

Kierkegaard: The Mirror of the Word

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Time are different and different times have different requirements.

Thus Kierkegaard began his exposition of James 1:22-27, contrasting two "times": the legalism of medieval Christianity and the antinomianism of nineteenth-century Denmark. In medieval Christianity, "everything had become works" and thus "through petty self-torments, they had made God just as petty." In the Lutheranism of Kierkegaard's Denmark the apostle James had been "shoved aside." Although Luther's life had expressed both works and faith, the doctrine he proclaimed led Kierkegaard's contemporaries to say, "Excellent. . . This is something for us. . .we are free from all works. . . long live Luther!"

Kierkegaard knew well that faith and works was not an "either/or" relationship. As he states, "In every human being there is an inclination either to want to be meritorious when it comes to works or, when faith and grace are to be emphasized, also to want to be free from works as far as possible." He knew that some "times" need one sermon more than they need the other.

In Kierkegaard's "time" he preached a subjective, inward, appropriation of truth. This was precisely, in his view, what Christendom (as opposed to genuine New Testament Christianity) lacked. He expressed his disgust with a Hegelian philosophical objectivity which had infected the Danish Lutheran church and which had effectively stripped Scripture of its unique authority, subsuming the divine commands under the universal World-Spirit.

He was no more pleased with the rationalism of Lutheran Orthodoxy which in his view had suffocated the vitality of Scripture in favor of a series of lifeless doctrines. Kierkegaard himself did not despise doctrine, however, when its proper purpose was upheld—namely, a Christian life of imitation and self-denial. As he said, "Whenever inwardness, appropriation, is lacking, the individual is in an unfree relation to the truth, even though he otherwise possesses the whole truth."

For Kierkegaard, the Bible—in particular the New Testament—served as the norm for the highest stage of religious truth. The Bible, in a way unlike creeds, symbols, and catechisms demands imitation and appropriation. By reading the Bible one moves toward subjectivity. By appropriating it, he achieves inwardness.

For Kierkegaard, truth bears no significance for one if it is not appropriated—if the individual does not come to terms with the existential concerns of the objective text of Scripture in light of his or her life. As he urges, "When you read God's Word, in everything you read, continually to say to yourself: It is I to whom it is speaking, it is I about whom it is speaking—this is earnestness, precisely this is earnestness." In light of For Self Examination's "The Mirror of the Word," we will in this paper,

1. Discuss Kierkegaard's understanding of appropriation in the context of hermeneutics
2. Apply that understanding to evangelical theological method
3. Discuss the theological implications of a Kierkegaardian hermeneutic of appropriation for biblical authority and biblical inerrancy.

For Kierkegaard, the aim of interpretation is to appropriate the text. "Appropriation" involves two "senses" in Kierkegaard's writings. The first is something akin to obedience, which is connected to the dual concepts of "inwardness" (Inderlighed) and "subjectivity." In epistemological parlance, truth calls out to the reader in her subjectivity—"Appropriate me!" Truth demands an obedient response. In hermeneutical parlance, the text calls out to the reader just the same.

If nothing has occurred to (or in) the reader in the process of hearing the Word, she might as well have walked away from the mirror with no remembrance of her appearance. The purpose of a mirror is to provide one with a lasting and accurate self-image. As Timothy Polk notes, "Instruction taken from the mirror . . . issues in a passionate self-knowledge. . . One looks into scripture to learn who one is with the sense that one's life is at stake in the learning." The Word, as the divinely inspired mirror, offers the "doer" a clear and lasting image of himself.

When a reader "appropriates" Scripture the text is absorbed into her being, impacting her view of the world. When she obeys a text after the initial reading she gains a greater understanding of the text. Conversely, her greater understanding of the text inspires obedience. Kierkegaard, commenting on James 1 in a written sermon, says,

The person who knows his soul sees himself in a mirror, but he can forget what he looks like, as the Apostle James says, and therefore what he goes on to say is pertinent here: 'that the one who hears the Word properly is the one who does it.' As long as he merely hears the Word, he is outside it, and when the proclaimer is silent, he hears nothing; but when he does the Word, he continually hears what he himself is proclaiming to himself.

