

# Kierkegaard's Cure for Divorce

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In Gilbert Meilaender's sermon for his daughter Hannah's wedding, he sets out in part to show the relevance of Søren Kierkegaard's book, *Works of Love*, for Christian marriage.[1] This is because he thinks Kierkegaard helps explain the worthy thought that true "love never ends" (1 Corinthians 13:8).

This sermon also provides an alternative to all the sentimental slogans heard at Christian weddings.[2] Kierkegaard is well suited for this since he is harsh and philosophizes "with a hammer." [3] That trait gives him power to purge the drivel from wedding sermons. This power is Kierkegaard's relevance for weddings. So just because he broke off his engagement with the young Regina Olsen and never married after that [4] does not disqualify him in matters marital. [5] The preacher still should be able to fall "in love with Søren" [6] and use him confidently at weddings.

I want to present the gist of Meilaender's sermon in order to augment it with further material from *Works of Love* and then assess its overall commendability.

## I. Patience in Marriage

Meilaender rightly sees that Kierkegaard in *Works of Love* elaborates the theme of patience or what he calls "waiting for the beloved." Patience in marriage stops one from running off for a divorce the first sight of trouble. Patience enables one to wait for better times. Meilaender says that by being patient marital love reflects the "steadfastness and faithfulness" of God's love which is what "joins Father, Son and Spirit." By waiting, the husband or wife is able to "exercise just a little of God's own creative power – to determine...that it will be a future together." In that way they act like God. This makes the struggle to persevere in marriage noble.

Meilaender sees this point about patience in Kierkegaard's image of the broken hyphenated or compound word. That compound word is husband-wife or lover-beloved. [7] It depicts an intact, marital relationship. So if the wife leaves, she "cannot take the hyphen" with her. In this way the husband can still abide in his love for his upset wife - regardless of her behavior. He can wait with open arms. In fact what others might call "a break" is only "a relationship that has not yet been finished." This is because the husband cannot say he knows for sure "that nothing more is coming" (306). Even after years elapse he still "continually emancipates" himself from the past sad years and waits "for the future" when her love for him may once again bloom (307). So his love abides even though hers does not. He does not need her love to motivate himself to love her. He waits on his own because of his love for her. By so doing his love abides even when hers wanes. [8] On this account the break between them is only apparent.

The other image from *Works of Love* that Meilaender uses is that of the dancer who remains on the floor even after her husband leaves in a huff. [9] Just because he runs off does not mean she must do so too. So "if the other remains standing in the position that expresses bowing toward the one who is not seen, and if you know nothing

about the past, you will say, 'The dance will surely begin just as soon as the other one, who is awaited, comes'" (307).

So love abides in the waiting wife on the dance floor. Meilaender astutely observes that this bowing posture could be "rather awkward.... One could get...lots of cramps. A stiff neck. One could tire," he says. But this failure to abide because of pain and impatience is warded off by the fact that "God gives us time, gives us marriage: that we may not tire, but, on the contrary, gain joy by abiding." So the time allotted in marriage is not only for enjoyment but also for putting the pieces of broken love back together.

## II. Self-Hatred in Marriage

This ends Meilaender's fine sermon. But he could have gone on. Kierkegaard's Works of Love has more to say. He could have said what Kierkegaard thought should be done with the time God graciously gives for the restoration of marriage.[10] In addition to having time to reconcile, an estranged couple also needs to learn how to fix their broken love. They should not use their time to sulk or play the blame game. That would be to misuse God's gift of time. They instead need to learn how to deal with their cramps and pain, disappointment and anger, stiff necks and fatigue.

Picking up where Meilaender leaves off in Works of Love, Kierkegaard makes this crucial, additional point:

But perhaps the girl actually loved herself. She desired the union with the beloved for her own sake; it was her only desire, her soul was as one in this desire. In gratitude for this fulfillment, she would do everything possible to make her husband's life as beautiful as possible. Yes, this is true, but yet, yet it was for her own sake that she desired the union. If this is so, she is sure to become weary, she becomes attentive to the past, to the length of time – now she no longer sits at the window; she expresses that the break exists... (307).

