosed, but not so, because the understanding cannot even think the absolutely different …"[26]

As Evans explains, "The Paradox is fundamentally above reason, not understandable (and thus if reason does not recognize its limits, the paradox will conflict)."[27] Sin, although it stems from the will, has so corrupted the intellect that natural reason cannot comprehend the paradox and thus takes offense at it. Anti-Climacus describes the situation:

> Essentially offense is related to the composite of God and man, or to the God-man. … It is either in relation to the loftiness that one is offended … or the offense is in relation to the lowliness … In the first form, the offense comes in such a way that I am not at all offended at the lowly man, but at his wanting me to believe that he is God. And if I have already believed this, then the offense comes from the other side, that he is supposed to be God – he, this lowly, powerless man who … is capable of doing nothing.[28]

It is offensive to fallen man that he is untruth and that he is to blame for that situation. And it is equally offensive to consider that God came to earth in order to reveal this and to rectify the problem. Another aspect of the offense occasioned by the Paradox is seen in the *kenosis* passage in Philippians 2. The Paradox dies. Not only does he die,

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[25] Evans, *Fragments and Postscript…*, 25.

[26] *Philosophical Fragments*, 45.

[27] Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript*, 238.

[28] *Practice in Christianity*, 81-82.

but he dies for fallen man. The loftiness and lowliness are again involved. One might be offended that such a lofty man would die willingly. Conversely, one may be offended because the death of a lowly man is said to accomplish so much, even the salvation of the entire world. When confronted with the scene described by Anti-Climacus, fallen human reason simply cannot comprehend it. It is foolishness.

The very fact that there is even a problem, sin, is also cause for offense. The Paradox came, but He came for a reason, to reconcile men to Himself. But the very fact that reconciliation is needed is likewise offensive to man. Sin is that qualitative difference which both separates man from God and prevents man from even realizing that there *is* a qualitative difference. The very revelation of this qualitative difference, which must come from the Paradox, is offensive. Hermann Diem writes, "Instead, this revelation encounters him as a paradox that challenges not only a man's intellect, but his entire existence… it always involves the possibility that the man to whom it comes will not believe it, but instead by offended by it."[29]

Kierkegaard remarks that what is crucial to understanding this offense at sin is the Christian specification: before God. Before God one stands alone as an individual, an entity in oneself, not as mere part of a greater whole. As a result, sin is shown truly to be one's own sin against God; and yet the true importance of the individual is also revealed. And it is this, too, that the natural man cannot stand. He is offended:

> because it [Christianity] is too exalted for him, because he cannot make sense of it, because he cannot be open and frank in the face of it, and therefore must have it removed, made into nothing, into madness and nonsense, for it is as if it were about to choke him.[30]

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[29] Hermann Diem, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction*, (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1967), 68.

[30] *The Sickness Unto Death*, 118.

The Order of Salvation

In order to overcome the offense at the Paradox, man must have faith. But faith is something that can only come from God. It is the condition that is necessary to "come to an understanding with this paradox…"[31] Climacus continues by giving a basic description of the process by which one understands the Paradox via the granting of the condition of faith:

> It occurs when the understanding and the paradox happily encounter each other in the moment, when the understanding steps aside and the paradox gives itself, and the third something, the something in which this occurs (for it does not occur through the understanding, which is discharged, or through the paradox, which gives itself – consequently *in* something), is that happy passion to which we shall now give a name, although for us it is not a matter of the name. We shall call it *faith*. This passion, then, must be that abovementioned condition that the paradox provides. Let us not forget this: if the paradox does not provide the condition, then the learner is in possession of it; but if he is in possession of the condition, then he is *eo ipso* himself in truth, and the moment is only the moment of occasion.[32]

If the learner had the truth in him already and the condition were not given by the Paradox, one would be back in the Socratic framework and no longer in Christianity. This statement by Climacus is evidence against synergism because Kierkegaard is saying the Paradox (i.e. the God in time) must give faith; that faith comes from *outside* of man. The only alternative to this is faith already being inside man, and this is not Christianity. Furthermore, man does not and cannot ask for this condition, because, as Climacus points out, his understanding, or reason, must "step aside" or be "discharged" in order for faith to make room for the Paradox.

