

*Bridging the Socio-Political Chasm of Communication: The Existential Implications of the
Theological Work of John Williamson Nevin and Søren Kierkegaard*

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Part I: Introduction

When I reflect on the current context of extreme socio-political polarization in the United States, images of multiple houses of mirrors situated side by side come to mind. Within each little house exists a specific self-contained setting (i.e. socio-political identity) whose contours are reflected back in upon itself (via one's chosen media outlets as well as social and religious affiliations and organizations, etc.) and no matter the angle from which one gazes at the contents in one's home; they essentially remain the same. The rigid casing seems impenetrable, making communication and exchange between the environments of each glass house seemingly impossible. We might catch a glimpse of our neighbor's house through the small windows of our own, and may even see their lips moving and hear muffled voices; however, we seem unable to fully see and hear each other, and so we sink back down into the shadows of our own reflections, perhaps feeling helpless and hopeless in the face of such barriers to building a sense of true communion with one another. This chasm of communication we are currently experiencing is relatively slight in comparison to the chasm of communication that once existed between God (i.e. the divine/love) and humanity prior to the revelation of God in human history via the incarnation of Jesus Christ as expressed in the Christian tradition.¹ The overcoming of this deep fissure of communication between God and humanity in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is most vividly celebrated in the sacrament of the Eucharist and is of central importance to

¹ It should be noted that the chasm of communication between God and humanity prior to the incarnation of Christ in human history is unlike the socio-political chasm of communication between individual human beings primarily because human beings cut themselves off of communication with God by choosing to worship themselves (i.e. turning away from receiving life as a gift from God) instead of worshiping God. Thus, the chasm of communication between God and humanity was the singular fault of humanity.

the theological tradition of the Mercersburg Theological Society, whose theological focus has historically remained on the embodied ramifications of co-founder, John Williamson Nevin's understanding of the believer's mystical union with Christ's mystical presence in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Likewise, the nineteenth century Danish theologian and philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, whose work aimed to reawaken the Danish Lutheran State Church from its comfortable bourgeoisie slumber to the passionate rigors and joy of the Christian faith, claimed that his entire authorship sought "its decisive place of rest, at the foot of the altar."² In keeping with the centrality of this historical trajectory of the Mercersburg Theological tradition and in service to the Society's urgent call to seek theological resources that might serve to foster a type of interpersonal communication that would better enable us to see and hear each other from across our socio-political differences, this paper will seek to draw out the existential implications of the theological thoughts of each thinker that may foster improved interpersonal communication from across the socio-political divide. To this end, I will begin by offering a brief contextualization of each thinkers' work. Then, I will lay out Nevin's understanding of the incarnation and the believer's mystical union with Christ's mystical presence in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Finally, I will explore several major themes found in the work of Kierkegaard, including: (1) His understanding of the incarnation of Christ as *the paradox* of the eternal (God/love) entering time; (2) Christianity as an *existence-communication*; (3) the role of *faith* in experiencing the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and therefore also in one's neighbor;

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 165. See also Tekoa Robinson, "Kierkegaard's Authorship as Eucharistic Liturgy," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (2019): 285-314 for an in-depth explanation of how Kierkegaard's authorship is reflective of the characteristics of the Eucharistic liturgy found in the 1830 *Forordenet Alter-Bøg for Danmark*, which Kierkegaard owned and was quite familiar with, and for an explanation of how the liturgy of the authorship functions to indirectly lead the individual to the foot of the altar through an ever-deepening inward and pathos-filled appropriation of the Christian faith.

and (4) the role of the *inverse-witness* that is a part of living within the ongoing communion with Christ in relation to self and neighbor.

Part II: Background and Context

Before unpacking how the major theological arcs and convergences of these two thinkers may help point us toward overcoming the barriers of socio-political polarization via interpersonal communication, it will be helpful to provide a brief overview of their contexts and concerns. Nevin and Kierkegaard were both writing in the turbulent context of the nineteenth century and even though the particular issues they addressed were quite distinct, both authors focused on wanting to maintain a clear distinction between Christianity as a revealed religion and those rationalistic and romantic iterations of it that had in their day become so popular across Europe and the United States. Nevin (1803-1886), who “was born to Scotch-Irish Presbyterians in rural Pennsylvania,” eventually went on “to study the theologians and historians of Germany’s ‘Mediating school,’” and nearly converted to Catholicism at one point, was concerned with what he saw to be the overly rationalistic and individualistic tendencies of Protestant culture more generally as well as the over spiritualizing and moralizing tendencies that had grown out of the radical revivalism of the Second Great Awakening in the U.S..³ For him, this meant writing a theology that took seriously the unity of the human body and spirit and therefore of the salvific implications of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ as the supernatural revelation of God’s eternal reconciling love entering into human history for the redemption and sanctification of the whole human being (in both body and spirit) and of all creation.⁴ His theological approach