A hearer of the Word stands outside of the Word. When he finishes reading, the hearer-only walks away unaffected. But the one who hears properly—the doer—stands inside of the Word. The Word impacts the doer long after the initial hearing, showing that he has assimilated, or appropriated, that text. He stands in a subjective, inward relation to Scripture, having become a part of its world. As such, he gives testimony in the world to the truthful efficacy of the divine communication. He has become a "witness to the truth."

The second sense of appropriation suggests an interpretive methodology in which the reader imaginatively enters into the world of the author and the author's immediate audience. Janet Fishburn dubs this the "principle of imaginative imitation." She states, "In response to the search for the factually true or historically probable element in the Bible that influenced hermeneutics in his day, he persisted in seeking the truth in Scripture through total immersion by identifying with both the writers of Scripture and their subjects."

She goes on to point out the influence of New Testament commentator J. P. Ruckert on Kierkegaard, who recommended that the reader seek to identify with Paul and with Paul's immediate audience in order to truly understand the meaning of a Pauline text.

Kierkegaard practiced a "silent absorption" of the text, in which he (or his pseudonym Constantine Constantius) would retreat to a secret place and imaginatively 'become' Job or Abraham, so that he could "slip more fully out of his own and into the costume of the Biblical author."

Kierkegaard's use of James' metaphor commends this interpretive method of entering into the world of the author through imaginative identification while keeping primary the goal of obedience (subjectivity). In this sense of appropriation, the reader enters into the world of the text—whose boundaries and scope are determined by the author's words and

historical context—and finds that her world has been changed and enlarged by exposure to Scripture.

Appropriation, then, is a term that is used both of epistemological and of hermeneutical approaches in Kierkegaard. Truth must be subjectively appropriated by the individual if it is to have impact in the individual's life. Similarly, Scripture—as God's divinely revealed truth—must be subjectively appropriated by the individual if it is to have significance for the individual. When the reader obeys the divine command, he or she has rendered testimony to the truth of Scripture's words—and to the reality of the divine Communicator.

Paul Ricoeur takes Kierkegaardian appropriation to a more systematic level. Similarly, for him, the final aim of interpretation is also appropriation. The reader encounters a text and, when following the sense of the text rightly, sees that a new world is being opened before him. His realm of possibilities—of what it means to be human—has been enlarged by engagement with the text. His words are strikingly similar to Kierkegaard:

You will recall my insistence on defining the hermeneutic task not in terms of the author's intention supposedly hidden behind the text, but in terms of the quality of being-in-the-world unfolded in front of the text as the reference of the text. The subjective concept that corresponds to that of the world of the text is the concept of appropriation. By this I mean the very act of understanding oneself before the text. This act is the exact counterpart of the autonomy of writing and the externalization of the work. It in no way is intended to make the reader correspond with the genius of the author, for it does not respond to the author, but to the work's sense and reference. Its other is the issue of the text, the world of the work.

Ricoeur intends to counter the hollowness of Schleiermacher's Romantic hermeneutical project while at the same time recognizing the inability of the reader to cross the historical and psychological divide which separates the reader from the author. Something Gadamer suggested holds great possibility for Ricoeur: the fusion of the world of the text and the world of the reader.

Unlike Ricoeur, though, Kierkegaard does see the world of the present text as historically connected in essential ways to the world of its original authors and original readers. He wondered how those who would interpret Paul without reference to the historical Paul could presume to really be interpreting Paul. As Fishburn notes, Kierkegaard referred to the historical background and cultural contexts to make sense of scripture passages. However, such research could only provide an "approximate" understanding of the Bible.

Further, an overabundance of commentators, like the proverbial cooks in the kitchen, might do more damage than good. Or, to use Kierkegaard's analogy, commentaries can be like "spectators and spotlights" that "prevent the enjoyment of a play at the theater." Commentaries are necessary for responsible interpretation of the text but they become problematic if their voices drown the voice of Scripture which calls out, "thou art the man" or "go and do likewise."

For Kierkegaard, the problem of historical approximation, or "Lessing's ditch," is lessened due to the present power of the Holy Spirit and to the unique authority which God has invested in the objective Scripture as the divine communication of the Abased One, Jesus Christ. God illumines the ancient Scriptural text as it is appropriated in the reader's life by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Meaning is Subjectivity

A Kierkegaardian hermeneutic of appropriation—as we would now apply it to evangelical theological method-- involves several complex concepts: truth, meaning, and

significance. The hermeneutical term "meaning" corresponds to the epistemological term "truth." Our phrase "meaning is subjectivity" translates Kierkegaard's epistemological subjectivity to hermeneutic subjectivity, which aims for appropriation of the biblical text. In hermeneutical parlance, then, "meaning" is the author's intended meaning—or what the author was attending to by writing. Significance denotes the author's extended meaning--what the objective, completed text has accomplished in the reader's contemporary life.