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[31] *Fragments,* 59.

[32] *Fragments,* 59.

As Climacus points out, faith is not a knowledge.[33] This conception of faith is consistent with what the author of Hebrews writes about faith: "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." (Heb. 11:1) The word "seen" in the Greek could also be translated "understood."[34] To Kierkegaard, as to the author of Hebrews, faith is the evidence of God, who cannot be directly understood. Faith is the vehicle for salvation, not human reason, in that while the Paradox itself cannot be understood, the reality and importance of the Paradox is understood by faith.

Actually, Climacus calls faith a "paradox" as well. He even calls it a "miracle." He writes, "Faith itself is a wonder, and everything that is true of the paradox is also true of faith."[35] The follower realizes that without faith, he would not be able to accept the truth that is the Paradox. Furthermore, that follower realizes that he did nothing even to get or earn faith, for it was by the faith that was given him that he realized he was untruth, a state which automatically precluded him from being able to merit or ask for the condition.

This giving of the condition is logically antecedent to the revelation of one's sinfulness. Climacus states, "So it is with the follower who knows that without the condition he would have seen nothing, inasmuch as the first thing he understood was that he himself was untruth."[36] Recall that this realization of being untruth is the

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[33] *Fragments,* 62.

[34] Robert Young, *Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible,* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers), 851.

[35] *Fragments,* 65.

[36] *Fragments,* 65.

consciousness of sin. In fact, faith and sin-consciousness can be viewed as two sides of the same coin.

Conversion, for Climacus, is that change which took place in the individual after he received the condition. Because the condition also makes the man realize that he is untruth through his own fault, the conversion experience is also characterized by repentance. Climacus states, "Let us call such sorrow *repentance,* for what else is repentance, which does indeed look back, but nevertheless in such a way that precisely thereby it quickens its pace toward what lies ahead!"[37] Carnell notes that this repentance comes from the realization that "...life is nothing without God."[38]

Climacus notes that conversion means that the person has become qualitatively different. Salvation is a radical change in the person so that he becomes another than he was before. This "*new* person," as Climacus calls it, has become that way as result of a transition he calls "rebirth." He writes: "Inasmuch as he was in untruth and now along with the condition receives the truth, a change takes place in him like the change from "not to be" to "to be." ...Let us call this transition *rebirth*... "[39]

To summarize, an unsaved man is given the condition, faith, which is a kind of "seeing" ("faith's autopsy" or "self-seeing," Climacus calls it). By this condition he understands the truth, which is Christ. Climacus also says that he "receives" the truth by this condition. In this moment also comes the knowledge of sin, which, again because of the condition, causes the person to repent. Conversion can, then, be described as turning

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[37] *Fragments,* 18-19.

[38] Edward John Carnell, *The Burden of Soren Kierkegaard*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), 144.

[39] *Fragments,* 19.

to God and thus away from sin; it is a qualitative lifestyle change. As Climacus put it, "*he was turned around*."[40] But the change is more than one of lifestyle, it is really like starting life anew, and thus is called the rebirth. So rebirth coincides with conversion. As one turns towards God and away from sin, one embarks on a new direction and is "reborn."

Freedom: Its Necessity and Role

It is clear then, that Kierkegaard makes a proper defense of his own DIVISIO. Salvation is initiated and completed by God. Yet it must be remembered that the SUBDIVISIO cannot be left out. Human freedom fits somewhere into salvation. However, while the SUBDIVISIO is defended, it is done so in the context of the DIVISIO. It should be kept in mind that after the published works (1852), towards the end of Kierkegaard's life, his thinking does begin to shift and his writing contains a synergistic tone. Hinkson correctly points this out, but nevertheless insists that "the weight of evidence **prior to** the final period indicates that SK has not always ascribed so much to man, and so little to God."[41] Kierkegaard is sure to properly **subordinate** the SUBDIVISIO to the DIVISIO throughout his published corpus. Even so, despite the fact that the SUBDIVISIO is secondary, Kierkegaard still issues a powerful defense for it. He views human freedom and its implications as being essential to the Christian faith. His defense of freedom is just as well thought out as his defense of grace; in fact the two go hand-in-hand, as freedom must be understood within the context of grace. It is to his defense of the SUBDIVISIO, as subordinately related to the DIVISIO, that we now go.