According to Kierkegaard much more than time is needed to ward off fatigue, impatience and divorce. One also needs to use that time properly – specifically in three ways. First one must quit loving oneself. Second one must not want the marriage restored for one's own sake. And finally one must not look for fulfillment in marriage.

Well, it surely goes without saying that these are all highly contestable points – especially in our time when love has become "a consumptive item." In such a time "the only way to move one's spouse is to threaten to remove the object of his or her gratification – oneself. In this way...divorce permeates marriage." So "all talk of happiness in marriage seems to be linked to a threat: Make me happy or I'll leave.... If the goal is the happiness of the individual partner, then the therapeutic love contract, or marriage, is inherently temporary." [11] No wonder, then, that The New Yorker published a cartoon that has the pastor telling the newly weds: "O. K., then. You may kiss, shake

hands, and come out married." [12] Marriage looks like a boxing match today because threats and the specter of divorce permeate it.

Against this prevailing consumptive view of love and marriage Kierkegaard's point is particularly relevant – even if contested. Marriage is not about self-fulfillment and self-love. [13] But saying this does not make it so. Kierkegaard, however, does not leave it at that.

Earlier in Works of Love he argues that it is "foolish...to love others for...one's own advantage" (258). If one therefore sets aside one's own advantage, love will "never give up" (254). That is indeed the noble goal of marriage, viz to never give up loving. But how does one quit pursuing one's own advantage so that one may endure? How can we make love abide?

Kierkegaard's answer is simple. We give up pursuing our own advantage in marriage by hating ourselves. Love that truly abides must be purged of all self-love and selfishness if it is to endure what Martin Luther called the "thorns and thistles in marriage." [14] Such love is "self-denial's love" that "drives out all...self-love" (55). Indeed one must hate "one's own life" in order for love to abide (109). Self-hatred has the power to enrich marriage. By hating oneself in marriage we no longer yearn to be at the center of our marriage. We fight against being selfish and thinking that marriage is for our "own sake" (307).

Surely we would prefer not hearing such tough words amidst all the finery and festivity of a church wedding. Having three children myself I can imagine wishing for something better. But Kierkegaard warns against making love something "sentimental" (376). The Christian goal after all is not an "easy and...sociable" life (124). Luther was right that Christian living rightly brings with it "danger and difficulty." [15]

Because of the bitterness and despondency self-hatred can bring, its value is less than clear. In order to combat these pitfalls, Kierkegaard steers clear of inappropriate self-hatred. Self-hatred is wrong if it is wasteful, foolish, depressing or violent (23). Properly construed self-hatred "removes from love everything that is inflamed, everything that is momentary, everything that is giddy" (188). This alone is the value of self-hatred. With it love can truly reach out to the beloved and abide. [16] When both husband and wife practice self-hatred a marriage lasts. This is because they are able to help each other be less selfish.

So the indelible mark of love is that it diminishes and devalues reciprocity. Martial love does not live because it is returned. Self-hatred enables one to let go of a dependence on reciprocity in marriage. All Christians should hear this point shouted from the rooftops at weddings. It is wrong to love only if we are loved in return. If love is returned, it is sweet – but that does not control whether or not we ourselves are loving. In this sense love is free of the burdens of reciprocity. That is what it means to devalue and diminish it. According to Kierkegaard, love is selfish and false when it "aspires to...repayment" – even in the form of "reciprocal love" (349). Reciprocity is defanged when it no longer controls the love we show to others. When allowed to roam unchecked, reciprocity destroys true, unselfish love.

This, however does not turn husbands and wives into automatons. They must still rejoice in being "loved" (39) whenever it happens. [17] For whether or not we are loved is not "a matter of indifference" (27). Abandonment hurts. Devaluing reciprocity does not eliminate that pain nor the desire to be loved. But neither will withdrawal, rejection or attack sway us from loving. [18] This determination surfaces only after reciprocity has been devalued. According to Kierkegaard, this makes love wild and "dangerous" (198, 277). It will show itself when the prudent have given up. Looking around we know how people can display "animal bloodthirstiness and savagery" (169).