³ John Williamson Nevin, “The Mystical Presence: And the Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord’s Supper,” in *The Mercersburg Theology Study Series*, edited by Linden J. DeBie and W. Bradford Littlejohn, vol. 1. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), ix.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 146-49.

to the supernatural revelation of God in Christ recognized the limitations of human reason and the special role of faith in the believer's reception of and union with Christ's life-giving presence via the Holy Spirit.⁵ Thus, Nevin's approach avoided the overly rationalistic tendencies of metaphysical speculation that attempted to provide empirical proofs in support of revelation, while simultaneously rooting the salvific loving actions of God in Christ, rather than in an individual's personal emotional and moralistic responses to particularly charismatic preachers.⁶

Kierkegaard (1813-1855), whose critique of the Danish Lutheran State Church has often led to his being unfairly characterized as an anti-ecclesial radical individualist by those unfamiliar with the nuances of his authorship, not only shared Nevin's disdain for metaphysical speculative approaches to Christianity, but also his critical suspicions of what Christopher Barnett has termed, "the self-righteousness of sectarian groups."⁷ As Lee Barrett states, "He had no more sympathy for separatism than he did for the establishment, for he was suspicious of the power of any collectivity to minimize individual responsibility and passion" in relationship to God.⁸ In light of these concerns, Kierkegaard's writings were meant to provide a kind of corrective to the Danish Lutheran State Church, which in his view was misleadingly equating the

⁵ The phrase "Christ's life-giving presence via the Holy Spirit" is worded this way in order to recognize the post-Ascension and post-Pentecost context in which Christ's vivifying presence is continually available to all of humanity through the Holy Spirit.

⁶ John Williamson Nevin, "The Heidelberg Catechism: The Mercersburg Understanding of the German Reformed Tradition," in *The Mercersburg Theology Study Series*, edited by Lee C. Barrett and David W. Layman, vol. 10. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2021), 30-32.

⁷ Christopher Barnett, *Kierkegaard, Pietism, and Holiness* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 111-12. As Barnett notes on p.117, "The trouble, as Climacus [Climacus is Kierkegaard's pseudonym used for his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*] sees it, is that Christianity posits an eternal happiness that 'is decided in time and is decided by the relation to Christianity as something historical.' But philosophical speculation, in contemplating Christianity, abstracts from time and history, thereby making the truth of Christianity an object of *thought*, as it were, *over* Christianity, controlling it as 'an element within speculation.'"

⁸ Lee C. Barrett, *Eros and Self-Emptying: The Intersections of Augustine and Kierkegaard*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 375.

“Christian life with social conformity and bourgeois felicity,” rather than living more and more in *communion* with Christ.⁹ For Kierkegaard, when a person truly lives in *communion* with Christ it will lead to “a life of persecution and socially induced suffering.”¹⁰ The fact that he chose to break off his engagement to his beloved Regine Olsen in order to spend ten years intensely writing to provide such a corrective for the Danish Lutheran State Church points to his deep concern and therefore recognition of the value of the church as a communicator of “the attractive and offensive picture of the self-offering God to humanity.”¹¹ Further undergirding his valuation of the church is Kierkegaard’s personal devotional and authorial use of “the prayer books, hymnals, catechisms, [liturgies] and confessions of the church, . . . [and his] insistence that Christian pathos requires the communication of authoritative concepts and schooling in the use of those concepts.”¹² This being said, for Kierkegaard the church does not automatically exist simply because people collectively attend worship. For attending worship and participating in the social structures and activities of congregational life do not necessarily “always help individuals [to] stand alone before God,” and to take responsibility for their lives.¹³ Much like Nevin, Kierkegaard does not simply assume that a person is filled with the pathos of faith through which one may experience the mystical union with the presence of Christ via the Holy Spirit simply

⁹ Ibid., 365.

