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Is Forgiveness Enough ? A Kierkegaardian Response

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I second Marc Kolden's motion.[1] Of course, whether forgiveness is enough depends on what forgiveness is, and it depends on what we are talking about—enough *for what*? I suspect that Christians would agree that "it depends."

So, why then ask the question? Perhaps the questioner means to ask the one who responds to evaluate, to weight, the various "whats" that one might consider—the sort of thing Professor Kolden lists in the first section of his article. If in this sense I were forced or lured into giving a Yes or No answer to the stated question, I would have to choose No. When it comes to weighting the "whats," we must ask the question as "Is forgiveness enough *for God?"* If the will of God is taken to be the principle of evaluation, one is then asking if forgiveness is enough to accomplish the purposes of God. I take it we are speaking of God the Creator. To say that forgiveness is enough to accomplish God's purposes seems to risk a dangerously anthropocentric reading of what God was and is up to in this vast

[1]This article is written in conversation with the preceding article by Marc Kolden, "The Scope of Forgiveness," *Word & World* 16/3 (1996) 309-319.

universe which humankind entered a few minutes before midnight on the evolutionary clock. (In this objection I am assuming that "the creation" does not need to be forgiven, though it groans in labor pains, waiting to be set free—Rom 7:19-22.)

To say simply that forgiveness is enough for us humans risks distracting and deflecting hearers from understanding precisely this human life in its necessary connections with the cosmological scope of God the Creator's purpose. Does not the presence of such deflection and distraction somehow put in question even the very claim to possess forgiveness? But the "natural world" aside, even a focus on the *human* creature still seems to call for a wider framework in which forgiveness is to be understood. To focus on forgiveness as enough for human beings may escape anthropocentrism only to end up in egocentrism. What is God up to with human beings? In answering that question, Christians—and notably Lutheran Christians in particular—will want to speak soon enough of forgiveness. But actually to give forgiveness its due requires recognizing forgiveness as a decisive divine response to human sin. In that recognition lies, at least implicitly, a rejection of a supralapsarian position (that the fall was predestined) and an invitation to ask anew of God's purposes with humankind. The "second Adam" may be "much more" than the first, but surely he is an Adam after all.

Marc Kolden's article already presents the "it depends" position, with more historical sophistication than I could muster and perhaps with a more traditionally Lutheran terminology

than I would have tended to use. But what is left to say? I choose to second Marc's motion by drawing on a Lutheran author whom he does not cite: Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard is notoriously weak on cosmological questions. But on the anthropological form of the "Is forgiveness enough?" question, he makes—through his "decisively Christian" pseudonym Anti-Climacus—the necessary distinctions and connections with great clarity and grace.[2]

So I offer a kind of Kierkegaardian commentary on Kolden's argument as seen by an author whose name does *not* begin with a K. Is something gained in the assembling of this trio? Does the "it depends" get advanced by addition? Kierkegaard would turn over in his grave at the thought, and Marc might, of course, say, "With support like this, who needs opposition?" These three are not one—granted. Does difference (in degree? in kind?) perhaps direct the question to the reader's authority? In either case, dear reader, whether this is the truth for you, only you will be able to say.

I. GOD'S FORGIVENESS IS DECISIVE: "WHO WILL BRING ANY CHARGE AGAINST GOD'S ELECT?" (ROM 8:33)

> Sin is the one and only predication about a human being that in no way, either *via negationis* or *via eminentiae,* can be stated of God. To say of God (in the same sense as saying that he is not finite and, consequently, *via negationis,* that he is

[2]Kierkegaard's entry in his journal from July, 1849, reads as follows: "The pseudonym [for *The Sickness unto Death*] is called Johannes Anti-Climacus in contrast to Climacus, who declared himself not to be a Christian. Anti-Climacus is the opposite extreme in being a Christian to an extra-ordinary degree, but I myself merely strive to be quite simply a Christian." *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer,* ed. P. A. Heiberg and Victor Kuihr, 11 vols. (Copenhagen: Gyldendals, 1909-1948) 10/I:A510 (translation mine).