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[40] *Fragments,* 18.

[41] Hinkson, 159n, emphasis his.

Kierkegaard lays much of the foundation for his doctrine of human freedom in his journal. One particular entry reads, "The most tremendous thing conceded to man is – choice, freedom. If you want to rescue and keep it, there is only one way – in the very same second unconditionally in full attachment [abandonment, devotion, or submission] give it back to God and yourself with it."[42] In fact Kierkegaard goes so far as to say that freedom is a necessity. He even links the necessity of freedom with the doctrines of creation *ex nihilo* and the omnipotence of God. His journal entry reads:

> ...only omnipotence can make [a being] independent, ... only omnipotence can truly succeed in this [making man free]. Therefore if a man had the slightest independent existence over against God (with regard to *materia),* then God could not make him free. Creation out of nothing is once again the Almighty's expression for being able to make [a being] independent. He to whom I owe absolutely everything, although he still absolutely controls everything, has in fact made me independent. If in creating man God himself lost a little of his power, then precisely what he could not do would be to make man independent.[43]

Freedom is necessitated by an omnipotent creator. Denying freedom is denying God's omnipotence and his ability to create at all.

Defending Christianity

This line of thought especially was a reaction against Hegelianism. Although God's sovereignty and man's freedom appear to contradict one another, they actually must be simultaneously affirmed in order for Christianity to stand. Hinkson provides an insight into the way this is so, especially in relation to the philosophical milieu of the time.

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[42] *Journals and Papers,* vol. 2, entry 1261.

[43] *Journals and Papers,* vol. 2 entry 1251.

He comments that an overemphasis on either one would reduce God to mere immanence and destroy the qualitative distinction between God and man:

> An emphasis upon grace that would neglect man's freedom issues in a **monism** that denies God's power to create entities distinct from himself; in effect, it makes of all things an ultimately homogenous divinity and therewith posits the dependency of God upon his creation. Conversely, an emphasis upon freedom that would neglect God's grace issues in a **monadism** wherein man assumes the status of a demi-divinity.[44]

Kierkegaard's theology does not scramble to rethink orthodoxy to defend against a new challenger. Rather it can be seen that orthodox Christianity is strongest when all of its doctrines are affirmed, even those which appear to contradict one another.

Defending Monergism

Kierkegaard affirms the traditional Reformation teaching that God's regenerative work precedes man's faith. This must be upheld in order to avoid synergism. Yet this would seem to imply that grace is being "forced" upon man, which is, in fact, what Anti-Climacus affirms:

> "But if the essentially Christian is something so terrifying and appalling, how in the world can anyone think of accepting Christianity?" Very simply and, if you wish that also, very Lutheranly: only the consciousness of sin can force one, if I dare to put it that way **(from the other side grace is the force)**, into this horror. And at that **very same moment** the essentially Christian transforms itself into and is sheer leniency, grace, love, and mercy. Considered in any other way Christianity is and must be a kind of madness or the greatest horror. Admittance is only through the consciousness of sin; to want to enter by any other road is high treason against Christianity.[45]

As Anti-Climacus points out, there must be a transformation of the man "before" he accepts the "radical cure," and that transformation begins with the quickening of sin-

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[44] Hinkson, 158. (emphasis his)

[45] *Practice in Christianity,* 67-68. emphasis added

consciousness. David Gouwens states succinctly: "Sin-consciousness, Kierkegaard often insists, is the prerequisite to faith;..."[46] Both are God's work, and not our own work.

This commitment to Lutheran monergism can be seen in a journal entry in which Kierkegaard states, "Heterodoxly one may say that conversion precedes and conditions the forgiveness of sins; orthodoxly one may say: the forgiveness of sins precedes conversion and strengthens men truly to be converted."[47] That is to say, from the human perspective, we turn to God in repentance and faith, and He, in turn, grants the forgiveness of sin. But in actual fact, our turning is preceded by a regenerative work of the Holy Spirit that causes us to receive forgiveness with joy and gratitude. Conversion and regeneration do occur simultaneously, though regeneration possesses logical priority in the ordo salutis. God forgives (wipes away) sin, thereby ending the separation between man and God, and a change occurs in the person as a result of this.