¹⁰ Ibid., 365; Søren Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 188.

¹¹ Lee Barrett, *Eros and Self-Emptying*, 376.

¹² Ibid., 375.

¹³ Ibid., 376. Barrett notes, “Ironically, the same understanding of Christian love that led Kierkegaard to critique the church also provided some clues for a possible Christian community that would be acceptable to him. The basis of any genuine Christian community would, for Kierkegaard – like any true Augustinian – have to be love. . . . He suggests that our transformation may be fostered by some social channels, [such as] . . . mutual assistance to humility before God. This remark suggests that communities can help build up a person in humility – and presumably also in love.”

because one is baptized and attends Sunday morning worship. Faith involves an ongoing passionate subjective relation to Christ that permeates a person's entire existence and therefore cannot be narrowly defined by one's cognitive assent to the doctrines and dogmas of the church.

Part III: Exploring the Major Theological Concepts in Nevin and Kierkegaard

Since the incarnation of Christ as God's finite self-communication of self-emptying love for human beings in time is of primary importance to the work of both Nevin and Kierkegaard, we shall begin by delineating how each author approached it. For Nevin, the incarnation lays the theological groundwork upon which he builds his understanding of how the mystical presence of Christ becomes available to us via faith within the context of our finite existence and thus makes our eternal eschatological union with God in Christ possible beginning here and now, most especially through Christ's union with the church as realized in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Nevin states, "The one only medium of such inward, *living communication* with the divine nature is the mystery of the incarnation as exhibited in the man Christ Jesus."¹⁴ For Nevin, "[Human] nature reaches after a true and real union with the nature of God as the necessary complement and consummation of its own life,...[and] the *idea* which it embodies can never be fully actualized under any other form, [for] the incarnation...is the proper completion of humanity."¹⁵ This is so according to Nevin, because it is only through the incarnation of Christ that divinity (the eternal) and humanity (the finite) are perfectly joined together and "made one, in a real, inward and abiding way."¹⁶ Thus, in Christ, the eternal is "brought not only near to

¹⁴ John Williamson Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 176.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

nature [i.e. the finite and particular] but into its very heart...to remain in union with it forever.”¹⁷ The incarnation for Nevin is the literal “introduction...of a new element, a new divine force, into the very organism of the world itself,” which “descends into the actual process of human history, and becomes within it the principle and law of a second creation.”¹⁸ Since according to Nevin, “[Christ] gathered humanity into himself as a whole and was constituted thus its head and sum,” it is important to note that this understanding of the incarnation implies that Christ (i.e. the eternal/divine in complete union with finitude) is at work in the finite and particular lives of each individual, regardless of whether we can affirm this as true based on our own limited observations of another person’s life.¹⁹ As Nevin asserts, “It is by the incarnation properly, that the way has been opened for a true descent of the Spirit into the sphere of the human existence as such,” and so *through faith*, we may come to see and experience the life of Christ via the Holy Spirit at work in all of finitude.²⁰

The role of faith in relating to the incarnation of Christ as God’s self-revelation of love in human history is also of primary importance for Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Anti-Climacus.²¹ When writing about the possible offensiveness of Christ (i.e. as a particular human being who claimed to be God and then submitted to crucifixion) and Christianity to the human understanding, Anti-Climacus states, “The God-human is the unity of God and an individual human being; [and] *that* an individual human being is God is Christianity, and this particular

¹⁷ Ibid., 181.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 184.

²⁰ Ibid., 193.

²¹ Anti-Climacus (Søren Kierkegaard), *Practice in Christianity*, eds. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 140-43.

human being is the God-human. The God-human being is the paradox, absolutely the paradox; therefore it is altogether certain that the understanding must come to a standstill on it.”²² Anti-

Climacus explains why this is so:

If someone says directly: I am God; the Father and I are one, this is direct communication. But if the person who says it, the communicator, is this individual human being, an individual human being just like others, then this communication is not quite entirely direct, because it is not entirely direct that an individual human being should be God—whereas what he says is entirely direct. Because of the communicator the communication contains a contradiction, it becomes indirect communication; it confronts you with a choice: whether you will believe him or not.²³