But we are to be ready for that and not be surprised when it happens – even when it appears in its softer forms of carping and sulking. In the face of this we are to abide even if it makes us look foolish and a bit "mad" (108, 132, 185, 203, 238, 287, 290, 321). So in some sense you have to be a little crazy to stay married and hold onto your wedding vows.[19] The church, Kierkegaard is saying, should push for such craziness in marriage.

One way to promote this teaching on self-hatred and disregard for reciprocity in wedding sermons would be to base them on Ephesians 5:21-33[20] rather than on 1 Corinthians 13:8. This classic marriage text from Ephesians is about "sacrifice." [21] It says husbands and wives should mutually subject themselves to each other out of reverence for Christ. Within that rubric of sacrifice Kierkegaard's criticism of reciprocity fits nicely. So a wedding sermon based on Ephesians 5 could wonderfully reflect Kierkegaard's point that self-hatred is what makes marriage last and wards off divorce.

Another verse would be John 12:25. Even though this verse is not explicitly about marriage it also could help. It says that if we hate ourselves we will be saved from hell. Now if we were to extend that thought into the realm of marriage, we could say that self-hatred also saves us from divorce – what many, by the way, know to be a living, earthly hell. So if self-hatred can save us from going to hell it surely can save us from getting divorced. Conquering hell after all is much more difficult than conquering divorce. Seeing that pivotal role for self-hatred in marriage is precisely Kierkegaard's cure for divorce.

### III. Confession in Marriage

Criticisms of this cure are many and intense. But far be it from Kierkegaard to make a proposal that would be anything less than contentious.

So there are questions. How, for instance, can it be that a loving husband should wait indefinitely for his errant wife to return? And is it always wrong to cut the ties that bind and look for another spouse? Or how can it be that a battered wife should keep loving her abusive husband without regard for her own safety? Should she not leave in order to protect herself? And how can it be that a husband should stay with his wife when he gets absolutely nothing out of the marriage? And is it always wrong to expect fulfillment in marriage?

How would Kierkegaard respond to these questions? I think he would say we need to learn how to live under the weight of the ideal of this "higher" (45) form of love and marriage.[22]

Kierkegaard knows that up against this exalted ideal of love we look "shabby" indeed (284). Our efforts at approximating it are "superficial" (364). These failures render us "unworthy servants" (365) of the God who calls us to this exalted life of suffering love.

In the face of these failures our temptation is to settle for some "medium grade" of love (45) that is less demanding. We could master it and erase our guilt for failing to live up to the exalted ideal. No longer would we have to appear in "an unfavorable light" (370). But Kierkegaard resists this temptation. That medium grade of love must be "thrust down," he says (45). We must not "slacken" the higher form of love (50). We cannot expect to "splinelessly whimper" our way into righteousness (379).

Watering down the higher form of love is not the way to go. We instead must continue to aspire to this exalted ideal while admitting that we have not reached it. And

we must say that we are "always only...on the way" (48). Even though we may never arrive we must always hope we will.

Kierkegaard explains this dialectical relation to the exalted ideal of Christianity in his book *Judge For Yourself*.<sup>[23]</sup> In the face of the "difficult and complex" problems foisted on us by this ideal, the faithful Christian should with "a purity like that of a virgin and a blushing modesty like that of an adolescent," refuse to act "sagaciously" (JFY 103). We should dump "flabby sensibleness" and the "despicable thralldom in probability" (JFY 102).

His reason for this is that those maneuvers constitute a "mean slandering of all...the martyrs" in the past who died for true Christianity (JFY 101). Their deaths for all times show that Christianity is "sheer agony" and that Christians are nothing but "worms."<sup>[24]</sup> Backing off from this severe judgment only defames the centrality of martyrdom for Christianity.

So we should let the ideal "stand firm" and declare that the "only way to be exempted" from the rigors of the ideal is by "humbling oneself and making an admission" (JFY 102). We must humbly admit that we are afraid to live by the ideal because it is too hard on us. Miraculously this confession does not exclude us from God. When we confess our failure and our hope for doing better, we are "eternally saved" (JFY 207). Then we "come...to...grace" (JFY 142). God grants us forgiveness and the hope of living righteously through him.

