

Kierkegaard and his gifts for the church

Stephen Backhouse's accessible biography reveals a man who worked hard to conceal himself.

by [Elizabeth Palmer](#) in the [May 24, 2017](#) issue

In Review



Kierkegaard: A Single Life

By Stephen Backhouse

"I 've waited my whole life for this book. And so has the church." So claims Richard Beck in endorsing Stephen Backhouse's biography of Søren Kierkegaard. Although blurbs are often prone to exaggeration, Beck's claim is not an overstatement. The church *has* been waiting for this book. Other excellent biographies of the Danish theologian have been written, but none is as accessible as this one.

Backhouse, who teaches social and political theology at St. Mellitus College in London, succeeds because he makes a clear distinction between Kierkegaard's life and his ideas without divorcing the two. This distinction is mirrored in the structure of the book, which begins with biography (told in narrative form, at times in the present tense and with considerable poetic license) and ends with overviews of each of Kierkegaard's major works. Understanding Kierkegaard's ideas is impossible without knowing his biography, and Backhouse faithfully ties the two together.

At the heart of Backhouse's narrative is Kierkegaard's prolific use of pseudonyms, which has caused much consternation and misunderstanding. Kierkegaard used pseudonymous writing to lead readers toward the immediacy of a relationship with God, unburdened by concerns about the identity of the author of the book at hand. Ironically, the stubbornness with which Kierkegaard strove to deflect attention from himself has driven many readers into an obsessive investigation of the man as well as his beliefs. There's deep irony in the very idea of a biography of someone who continually (and sometimes painfully) worked to conceal himself. Near the end of his life, Backhouse notes, Kierkegaard "stipulated clearly that he was *not* a witness to the truth, he was *without authority*, and he was *not* claiming to say anything that the New Testament has not already made clear."

The man behind the carefully constructed personas was a Christian of deep faith. His later works, published under his own name, explicitly explore discipleship, scripture, practices of love, and faith lived out in community. In his final journal entry before his death, Kierkegaard wrote that God desires

a human being who in the last lap of this life, when God seemingly changes into sheer cruelty and with the most cruelly devised cruelty does everything to deprive him of all zest for life, nevertheless continues to believe that God is love, that God does it out of love. . . . He has no faith in himself, but he does have faith in God.

That description was personally borne out on the author's deathbed six weeks later. When asked by his friend Emil Boesen whether he believed and took refuge in Christ, the weakening 42-year-old replied with bemusement, "Yes, of course, what else?" Backhouse is not the first biographer to tell this story, but his account is the most engaging. He excels as a storyteller of theological drama.

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Kierkegaard's impact has been extensive—across virtually all fields of theology and philosophy—and he has attracted a wide range of readers and commentators, from Franklin D. Roosevelt (who claimed Kierkegaard helped him understand the Nazis) to the popular Twitter profile KimKierkegaardashian. Yet the multiple voices in his own writing make him a difficult figure to pin down, and he is often taken up by people with very different agendas.

Kierkegaard was aware of this problem, and he worked in his own time to avoid being appropriated by either the conservative ruling party in Denmark or the populist national-liberal opposition. Backhouse writes:

Poets and playwrights admired the man who wrote provocative fiction. Philosophers read him for his statements on the nature of time, existence, and the meaning of life. Conservatives liked Søren for his opposition to democracy and revolution. Liberals liked Søren for his championing of the individual and the common man against the forces of inherited tradition. Atheists loved his attacks on the clergy and official religion of Christendom. Reformers, longing for a renewal of Christianity in the land, also loved his attacks on the clergy and official religion of Christendom.

If this is the book on Kierkegaard the church needs, a deeper question yet remains: Why does the church need any book on Kierkegaard? What does Kierkegaard offer to people of faith and the communities that support them?

Kierkegaard's first gift to the church is an acute psychological description of human existence and human limitations. His early writings abound with evocative images that speak to lives marred by brokenness or despair. His insights about faith—the cognitive and existential leaps required to grasp that God could love us and forgive even the worst of our sins, and the absurdity of aligning one's life with the often surprising call of God—are deeply challenging. But they are also sources of comfort

for those who live with uncertainty or doctrinal doubts. There's something refreshingly honest, as well as terrifying, in Kierkegaard's claim that believing in God is like swimming over an abyss 70,000 fathoms deep. Reading Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works may not move most Christians to the point of experiencing God's grace, but they help us glimpse our desire to get there. It's when we see our sin and contingency that we can grasp who Christ really is for us.

In this respect, Kierkegaard is a particular gift to all who give and receive pastoral care. I remember answering my phone one evening and hearing the distressed voice of a parishioner whose life was unraveling because of addiction. Charles had lost his job and was being mandated to complete a course of professional treatment. He called to tell me that he had dropped out of the program. His unflinching acceptance of the consequences of his noncompliance simultaneously scared and comforted him. "I just don't think I've hit rock bottom yet," he lamented, "and until I do, I'm going to stay right where I am. I know that things are going to get worse for me, and I guess I'm OK with that."

Knowing that Charles was familiar with Kierkegaard, I asked him if he remembered Kierkegaard's contrast in *Fear and Trembling* between the "knight of resignation" and the "knight of faith." Both knights live and suffer within the reality of loss—but the knight of faith does so with hope in God, while the knight of resignation is unable to grasp that hope.

"Yes," Charles answered, and then there was a long pause. "Oh, I see the connection. I'm the knight of resignation. I'm willing to give up everything that's good in my life without ever getting it back, and I don't have any hope that this will change." He continued tentatively: "But do you think it might someday change for me? Will I ever become the knight of faith? Do I need to hit rock bottom first?"