Under the pseudonym of Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard maintains that since the paradox of the incarnation of Christ as God’s self-communication of self-offering love in time cannot be directly communicated, then Christianity is an *existence-communication*.²⁴ This means that one cannot come into an understanding of Christianity via such direct communication as is found in speculative thought or by simply assenting to church doctrines, but rather through *the choice* to relate to Christ within the concrete context of one’s life by faith.²⁵ As Climacus asserts, “...the task of the understanding in relation to Christianity is simply ‘to understand that it is to be existed in’ and ‘to understand the difficulty of existing in it.’”²⁶

Nevin likewise asserts that Christianity “is not a doctrine to be taught or learned like a system of philosophy or a rule of moral conduct,...[but rather] a new order of revelation [that]

²² Ibid., 82. Note that Kierkegaard is not anti-reason, but wants to make it clear that human rationality, which attempts to objectify things in order to grasp them, must come to a standstill in relationship to God. This is because God is not an object or thing that can be grasped and controlled but rather is a subject to which we relate.

²³ Ibid., 134.

²⁴ Johannes Climacus (Søren Kierkegaard), *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, vol. 1, eds. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 379-80.

²⁵ Ibid., 379-80.

²⁶ Ibid., 379.

bursts [into] the world in the person of Jesus, . . . who is personally present among [each human being] and incorporating itself with their life.”²⁷ Thus, it follows that we cannot judge whether God (the eternal/love) is at work in another human being’s life simply based on whether he or she attends church, assents to the doctrines and dogmas of the tradition, ascribes to a certain political view, and generally lives according to the cultural norms of the day. For Christ, and therefore Christianity, says Nevin, is not a doctrine, a philosophical system, or a moral code, but rather, “it is a LIFE.”²⁸ It is Christ’s life. As Nevin puts it, “[Human beings] are brought to God, not by doctrine or example, but only by being made to *participate* in the divine nature itself; and this participation is made possible to us only through the person of Christ; who is the very substance of our salvation.”²⁹

It is important to note that for both Nevin and Kierkegaard, a human being encounters and comes to participate in love (Christ/the eternal in time) only by existing in relation to Christ via faith, because God’s existence-communication in time comes to us in the hidden form of a vulnerable suffering individual human being. It is in no way obvious to the human mind that an individual human being who suffers and dies is indeed God. That *faith* is the necessary key to encountering love’s hiddenness within a finite human being is the first existential implication of Nevin’s and Kierkegaard’s approaches to the incarnation that may provide an initial step toward building a bridge of communication across the socio-political divide. Such faith in Christ’s presence, even in my neighbor whose political views are quite divergent from my own, is indeed an important aspect of being made to participate in the life of Christ. For such faith in love holds

²⁷ John Williamson Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 186.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 188.

open space for the unexpected and surprising work of the Holy Spirit as it refuses to view the neighbor in static categorical terms, but rather, encounters the neighbor as a dynamic fellow human being whose vulnerability and suffering and responses to that vulnerability and suffering has shaped the contours of his/her life in unforeseeable ways that have perhaps lead him/her to hold certain political views.

For Nevin this *participation* or what he comes to term, the *mystical union* with the life of Christ, although permeating all of creation, is most explicitly revealed in the church as the continuation of the resurrected Body of Christ in the world and becomes most viscerally communicated to each person via the real vivifying spiritual presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.³⁰ Although, for Nevin, the institutional church plays a crucial role as a mediating source of the real presence of the enlivening Spirit of the crucified and resurrected Christ; it is those who *by faith* partake of the *life of Christ* via the enlivening presence of the Holy Spirit who actually constitute the living church. Through the words of the celebrated Reformed Church historian, August Ebrard, Nevin outlines the contours of this *participation in the life of Christ* via the *mystical union* with Christ's spiritual presence in the Lord's Supper:

The breaking of the bread serves to bring into view Christ's death; the eating of the broken bread is a symbol that this death is appropriated in the way of a living union with the Savior himself. As however Christ, in giving the bread to eat and the wine to drink, declares them to be the pledge of the new covenant itself in his blood, it follows that the bread and wine are not simply *symbols*, but that they serve to place him who eats and drinks, in real communion with the atonement through his death. And since such communion with Christ's death can have no place without a life-communion (Lebensgemeinschaft) with Christ himself, or since in other words the *new covenant* holds in the form of a real inward and living fellowship only, it follows again that the

³⁰ Ibid., 190-91, 194-211.