This confession is monumental. It shows that our weak faith, straining under the weight of these lofty ideals, is really not "Christianity at all" (JFY 142). True Christianity is too high for us. It would leave us unfulfilled, battered and alone. But that is "treason against us!" (JFY 141). We cannot sacrifice "everything for Christianity" (JFY 134). We are too weak for that.<sup>[25]</sup> So we live with less. We live with a "mitigation" of true Christianity (JFY 142). Our only faithfulness left is to refuse to "establish the error" as the true, redefined Christian faith (JFY 102). To do so would be to turn Christianity into something else. Here Kierkegaard stands with Luther. "This entire life," Luther wrote, "is a time of willing to be righteous, but never achieving it, for this happens only in the future life."<sup>[26]</sup> This admission humbles us. With it we know we are too weak to live the pure Christian life and must depend on God to carry us along.

With this confession we develop "some respect for Christianity" (JFY 209). We refuse to water it down in order to make it palatable. We know we would like to change Christianity – but we refuse to do it. "Moreover, just as suspicious characters must register with the police," so we will report to God on the "dubiousness" of our Christian identity – knowing full well that God is "sheer love and grace and compassion" and will welcome us while still expecting us to "be honest in the relationship" with him (JFY 207).

Once we have learned to live under the weight of this ideal, Christian love will remain as extreme as ever. The picture of love in *Works of Love* will be allowed to stand in all of its fierce boldness. It will stand even though we will not be able to live up to much of it. We will not be able to sacrifice the way it wants of us. But we will be able to lament our failure. We will not explain it away. We will continue to let the pressure of this ideal bear down upon us – pushing us to greater faithfulness. With our sadness, however, we will also have hope. With our sorrow there will be rejoicing (2 Corinthians 6:10). For through God's abiding mercy we will be saved while we are yet sinners: "For our sake God made Christ to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).<sup>[27]</sup>

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[1]Gilbert Meilaender, "Love Abides," *Christian Century* 117 (October 11, 2000) 990-991. He makes a similar point in his essay "The Task of Lutheran Ethics," *Lutheran Forum* 34 (Winter 2000) 17-22, 20-21.

[2]See, for instance, *Best Wedding Meditations: An Anthology, Revised Edition*, (Lima, OH: CSS, 1972, 1997), "Let there be spaces in your togetherness" (38, 53) and "Celebrate the staying power of love – so bright a flame nothing can put it out" (47). Note also *Wedding Readings: Centuries of Writing and Rituals on Love and Marriage*, ed. Eleanor Munro, (NY: Penguin, 1989), "You can transmute love, ignore it, muddle it, but you can never pull it out of you [because] love is eternal" (25) and marriage "is like a dance.... Now arm in arm, now face to face, now back to back—it does not matter which. Because they know they are partners moving to the same rhythm, creating a pattern together, and being invisibly nourished by it" (75).

[3]Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith, (Stanford: Stanford University, 1996) 76. See also the aptly titled *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard*, Compiled and edited by Charles E. Moore, (Farmington, PA: Plough, 1999), especially section V, "Christian Collisions."

[4]See Susan Leigh Anderson, *On Kierkegaard*, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000) 5-11.

[5]See Carolyn Kizer's poem, "The Erotic Philosophers," in *The Best American Poetry 1999*, ed. Robert Bly (New York: Scribner, 1999). Kizer accuses Kierkegaard of supposing that what was "truly terrible" for him was "to be consoled by the love of another" because if one is to "suffer to love God,... he must tear himself away from earthly love" (102, 103).

[6]Dorothee Soelle, *The Window of Vulnerability*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 117.

[7]Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (1847), *Kierkegaard's Works*, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, in 26 volumes, (Princeton: Princeton University, 1978-2000), 16:306. All further citations to this book are noted in the text parenthetically by page number.