Climacus, as we have seen, stresses that this complete transformation of the individual takes place in the moment. Robert C. Roberts adequately eases any tension that may arise between man's view and God's view. He writes, "So even if, at the moment of conversion, it looks phenomenologically as though one had, at least partially, by effort come to faith, still one corrects this judgment retrospectively by a dogmatic standard: God is entirely the author of one's faith."[48]

If all this is true, what happened to freedom? It is still affirmed. Man has a choice, but yet it is not a choice.

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[46] David J. Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 150.

[47] *Journals and Papers,* vol. 2 entry 1206.

[48] Roberts, 98.

Kierkegaard's journal reads:

> Is it not a peculiar yet profound use of language that someone may say: There is absolutely no question here of any *choice* – I *choose* this and that....Furthermore, Christianity can say to a man: You shall choose the one thing needful, but in such a way that there must be no question of any choice – that is, if you fool around a long time, then you are not really choosing the one thing needful; like the kingdom of God, it must be chosen *first*. Consequently there is something in relation to which there must not be, and by definition there cannot be, a choice, and yet there is a choice. Consequently, the very fact that there is no *choice* expresses the tremendous passion or intensity with which one *chooses*. Can there be a more accurate expression for the fact that freedom of choice is only a formal condition of freedom and that emphasizing freedom of choice as such means the sure loss of freedom? The content of freedom is decisive for freedom to such an extent that the very truth of freedom of choice is: there must be no *choice*, even though there is a choice. (X2 A 428 [2:1261])

The freedom to which Kierkegaard refers cannot be liberum arbitrium inasmuch as it never existed. It is material freedom, the freedom determined by its object. Grace is forcing one to a decision. In the journal entry above, it is clear that grace has so compelled the will to choose Freedom, Christ, that although there at first seems to be a compulsion (no choice), there was in the realest sense a choice, because that choice was determined by its object, which was the Truth. Man is free because he chose Freedom-Itself. Hinkson clarifies: "Through the deprivation of formal freedom (the elimination of all viable options, save one) man comes into possession of material—that is to say, **real** – freedom, and finds himself able willingly to choose that to which he had hitherto only grudgingly submitted."[49]

Recall the journal entry in which Kierkegaard states that the only way really to have freedom is to surrender it completely in the moment it is given. It is grace which gives this freedom, as well as the very ability to give freedom back. The regenerated man, having been given the condition and the revelation of sinfulness, must realize that

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[49]Hinkson, 167. emphasis his

the only response is to embrace the "radical cure." In that moment in which all of this occurs, he must take the "leap of faith." Evans notes, ""The leap is simply Climacus' metaphorical way of emphasizing that the decision to become a Christian is a choice, a free personal decision."[50]

He must come to God in that moment, for only then can he be free. It is when he pauses to ponder formal freedom that he has really lost freedom. Kierkegaard writes:

> Alas, but man is not sufficiently spirit. He thinks: Since the choice is left to men, I will take my own time and *first of all* think it over very *earnestly*. Tragic anti-climax! "Earnestness" is precisely to choose God immediately and "first of all." And so man lies there and conjures with a phantom: freedom of choice, whether he has it or whether he does not, etc. --- and even does it in a scientific-scholarly way. He does not notice that he has missed freedom. ...By staring fixedly at "freedom of choice" instead of choosing, he loses both freedom and freedom of choice....If the sight of what is conceded to you tempts you, if you surrender to the temptation and look with selfish craving at freedom of choice, then you lose your freedom.[51]

Words such as "earnest" and "first of all" in the passage emphasize the subjectivity of the choice. What is more, it must be done "immediately." This leap is a passionate one; faith is a matter of passion, and certainly not of reason, for it is reason which causes one to contemplate formal freedom and thus lose freedom. As Johannes de Silentio says in *Fear and Trembling,* "faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off."[52]

This passionate subjectivity, or human willing, is that for which Kierkegaard aims. Remember that Climacus called faith a "happy passion." Eliciting this passion is the "compulsion" of grace which has undergone so total a transformation that it is

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[50] C. Stephan Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript: The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus*, (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1983), 274.