Lord's Supper involves for the worthy participant a true, personal, central communication and union with Christ's actual life.³¹

For Nevin, "Christ's life is apprehended on the part of his people only by faith...[which is] the most comprehensive, fundamental act of which our nature is capable, [and] is the medium of the introduction of new life into the soul and the condition of its growth and development."³² This being said, it must be noted that *participation in the life of Christ* does not simply equate to mindless social participation in the structures of the institutional church, nor does Nevin wish to confine such participation to the Sunday morning celebration of the Lord's Supper, but rather, it involves a level of existential intentionality that continually partakes of the *life of Christ* via faith as one receives his/her life as an ongoing gift of grace in relation to God's self-offering love in Christ. This continual awareness of and reception of God's grace in Christ may occur through, but is not limited to, one's relationship with co-workers, family members, friends, enemies, as well as interactions with strangers. As Nevin states, "Christ's life as a *whole* is borne over into the person of the believer as a like *whole*;... That is, it works as a *human life*; and as such becomes a law of regeneration in the body as truly as in the soul."³³ Thus, the *mystical union* of the believer with the life of Christ may begin and be continually nourished by the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, however, its effects radiate outward into an individual's daily relational interactions with others such that one may begin to see and hear others through the eyes and ears of the same grace from which one is continually receiving new life.

³¹ Ibid., 220.

³² Ibid., 156.

³³ Ibid., 153.

With this in mind, let us take a closer look at the relationship between faith and grace in Nevin's understanding of a sacrament in order to better understand how *participation in the life of Christ* flows from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to our interactions with others in our daily lives. Nevin defines a sacrament as "a holy ordinance instituted by Christ; wherein, by sensible signs, Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed and applied to believers."³⁴ According to Nevin's view of a sacrament, "the signs don't make the sacrament, they are only one part of it, ... [for] the other part is found in the *invisible grace* that is sacramentally or mystically joined with the signs."³⁵ Lastly and most importantly, "*faith* is necessary for the sacrament to benefit the participant."³⁶ *Faith* is what makes it possible to experience the real presence of the *invisible grace* of Christ's self-emptying love as "a real communication with the *person* (body/humanity and spirit/divinity united as a single whole) of the Savior."³⁷ At this point it is important to recall that for Nevin, this *invisible grace* that is made available in the life of the church through the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, has already been imparted to all of creation and every human being via the incarnation (life, death, and resurrection of Christ) as "the supernatural linking itself to the onward flow of the world's life, and becoming thenceforward itself the ground and principle of the entire organism, now poised at last on its true centre."³⁸ Humanity, as such, says Nevin, "stands revealed in [Christ's] person under its most perfect form," however, I would like to point out that just as it takes *faith* to

³⁴ Ibid., 158.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 158-59.

³⁸ Ibid., 148.

encounter the life-giving spiritual presence of Christ in the material elements of the Lord's Supper, it takes *faith* to believe that the *invisible grace* of Christ's enlivening presence via the Holy Spirit actually exists in and is at work in the lives of others (who may hold vastly different socio-political perspectives), even if we cannot perceive it through our own understanding. For we must ask ourselves if we, along with Nevin truly believe that "when Christ died and rose, humanity died and rose at the same time in his person; not figuratively, but truly; just as it had fallen before in the person of Adam."³⁹ If so, then what would it mean for a person of faith to partake in the life-giving mystical presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, but then to turn around and approach communication with the socio-political other with the belief that the same mystical presence of Christ's salvific spirit of love is not at work in the material element (i.e. sign) that is the life of another human being? In posing this question, I am not simply equating the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to interpersonal communication, but attempting to direct our attention to the theological and existential implications of Nevin's understanding of what it means to *participate in the life of Christ via faith* in the ongoing context of one's daily life. Just as it takes a great deal of faith to believe that the church, which is made up of countless imperfect human beings, is the resurrected Body of Christ on earth, so too, does it take a great deal of faith not to close the relational door on those whose political perspectives seem so contrary to expressions of Christian love. To know our own deep need to be sustained by God's grace in Christ and to believe by faith that we are indeed sustained by such self-giving love, may open our hearts and fill us with a compassion that allows us to see the fear and pain of our shared human vulnerability behind the polarizing political rhetoric. Such an equalizing vision of self in

³⁹ Ibid., 148.

relation to neighbor may help to keep the lines of conversation open long enough for individuals to see each other's humanity and to get to know each other as more than just homogenous political caricatures.