[8]This is no small matter if it is true that divorce by "mutual-consent...is rare," being that "over 80 percent of divorces are now...unilateral" [Maggie Gallagher, *The Abolition of Marriage: How We Destroy Lasting Love*, (Washington, D. C.: Regnery, 1996) 144]. That statistic alone holds out the hope that many broken marriages could be restored simply by the persistence of the husband or wife.

[9]Meilaender says this passage along with the one above on the broken, hyphenated word are "two of the most unforgettable and powerful...I have ever read."

[10]In personal correspondence Dr. Meilaender says this additional point is "problematic"

and so he excluded it (March 16, 2001). In his book *Friendship: A Study in Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981) he gives a reason for this. Any efforts, he writes, "to deny our neediness is to try to live a lie, and it must inevitably deny important features of our common nature" (45). But Kierkegaard is not guilty of this sin. He does not deny our neediness. All he does is prevent it from putting an end to love. He does not allow the tail (of need) to wag the dog (of marriage).

[11]Maggie Gallagher, *The Abolition of Marriage*, 231.

[12]The New Yorker, March 15, 1999, page 50.

[13]For a confirmation of this point see the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Revised Edition, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1999), "After the fall, marriage helps to overcome self-absorption, egoism, pursuit of one's own pleasure, and to open oneself to the other, to mutual aid and to self-giving" (§1609). This confirmation is an example of how "extremely close to Catholicism" Kierkegaard actually is [H. Roos, *Søren Kierkegaard and Catholicism*, trans. Richard M. Brackett, (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1954) 19].

[14]Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 26-30* (1545), *Luther's Works* 5:195-196.

[15]Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 14-16* (1538), *Luther's Works* 24:162.

[16]I have explored this thesis in "News From the Graveyard: Kierkegaard's Analysis of Christian Self-Hatred," *Pro Ecclesia* 9 (Winter 2000) 19-42.

[17]So "to rebuild marriage, we must recognize that grimly hanging in there 'for the sake of the children' will not work, that it has never been enough." Sober, self-sufficient endurance by one of the parties will not restore a marriage. For marriage is "the incarnation of eros, the body of love. It is the psalms and the Song of Songs and it is the Crucifixion, or at least it is our aspiration to all of these things" (Gallagher, *The Abolition of Marriage*, 263-264). Endurance can lead to restoration but is too grim to amount to restoration itself.

[18]This would be an extension of the teaching that we should lend money "expecting nothing in return" (Luke 6:35), and an appeal to the hope of being "repaid at the resurrection of the just" (Luke 14:14).

[19]Researchers have now mounted sizable scientific evidence against keeping one's marital vows. They try to show that just as "infants have their infancy," so adults naturally have their adultery [David P. Barash and Judith Eve Lipton, *The Myth of Monogamy: Fidelity and Infidelity in Animals and People*, (NY: W. H. Freeman, 2001) 2].

[20]Meilaender explores Ephesians 5 in *Things That Count: Essays Moral and Theological*, (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2000), 44-57. The importance of sacrifice in marriage however is missing from his account.

[21]See Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, ed. Mark J. Edwards, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament*, vol. 7 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1999) 195.

[22]M. Jamie Ferreira has a different solution. She uses the "category of responsiveness" to balance out Kierkegaard's account. This in turn eliminates the "extreme" elements in his view of Christian love [Love's Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 226, 224]. I prefer a less creative solution which stays closer to Kierkegaard's actual formulations.

[23]Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination and Judge For Yourself!* (1851), trans. and eds. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). All citations to this book are in the text parenthetically with the designation JFY.

[24]Søren Kierkegaard, *The Moment* No. 5 (July 27, 1855), *The Moment and Late Writings*, trans. and eds. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) 189.

[25]See Amy Laura Hall, "Poets, Cynics and Thieves: Vicious Love and Divine Protection in Kierkegaard's Works of Love and Repetition," *Modern Theology* 16 (April 2000) 215-236, 234, "The love to which Kierkegaard calls us requires us actively to acknowledge that true love itself is necessarily precarious – requiring prayers of confession and forgiveness."

[26]Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans* (1518), *Luther's Works* 25.268.

[27]I am grateful to Gordon D. Marino for his criticisms of earlier versions of this essay