Appropriation, then, corresponds to the concept of significance. Thus, the meaning of the text is the completed communicative act of the author(s) or Author. That meaning is applied— as significance--to the reader as it is appropriated by him or her. Appropriation involves obedience to the divine command. Appropriation, to employ J. L. Austin's speech act theory as developed by Vanhoozer, is the perlocution of the illocution. To elaborate, the hearer does a "performative act" in response to the speaker's completed communicative act.

Our thesis in sum is this: The meaning of Scripture is applied as significance in the reader's appropriation of the text through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the interpreter's passionate involvement with the text, the application of responsible interpretive procedures, and obedience to the divine command. The divine author of the biblical canon intends that its recipients become people of the book—New Testament Christians. At the intersection of author's words (present text), divine authorial communication (understood as canon and interpreted intratextually with the assistance of intertextual readings), and obedient response of the reader (appropriation) the meaning of Scripture becomes significance. At this intersection, truth is absorbed, appropriated, subjectively into lives. The meaning of the text does not result in a full, "thick" understanding until it takes root in God's people.

At this point an evangelical emphasis on the determination of authorial intent enters our discussion. In order to appropriate the biblical text responsibly, the reader must enter into the world of the original author(s) and context as it is defined and described historically, culturally, socially, literarily, and theologically. The voice of the author and the context of the original recipients echo as the determiners of meaning, as it is the author who provides an "objective" control in interpretation. Readers come and go. Authors endure with their texts.

We suggest that Kierkegaard, his sensitivity to historical "approximations" notwithstanding, would agree with this premise. However, Kierkegaard's hermeneutic suggests that interpreters reject a methodology whose end goal is the determination of authorial intent. Rather, the end goal of interpretation should be appropriation of the author's intent. Scripture exists that the people of the book might live by its words. This difficult task of "living" is made possible by the sacrificial death of Christ, the witness of the Spirit, and the community of God. But living rightly requires interpretation which necessitates an understanding of what the author(s) and Author were attending to. This kind of understanding demands serious investigative work.

However, the difficulties of the interpretative task must never be used as an excuse for a lazy ethical/religious life. As Kierkegaard says, "Ethically the question is never one of understanding, comprehending; it is a matter of doing what one understands, and the thing which a man actually ought to do is always easy to understand." Exaggerations aside, Kierkegaard wisely suggests that Christians spend more time obeying the imperatives that are clear in Scripture than in striving to clarify the obscure passages.

This latter activity appears to Kierkegaard as a way for scholars to avoid the ethical difficulties of religious existence. By contrast, as David Gouwens writes, "Kierkegaard's hermeneutics claims that hearing the New Testament with 'clarity' involves

acknowledging, to use the modern term, the 'performative' force not only of its promises (readily accepted) but its imperatives (nowadays "interpreted" away).

Implications for Biblical Authority and Inerrancy

What might be the implications for biblical authority and inerrancy if one appropriates Kierkegaardian appropriation? Regarding his view of Scripture's authority, Kierkegaard leaves little doubt that he viewed Scripture as authoritative. He practiced this conviction in his own life. As his one of his pseudonyms noted, "the Bible is always on my table and is the book I read most."

For Kierkegaard, God speaks in Scripture differently than could be said of any other text or any other medium of communication. He was no fan of mysticism in its appeal to "direct and immediate communication" from God. Rather, he viewed Scripture, both in his theory and in his life-practice, as the medium for knowing God through knowledge – though approximate--of the God-Man.

Moreover, Kierkegaard felt no need to establish Scripture's authority using evidential arguments. In fact, in Polk's words, "the attempt to establish scripture's authority only proves that it is gone (at least for the humans attempting to establish it). Genuine authority cannot be established, only attested." Thus, we need "witnesses" not "professors." As Rosas states, "The nature of the God-man as a communication of the Divine and the response of the human heart in either faith or offense are indications of the Bible's authority."