Union with Christ for Kierkegaard only comes through the suffering of sin-consciousness that is involved in what he terms the *inverse-witness*, and not through any direct imitation of Christ's suffering, since no human being can directly imitate the life of Christ. This is not simply a consciousness of this or that particular sin, but an awareness of one's existence in sin and inability to escape such an existence through one's own power or self-will.⁴⁰ This does not mean for Kierkegaard that we are not to strive to imitate Christ out of our sheer gratitude for grace, but rather, that through our grateful strivings we come to truly see and know the infinite qualitative difference between ourselves and God, and thus learn what it means to worship God instead of ourselves.⁴¹ This self-knowledge creates humility before God and compassion for our neighbor as we come to see that all stand equally in need of grace and that all are equally loved by God in Christ. He describes the *inverse-witness* as follows:

God and the human being resemble each other only inversely. You do not reach the possibility of comparison by the ladder of direct likeness: great, greater, greatest; it is possible only inversely. Neither does a human being come closer and closer to God by lifting up his head higher and higher, but inversely by casting himself down ever more deeply in worship. The broken heart that condemns itself cannot have, seeks in vain to

⁴⁰ Anti-Climacus (Søren Kierkegaard), *Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, eds. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 81-82. Anti-Climacus defines sin and faith as follows: "Sin is: before God in despair not to will to be oneself, or before God in despair to will to be oneself;...[it encompasses all forms of] self-willfulness against God [in] disobedience. Faith is: that the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God....*the opposite of sin is faith*, as it says in Romans 14:23: 'whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.' And this is one of the most decisive definitions for all Christianity – that the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith."

⁴¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *What We Learn from the Lilies in the Field and from the Birds of the Air*, intro. and trans. by Christopher Barnett, (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2019), 173.

find, an expression that is strong enough to describe its guilt, its wretchedness, its defilement—God is even greater in showing mercy!⁴²

Becoming conscious of one's own inability to perfectly express the eternal love of God in Christ in relation to self and neighbor (i.e. the ideal) not only leads a person into *sin-consciousness*, but opens one up to know one's self in humble relationship to God and neighbor in such a way that one may come to receive one's life as a gift of grace via faith and one's neighbor as one's self.⁴³ For Kierkegaard, the development of such a consciousness is what awakens a person to his/her deep need for Christ and draws him/her to seek out God's grace in Christ via faith at the Communion table, which is then extended into one's ongoing reception of Christ's loving grace in one's daily existence as one remains conscious of one's deep need for Christ:

Attentive listener, it is to the love that hides a multitude of sins you go today, seeking it at the altar. From the church's servant you have received assurance of the gracious forgiveness of your sins; you receive the pledge of that at the altar. And not only that, for you not only receive this pledge just as you can receive a pledge from a human being,... no, you receive the pledge as a pledge that you receive Christ himself;...in and with the visible sign he gives you himself as a cover over your sins....As he is the way, you do not then come to know from him what way you must go and now, left to yourself, must go your own way. As he is the life, you do not then have life handed over by him and now must shift for yourself, but only by remaining in him do you have life – in this way he is also the hiding place; only by remaining in him, only by identifying yourself with him are you in hiding and there is a cover over the multitude of your sins. For that reason the Lord's Supper is called communion with him. It is not merely in remembrance of him, not merely a pledge that you have communion with him, but it is the communion, this communion that you then must strive to preserve in your daily life by living more and

⁴² Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 108.