[51] *Journals and Papers*, vol. 2, entry 1261.

[52] *Fear and Trembling*, 82.

experienced as the *opportunity* to do good. Hinkson identifies this as a "*Gestalt*-shift,"[53] and writes: "...through the constraining operation of grace, man's will is transferred from the evil to the good so that he is able to choose the latter."[54] Evans goes so far as to define material freedom itself as "the ability to be the kind of person God is calling an individual to be." [55]

So, there is freedom, but not synergism. The key to explaining that Kierkegaard's position is not synergism is demonstrating three things: 1) that Kierkegaard held that man could do nothing to merit salvation, 2) that Kierkegaard taught that the human will can contribute nothing toward salvation independently of grace, and 3) that Kierkegaard did not espouse a cooperation between the pre-regenerate will and grace in salvation.

Man cannot merit salvation because he is untruth and positioned polemically against the truth. There is no independent working of the will because there is no *liberum arbitrium*, which would be necessary for man's will to work independently of God's, yet Kierkegaard tells us it never existed. Thus, it is all God working in man. Furthermore, the will is not working alongside grace because without grace it would not have known anything to begin with. Instead of cooperating <u>with</u> grace, human will first comes to be as a <u>result</u> of grace. Thus grace's sole efficacy in making the will effectual is maintained and man's freedom is preserved.[56] This free choice is just the will ratifying "the good in which it stands,"[57] and then having the ability to continue in the faith.

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[53] Hinkson, 167-168.

[54] Hinkson, 167.

[55] "Salvation, Sin,...," 185.

[56] Hinkson, 169-170.

The "little concession" really does seem to be "little" in light of an understanding of freedom and the necessity thereof. It is quite apparent that the concession is needed because the will must make a choice. This choice is easy to affirm once it is realized that what is conceded is "the choice that isn't a choice".

Conclusion

The issue of man's free will and God's sovereignty in the effecting of salvation is an issue that has been around since the dawn of Christianity and will be around until the return of the Lord. In dealing with this issue, many theologians have emphasized one side of the issue at the expense of the other. This has often led to extremism on either side, characterized by more of a theoretical theology than a practical one. However, this is not the case with Soren Kierkegaard.

While it may seem that he emphasized what he called the minor premise of Christianity (daring in a childlike way to be involved with God) over the major premise (the grace of God), he actually maintained a sound and systematic doctrine of salvation based on these premises. For sure, it is easy to get caught up in all of Kierkegaard's material regarding the freedom that man has and his responsibility toward God. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard never gives man any credit over against God. In fact, a good summation of his view on man is a one-liner from *Either/Or II.* The sermon that concludes the book is entitled, "That which is edifying in the thought that in relation to God, we are always in the wrong."[58] As loyal to the doctrines of Luther and the New Testament as he was, Kierkegaard always sought to maintain a practical theology. And

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[57] Hinkson, 175.

[58] Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, II,* trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), 339.

there is no better doctrinal controversy than this to call attention to the doctrinal correctness and practical applicability of Kierkegaard' teaching.

While never affirming synergism, Kierkegaard nevertheless championed a personal act of freedom in salvation. Unlike most who uphold some freedom, he rejected liberum arbitrium. By accentuating material freedom and by emphasizing a logical (and thus simultaneous) order of salvation over a chronological one, Kierkegaard assured a balance between the divine and human agents in salvation. These main points were what truly enabled him to develop his teachings on the minor premise while still recognizing the primacy of the major premise. However, this balance did not take the form of crediting anything to man's will. He never affirmed any human merit in salvation or the operation of the will independently of grace.

It is unfortunate that Kierkegaard is grossly misunderstood by so many. Far from being the anti-Christian irrationalist so many people take him for, Kierkegaard was a skilled theologian and philosopher who has a great deal to offer the 21st century church. His teachings on grace and the freedom of the will especially would add a great deal to the current theological discussion among leading evangelicals. Whereas there are some already taking advantage of his works, they are in the minority. Mainstream evangelicalism, as well as the Christian church as a whole, should discover the true Soren Kierkegaard, the defender of grace and childlike faith.

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