> infinite) that he is not a sinner is blasphemy. As sinner, man is separated from God by the most chasmal qualitative abyss. In turn, of course, God is separated from man by the same chasmal qualitative abyss when he forgives sins. If by some kind of reverse adjustment the divine could be shifted over to the human, there is one way in which man could never in all eternity come to be like God: in forgiving sins.[3]

Kierkegaard was not about to deny the ontological difference between God and humankind. But the chief point he would make in speaking of the relationship between God and the human is soteriological: that God forgives sins. Of course we are called to forgive each other, but God's forgiveness is of a wholly other order. The difference lies in the decisiveness of God's forgiveness. One is reminded of Luther's remark regarding the primary meaning of God's infinite righteousness that "it swallows up all sins in a moment."[4]

Kierkegaard is clear about how this decisive deed is accomplished. For Anti-Climacus the conceptual boundaries or border guards of Christian faith are the doctrines of original sin and the atonement. Much of the power of *The Sickness unto Death* lies in the scope and depth of Kierkegaard's understanding of sin. Sin is not ignorance (against his beloved Socrates)—a matter quite understandable and, indeed, manageable. Rather sin is essentially defiance, and one must be

taught by a revelation from God what sin is. We tend to deny the "positive" character of sin (that it is assertion against God). But at the same time human speculation "cannot get it through its head that sin is to be completely forgotten....Christianity...by means of the Atonement wants to eliminate sin as completely as if it were drowned in the sea."[5] Here we come upon the unconditional character of God's will and work. It is that character to which St. Paul bears witness in Romans 8:

> Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. (Rom 8:33-34)

II. GOD'S FORGIVENESS IS RELATIONAL: "BLESSED IS ANYONE WHO TAKES NO OFFENSE AT ME" (MATT 11:6)

God's decisive act of forgiveness is an unconditional element in what is a genuine relationship. A long passage puts this with beauty and power:

> God and man are two qualities separated by an infinite qualitative difference. Humanly speaking, any teaching that disregards this difference is demented—divinely understood, it is blasphemy. In paganism, man made god a man (the man-god); in Christianity God makes himself man (the God-man). But in this infinite love of his merciful grace he nevertheless makes one condition: he cannot do otherwise. Precisely this is Christ's grief, that "he cannot do otherwise"; he

[3]Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening,* ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1980) 122.

[4]Martin Luther, "Two Kinds of Righteousness," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings,* ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989) 156.

[5]Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 100.

> can debase himself, take the form of a servant, suffer, die for men, invite all to come to him, offer up every day of his life, every hour of the day, and offer up his life—but he cannot remove the possibility of offense. What a rare act of love, what unfathomable grief of love, that even God cannot remove the possibility that this act of love reverses itself for a person and becomes the most extreme misery—something that in another sense God does not want to do, cannot want to do.[6]

God's word of forgiveness is unconditionally decisive and yet in a genuine relationship the possibility of the hearer taking offense abides. How can this be held together? Does semi-Pelagianism lie in the wings when these statements sound together in the drama of faith? This question will continue to be asked, not the least by earnest Lutheran readers of Søren Kierkegaard. In considering the matter one might well reach back to an earlier Kierkegaard piece, Johannes Climacus' "project of thought," *The Philosophical Fragments.* The project there is to

"go beyond Socrates." One does so, Climacus asserts, by recognizing that "the learner" is not only without the truth (the Socratic supposition), but is "without the condition for understanding the truth." Otherwise put, one is not only without the truth but is "polemical against the truth."[7] The "teacher," then (to stay with the Socratic imagery), must not only give the truth but the condition for understanding the truth.

How on earth is this to be done? Perhaps we cannot expect an airborne "project of thought" to answer, for the answer surely does lie with something that happens on earth. Yet Climacus does offer us this:

> Faith is not an act of will, for it is always the case that all human willing is efficacious only within the condition. For example, if I have the courage to will it, Twill understand the Socratic—that is, understand myself, because from the socratic point of view I possess the condition and now can will it. But if I do not possess the condition (and we assume this in order not to go back to the Socratic), then all my willing is of no avail, even though once the condition is given, that which was valid for the Socratic is again valid.[8]

Kierkegaard seems to have driven us into the interminable debates represented by the election controversy in American Lutheran history.[9] Kierkegaard's recognition of the possibility of offense rhymes with the understanding represented in article 11 of the *Formula of Concord,* according to which God's gift is indeed real but rejectable:

> The reason for such contempt of the Word is not God's foreknowledge but man's own perverse will, which rejects or perverts the means and instrument of the Holy Spirit which God offers to him through the call and resists the Holy Spirit

[6]Ibid., 126.