Kierkegaard's view of Scripture's authority was something of a functional view, in that the purpose of Scripture was the formation of a Christian, of a Christian testimony, and of Christians standing under the authority of God. As noted by Polk, Brevard Childs points out that such a functional view has the potential problem of eviscerating determinant meaning. His concern is duly raised; evangelicals would be the first to require that the function of Scripture never be divorced from its origin.

However, we believe that for Kierkegaard the authority of Scripture itself did not derive from its function alone; rather, its function could be actualized precisely because of what Scripture is—the divinely inspired witness of the historical Christ, the divine imperative word needful for living a New Testament Christianity, and the divinely inspired source needful for understanding one's world rightly.

That said, in Kierkegaard's hermeneutical practice he considered some portions of Scripture as more authoritative than others. The Gospels, with their testimony of Christ, had prime of place. The Pauline epistles and the letter of James were a close second. And the Old Testament, with its "entirely different" categories seemed to be employed more in his ethical works than in his religious writings.

As we have seen, though, one of Kierkegaard's concerns with Luther was his rejection of James, "on dogmatic grounds," which gave him a starting place "above the Bible." In other words, Kierkegaard was sensitive to the authority of the canon, but particularly so when callousness might threaten an existential New Testament Christianity.

Kierkegaard's understanding of Scripture does not align with a traditional evangelical doctrine of biblical inerrancy. His sensitivity to Lessing's problem of historical knowledge and his unabashed preference for certain portions of the canon over others (i.e. Christ, then Gospels, then Pauline epistles and James, then Old Testament) undermined at times the historical accuracy of Scripture and the sufficiency and necessity of the entirety of biblical revelation.

In a late journal entry Kierkegaard suggested that the imperfections and difficulties of Scripture reflected the imperfections and difficulties of the world, precisely because "God wants the Holy Scripture to be the object of faith and an offense to any other point of view." Kierkegaard anticipated the post-modern epistemological predicament.

His solution, which was to ground objective knowledge in subjective faith, can help us to "dialectically" think through the evangelical position on inerrancy in fresh and timely ways, given that Kierkegaard's overall view and practice of biblical interpretation is one we can emulate and one from which we can learn. However, to state the obvious, we cannot do so uncritically.

Concluding Remarks for the Theologian

In conclusion, how might we apply this discussion of Kierkegaardian appropriation in hermeneutics to the practices of the evangelical theologian? In the context of theological methodology, we suggest a combination of passion and procedures.

Passion suggests an inward, earnest engagement with Scripture which begins and ends with faith.. Procedures include an combination of historical-grammatical exegesis, intratextual canonical reading, and an appropriation of appropriation in the interpretive process. The point of departure for this theological method is obedience and worship.

Interpretation should then be a dynamic process which begins in worship and obedience and ends in worship and obedience. The individual defers to the wish of the transcendent Other, dying to her need to know and to her need to exert epistemological and hermeneutical power over an "objective" text. She believes all things by holding all possibilities in tension. She seeks after the truth and meaning in the text, but remains joyfully uncertain that she has ever completely attained it. She believes in a God's-eye view of things and that there is meaning in the text. He knows that though all truth is God's truth the mirror is yet dark; final certainty of knowledge is an eschatological realization.

In the meantime he has God's authoritative word which calls out to him in his subjectivity: Go and do likewise! Thus, though there is a lot that may yet be uncertain, there is much that is certain enough: and so to modify the biblical admonition: to those to whom something has been given, something is required.

Allow me to close with Kierkegaard's challenge:

'God's Word' is indeed the mirror—but, but—oh, how enormously complicated—strictly speaking, how much belongs to 'God's Word'? Which books are authentic? Are they really by the apostles, and are the apostles really trustworthy? Have they personally seen everything, or have they perhaps only heard about various things from others? As for ways of reading, there are thirty thousand different ways. And then this crowd of crush or scholars and opinions, and learned opinions and unlearned opinions about how the particular passage is to be understood. . . . One could almost be tempted to assume this is craftiness, that we really do not want to see ourselves in that mirror and therefore we have concocted all this that threatens to make the mirror impossible, all this that we then honor with the laudatory name of scholarly and profound and serious research and pondering. My listener, how highly do you value God's Word?