I told Charles that even though he may not be able to describe himself yet as a knight of faith, he was, like Abraham on Mount Moriah, already held by God. The fact that he wanted to become a knight of faith, someone who holds fast to the promise of God's mercy, meant that he wasn't entirely stuck in resignation.

The second gift Kierkegaard gives the church is the withering power of his attacks on the established church in Denmark, including its dominant theology, its institutional structure, and its pastors. This stance is the focus of Kierkegaard's polemical writings in which he became enmeshed during the last years of his life. He was

offended by a theology that turned Christianity into a form of philosophical Hegelianism (Kierkegaard's charge against the popular professor H. L. Martensen), by culturally and politically sanctioned church leaders (embodied for Kierkegaard by Bishop J. P. Mynster), and by anti-institutional populist forms of religion that made an idol of the masses (Kierkegaard's view of the pastor-educator Nikolai F. S. Grundtvig). As Kierkegaard saw it, these manifestations of bourgeois faith lured Danes away from Jesus' radical call to discipleship. Caught up in the crowd of a culturally sanctioned faith, Christians were saved from the offensive but necessary movement of throwing themselves as sinners on God's mercy.

Although Christianity in 21st-century America is far from that of 19th-century Denmark, it is not only in Kierkegaard's day that pastors were guilty of preaching in a way that "tones down, veils, suppresses, omits some of what is most decisively Christian" (as Kierkegaard put it in an 1854 newspaper article following Mynster's death). Refusing on his deathbed to receive holy communion from a clergyman, Kierkegaard complained about a church that was beholden to the state, a church in which "the pastors are civil servants of the Crown." Today the co-opting of the church comes from other directions. Fear of numerical decline, nostalgia for the way things used to be, or adherence to a political agenda exerts its own pressure toward conformity and security.

And clergy are not the only ones Kierkegaard faults. Pews as well as pulpits are filled with religious complacency:

The New Testament is very easy to understand. But we human beings are really a bunch of scheming swindlers; we pretend to be unable to understand it because we understand very well that the minute we understand we are obliged to act accordingly at once. . . . I open the N.T. and read: "If you want to be perfect, then sell all your goods and give to the poor and come and follow me." Good God, all the capitalists, the officeholders, and the pensioners, the whole race no less, would be almost beggars.

Kierkegaard's third gift is the devotional writings published under his own name during the middle period of his authorship, including *Works of Love*, *For Self-Examination*, *Practice in Christianity*, and the many *Edifying* and *Upbuilding Discourses*. In these works, he abandons his angst-filled thought experiments to

exhort Christians to develop robust practices of discipleship. The distinction between thought and action is, in fact, at the heart of Kierkegaard's multiple layers of authorship. There's a difference between *struggling existentially* with the big philosophical questions of faith (as the early pseudonymous works do) and *living* in faith (as the signed works instruct their readers to do).

Kierkegaard famously posited three distinct stages of human existence—the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. As Backhouse explains, the aesthete “flits from one temporary experience to the next” while the ethical person “chooses to live according to a duty external to himself rather than according to some whim of self-satisfaction or human invention.” The religious stage, however, is about “existing before God.” The religious individual is “set apart from habitually following that which is universal to all, even when the universal is good. . . . A life chosen for God will be distinctly marked by the suffering that comes from being set apart.”

Part of what makes a person religious is how he or she interprets this suffering. “Unlike the aesthete or the ethicist, the religious man knows misfortune happens to anyone and everyone and is not a source of grief. Truly religious grief is over guilt, not misfortune.” In response to this grief, however, the Christian shouldn't turn inward and huddle in existential misery before God. Glimpsing the possibility of redemption—of God's love that bridges the seemingly impossible gap between humans and God—the Christian is then free to engage in works of love in the world.

Ultimately, for Kierkegaard, Christ was not a philosophical paradox but a pattern, a prototype of faithful living. Having grasped the paradox of the incarnation and grieved over the intractability of human sinfulness, the faithful reader of Kierkegaard is called toward a relationship with God and the world that is modeled on Christ's suffering and sacrifice. This is what it means to love.

Kierkegaard's later emphasis on works of love over anxiety doesn't negate the significance of his early writing. Grappling with the paradoxes of Christian faith doesn't go away in the life of faith. But Kierkegaard's later work is perhaps more relevant for today's Christians, who are less likely to stay awake at night worrying about their existential status before God than to wonder what it means to do works of love for the neighbor in need. Lived faith can transform individuals and communities. Even if the reader of Kierkegaard remains suspended above the abyss, forever hoping against hope to glimpse God's grace, she or he may do so while also actively living into God's justice.

Backhouse warns in the preface against treating Kierkegaard merely as an object of philosophical or theological study and thereby avoiding the challenge Kierkegaard presents to each individual in his or her singularity and inwardness—what Kierkegaard referred to as “the Single One.” “If you use these overviews to avoid engaging with the real thing, then it may be small comfort to know the only person Kierkegaard dislikes more than you is me. . . . You must read the originals and decide for yourself. . . . Kierkegaard’s thoughts need to be encountered, one by one, person by person, or they are not encountered at all.” He continues:

The infinite, eternal God is standing before you now with greasy hair and a bit of fish in his beard, bidding you who are weary to come to him and he will give you rest. To turn away in offense from this person is natural, expected, even reasonable. Yet to turn towards such a one is to turn away from all that has a false claim on your identity and into the one who defines what it is to exist. . . . As long as people continue to live and move and have their being in habitual ideas of their own creation, Kierkegaard will continue to upbuild and provoke wherever he is encountered by the Single One.

By looking at the life and writings of a single individual, readers—both of this biography and of Kierkegaard’s own writings—might find their own singularity and be moved toward authentic life with Christ, a life that transforms angst into action and despair into discipleship. Kierkegaard would expect nothing less of us.