[7]Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments or a Fragment of Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1985) 14-15.

[8]Ibid., 62-63.

[9]See Eugene L. Fevold, "The Theological Scene," *The Lutherans in North America,* ed. E. C. Nelson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 305-328.

> who wills to be efficaciously active through the Word, as Christ says: "How often would I have gathered you together and you would not!"[10]

Any college sophomore might confidently link the name Kierkegaard with the sentence "subjectivity is the truth." There is truth in such linkage, but when Kierkegaard set about giving the "project of thought" its historical dress in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments,* he came to speak even more strongly of truth which is external to the individual. We are back again to the boundaries of Christian faith, the doctrines of original sin and the person and work of Christ. Neither boundary speaks of that which truly originates in the individual. In that sense "subjectivity is not the truth." Kierkegaard termed this external element "the dialectical." This is the Kierkegaard of "Religiousness B," the Kierkegaard whom Karl

Barth appropriated. But even here he will say that "the dialectical part is the decisive part only in so far as it is combined with the pathetic to create new pathos."[11]

What is one to say to this? How can the decisive reality of God's declaration of forgiveness and the relational reality of human responsibility be thought together? Is any such project of thought impaled on a paradox? Perhaps the way forward is to come to terms with our own existential situation.

III. GOD'S FORGIVENESS IS EMPOWERING: "WORK OUT YOUR OWN SALVATION WITH FEAR AND TREMBLING; FOR IT IS GOD WHO IS AT WORK IN YOU" (PHIL 2:12B-13A)

What did Martin Luther mean in saying that "where there is forgiveness of sins, there are also life and salvation"?[12] I propose that we look at what is involved in the actual relationship between the God who forgives and the sinner who is forgiven. In the previous section I have stressed the human responsibility established by God, the Creator of the relationship. But Kierkegaard would not understand this as responsibility without empowerment. Anti-Climacus, realizing that "the criterion for the self is always: that directly before which it is a self," exclaims: "What an infinite accent falls on the self by having God as the criterion!"[13]

Anti-Climacus is clear that this empowerment is not simply some sort of metaphysical status for which events in the world make no difference. It is true that "every single human being, no matter whether man, woman, servant girl, cabinet minister, merchant, barber, student, or whatever" "exists *before* God" and so "is invited to live on the most intimate terms with God!"[14] What is thus given through creation is not a little thing. But there is more:

[10]*The Formula of Concord*, in *The Book of Concord* [*BC*], ed. T. G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) SD 11, p. 623.

[11]Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1944) 493.

[12]*BC*, 352.

[13]Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 79.

[14]Ibid., 85 (emphasis his).

> Furthermore, for this person's sake, also for this very person's sake, God comes to the world, allows himself to be born, to suffer, to die, and this suffering God—he almost implores and beseeches this person to accept the help that is offered to him! Truly, if there is anything to lose one's mind over, this is it![15]

While *The Sickness unto Death* was described by Kierkegaard as "too dialectical and stringent for the proper use of the rhetorical, the soul-stirring, the gripping,"[16] the homiletic force of the writing at this point is remarkable. Indeed, it reminds me of Martin Luther's sermon on "Two Kinds of Righteousness." In section one, I cited this sermon as making the point about the decisiveness of the divine forgiveness which "swallows up all sins in a moment." But there are truly *two* kinds of God's righteousness, for Luther adds this:

> Therefore this alien righteousness, instilled in us without our works by grace alone-while the Father, to be sure, inwardly draws us to Christ—is set opposite

> original sin, likewise alien, which we acquire without our works by birth alone. Christ daily drives out the old Adam more and more in accordance with the extent to which faith and knowledge of Christ grow. For alien righteousness is not instilled all at once, but it begins, makes progress, and is finally perfected at the end through death.[17]

God's decisive act of forgiveness does not, then, leave the forgiven one in a situation where the only change is a forensic one. The decisive in relationship is empowering. And yet the decisive is empowering precisely in relationship. So Kierkegaard follows his homiletically powerful testimony to God come in the flesh with this word: "Everyone lacking the humble courage to dare to believe this is offended."[18] The possibility of offense remains.