⁴³ Anti-Climacus (Søren Kierkegaard), *Practice in Christianity*, 67-68. For Kierkegaard, neighbor love becomes possible when a person comes into this level of sin-consciousness because it results in his/her self-knowledge of continually being in need of God's grace in Christ in order to live, which leads to a humble view of one's self and an awareness that all human beings stand equally in need of such grace and are equally loved by God. When one experiences this grace in the midst of such self-awareness it opens one up to receiving one's self as a gift from God and opens one's heart to receiving others with the same kind of grace. This is how sin-consciousness, for Kierkegaard, leads one to love the neighbor as the self.

more out of yourself and identifying yourself with him, with his love, which hides a multitude of sins.⁴⁴

Thus, becoming painfully aware of one's own concrete existence in sin leads to the pathos of faith that enables a person to experience the real presence of Christ in the reception of grace at the Communion table, and it is this ongoing consciousness of one's infinite need for Christ that extends the Communion table (reception of grace in Christ) into one's daily life and interactions with others.⁴⁵ This extension of the dialectic of sin/grace that a believer experiences at the Communion table may also be experienced at the existential level of interpersonal communication. When we enter into communication with another human being who is also made in the image of God, we enter with faith that Christ exists in this imperfect person, just as we trust that Christ is at work in our own imperfections. It may be difficult for us to see how love/grace is at work in another person's life. However, for Kierkegaard, we are not to trust in our own vision of another person, but rather, we are to strive by faith to emulate the love of Christ out of sheer gratitude for our own experience of God's abundant grace. Of course, since one is not Christ, one experiences one's inability to love as Christ loves and so inwardly confesses one's human limitations and finitude (sin) in relation to the transcendent other in my neighbor who is also made in the image of God. This recognition brings one to a place of humility before God and compassion for neighbor and prepares one to receive God's gift of grace through the relational exchange in which both individuals may experience each other as gifts of God's good

⁴⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*, trans. by Sylvia Walsh (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 143.

⁴⁵ Anti-Climacus (Søren Kierkegaard), *Practice in Christianity*, 62-68.

creation where love is present and at work. This recognition may result in giving thanks and praise for God's provision of mutual challenge and enrichment.

Having faith that love's hidden presence may be at work in the socio-political other is no doubt quite challenging; however, it is what may help us to begin to break out of our glass houses so that we may come to see and hear each other's shared humanity with compassion and grace. Without such faith in love's hidden presence, our conversations and our growth will continue to be stifled. If spaces of reconciliation are to be created through interpersonal communication we will need to have faith that love exists within the frailty of our finite humanity. Make no mistake: if one dares to risk venturing by faith in love across the socio-political divide, one may endure scorn and accusations of betrayal from friends and family who belong to one's own political group. Yet, one is to remember in these moments that such suffering is nothing in comparison to the suffering that Christ suffered/s for the sake of communicating God's love to every individual human being.

Conclusion:

This essay has attempted to draw out some of the existential implications that may foster improved interpersonal communication from across the socio-political divide by engaging John Williamson Nevin's theological conceptions of the incarnation and the believer's mystical union with Christ's mystical presence in the sacrament of the Eucharist and several major themes found in the work of Søren Kierkegaard, including his understanding of the incarnation of Christ as *the paradox* of the eternal (God/love) entering time; Christianity as an *existence-communication*; the role of *faith* in experiencing the real presence of Christ (love) in the Eucharist and therefore also

in one's neighbor; as well as the role of the *inverse-witness* that is a part of living within the ongoing communion with Christ in relation to self and neighbor.

In this essay, I demonstrated that Nevin's understanding of the incarnation implies that Christ is at work in the finite and particular lives of each individual, regardless of whether we can affirm this as true based on our own limited observations of another person's life. Additionally, I asserted that just as it takes faith to believe that a lowly human being (Christ) is God's eternal love made incarnate, so too is *faith* necessary for encountering love's hiddenness within another finite human being (i.e. the socio-political other as neighbor). Likewise, I found that Nevin's understanding of the *mystical union* of the believer with the life of Christ may begin and be continually nourished by the sacrament of the Lord's Supper; however, its effects radiate outward into an individual's daily existence and interactions with others such that one may begin to see and hear others through the eyes and ears of the same grace from which one is continually receiving new life. I also argued that just as it takes faith to receive the invisible grace of Christ in the material elements of the Lord's Supper, so too does it takes *faith* to believe that the *invisible grace* of Christ's enlivening presence via the Holy Spirit actually exists in and is at work in the embodied lives of others. Lastly, I demonstrated that Kierkegaard's vision of union with Christ through the inverse-witness creates an inward awareness of one's equality with all other human beings as standing in need of God's grace in such a way that it creates humility in relation to God and neighbor and compassion for other human beings in such a way that it opens one up to experiencing the sin/grace dialectic of Communion via the medium of interpersonal communication.

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