So, how shall one come across this pass? We receive a response to that question in the other of Anti-Climacus's works, *Practice in Christianity.* After extensive consideration of the "invitation" ("Come hither, all you that labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest"), Kierkegaard sums up "the moral." First the relationship "before God" is recognized:

> "And what does all this mean "? It means that each individual in quiet inwardness before God is to humble himself under what it means in the strictest sense to be a Christian, is to confess honestly before God where he is so that he still might worthily accept the grace that is offered to every imperfect person—that is, to everyone.[19]

The "melancholy Dane" who wrote so searchingly of "the sickness unto death" knows that this talk of acceptance poses a problem, but he is not without a response: "in the terrible language of the law it indeed sounds so terrible, because it seems as

[15]Ibid.

[16]*Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 6 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1967-78) 5:6136 *(Pap.* VIII A 651).

[17]Luther, "Two Kinds of Righteousness," 157. One notices here in Luther the same "external boundaries" specified by Kierkegaard.

[18]Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 85.

[19]Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1991) 67.

if it were the individual who by his own power is to hold to Christ rather than, in the language of love, that it is Christ who holds on to him."[20]

And then what? What "life and salvation" come with acceptance of forgiveness? Well, it is human life, restored again to genuine creatureliness. Thus after the call to "accept the grace," Kierkegaard writes:

> And then nothing further; then, as for the rest, let him do his work and rejoice in it, love his wife and rejoice in her, joyfully bring up his children, love his fellow human beings, rejoice in life.[21]

Or may there be something further? Well, perhaps. Marc Kolden, whose motion I am seconding, does speak in his part V of the gospel's "motivating" and "encouraging" power. And Professor Kolden refers us at the end of his article to Gustaf Wingren. Wingren can speak of the disciple of Jesus hearing a "sharpened demand," but his emphasis is on knowing and doing the Creator's will as creatures:

> Since the first Creation was Creation in Christ even before Christ's Gospel and the proclamation of the Gospel, God is actually working in this Creation, speaking to man [*sic*] and ordering and compelling him to goodness and to outgiving love. There is no contradiction between this natural order and the idea that Christ has a new command to give....Christ's command is at one time as old as Creation and as new as salvation.[22]

Does Kierkegaard call for something more than forgiveness? Well, yes, I suppose he may, for we know how elsewhere he calls the Christian to self-examination before the mirror of the word;[23] he can speak of Christ as "prototype" and of Christian existence as "imitation." Indeed, even what Kierkegaard calls "the moral" has such a hint for us. After evoking the creaturely life, Kierkegaard adds, "If anything more is required of him, God will surely let him understand and in that case also help him further."[24] It does sound as if the relationship abides, as gift and as task.

So, how does one come across this pass into Christian existence and abide in it? Here is a Kierkegaardian response: "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, mercy."[25]

So, is forgiveness enough? Well, that depends. Is such an answer too uncertain? Does it give the believer too little to which to cling? Who can be hopeful with

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Gustaf Wingren, *Creation and Law* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961) 42.

[23]Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination, Judge for Yourself*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1990), where Kierkegaard—speaking without the aid of a pseudonym—ponders what Luther, come back to life, would make of the new "worldliness." If faith is a "perturbating" thing, perhaps recourse even to the Book of James will be needed.

[24]Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 67.

[25]Ibid.

such a dialectical "it depends"? Perhaps what is given is not too little. Christ is an unusual prototype:

> He who is truly to be the prototype and be related only to imitators must in one sense be *behind* people, propelling forward, while in another sense he stands *ahead*, beckoning....Thus in one sense the prototype is *behind*, more deeply pressed down into abasement and lowliness than any human being has ever been, and in another sense, *ahead*, infinitely lifted up. But the prototype must be behind

> in order to be able to capture and include all....The prototype must be *unconditionally* behind, behind everyone, and it must be *behind* in order to propel forward those who are to be formed according to it.[26]

Each individual (each reader) will truly have reason for self-examination. But that is not the whole truth, for "there is no identity between the subjective and the objective. Though Christianity comes into the heart of ever so many believers, every believer is conscious that it has not arisen in his heart."[27] It is clear that Kierkegaard could employ the sharp-edged sword of the Either/Or. But perhaps he had a *simul* up his sleeve as well.

[26]Ibid., 238-39 (emphasis his).
[27]Kierkegaard, *Papirer*, 7/2:B235.

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