



Is the Church Untruth?: Reading Kierkegaard's Critique of the Crowd in Light of the New Testament Ecclesiology

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to enrich the contemporary discourse of the thought of Søren Kierkegaard by positing an analysis of the ecclesiology of the New Testament according to the Danish thinker's critique of the crowd. Through a literature study on both topics, I try to indicate whether Kierkegaard would consider the church untruth based on its similarity to his depiction of the crowd. Such a literature study is delineated in a three-segmented explanation, each focusing on Kierkegaard's view of the crowd, the New Testament portrayal of the church, and the intersections between the two. Eventually, I conclude that Kierkegaard would indeed perceive the church as an embodiment of the crowd and consider it untruth. Such a conclusion demands further study on the validity of Kierkegaard's understanding of Christ, as it confirms the potential aporia that haunts his critique of the crowd when read in light of the New Testament ecclesiology.

Keywords: critique of the crowd, ecclesiology, New Testament, Søren Kierkegaard, the church, untruth.

INTRODUCTION

Recent studies in the contemporary discourse of the thought of Søren Kierkegaard have shown that the Danish thinker had a complex relationship with the church. John W. Elrod, for example, has elaborated upon Kierkegaard's ethical-religious critique of 19th-century Denmark's Christianity by drawing from his works that were published after 1846.¹ Michael Plekon has delineated how Kierkegaard shared the same concern as his churchman peers regarding the crises of secularity within Denmark's Christianity despite his aversion to the reigning Danish church.²

1 These works include some of Kierkegaard's well-known writings, such as *The Sickness unto Death*, *Training in Christianity*, and *Attack upon "Christendom."* John W. Elrod, *Kierkegaard and Christendom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

2 Michael Plekon, "Kierkegaard, the Church and Theology of Golden-Age Denmark," *The*

Anders Holm has showcased the paradoxical nature of Kierkegaard's view of the church in general by highlighting the two different senses of the term *church* throughout his writings, i.e., *church* as the act of public worship (denoting that he was a frequent churchgoer) and *church* as a religious institution (which he attacked later in his life).³ More recently, Aaron P. Edwards has attempted a theological retrieval of Kierkegaard's perspective of truth, arguing that the Danish thinker "ought to be seen as an ally rather than an enemy" of the church of today despite his decision to be left "on the ecclesial outskirts" before his death.⁴

However, there are still topics that remain untouched by these studies, such as Kierkegaard's perception of the church according to his critique of the crowd. This paper seeks to address such a lacuna by positing a reading of the ecclesiology of the New Testament in light of this critique.⁵ The critique itself is stated in "Against the Crowd" and *On the Dedication to "That Single Individual."*⁶ Without much prelude, Kierkegaard boldly showed his sentiment against herd mentality by regarding the crowd as untruth. "Even though every individual possesses the truth," said Kierkegaard, "when he gets together in a crowd, untruth will be present at once, for the crowd is untruth."⁷ Kierkegaard then took a theological turn by arguing that the reason for Christ's crucifixion is his insistence on being "what he was, the truth,

Journal of Ecclesiastical History 34, no. 2 (April 1983): 245–66, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046900037039>.

3 Anders Holm, *Kierkegaard and the Church* (Oxford University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199601301.013.0007>.

4 Aaron P. Edwards, *Taking Kierkegaard Back to Church: The Ecclesial Implications of the Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2022), 22.

5 Throughout the paper, I will use phrases such as "the New Testament ecclesiology," "the ecclesiology of the New Testament," "the church as envisaged by the New Testament," and "the New Testament church" to refer to recent findings among biblical theologians regarding the vision of three prominent sources of the New Testament—the Pauline corpus, the Synoptic Gospels (including Acts of the Apostles), and the Johannine corpus—regarding the church. Keep in mind that by using these phrases I do not intend to generalize the New Testament as an ecclesiological document. Nor do I intend to posit the exposition provided by this paper as the only valid reading of ecclesiology in the New Testament.

6 See Søren Kierkegaard and Charles E. Moore, *Provocations: Spiritual Writings*, 1st ed (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 1999), 23–24; Søren Kierkegaard, "On the Dedication to 'That Single Individual,'" trans. Charles K. Bellinger, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed May 2, 2024, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/kierkegaard/untruth.html>.

7 Kierkegaard and Moore, *Provocations*, 23; Kierkegaard, "On the Dedication to 'That Single Individual,'" 2.

which is related to the single individual” instead of any crowd at all.⁸ This statement entails that by using the term *truth*, Kierkegaard did not intend to denote matters of fact or propositions. Instead, he referred to eternal truth, the same truth that the Word of God proclaimed to the world.

The problem with Kierkegaard’s critique of the crowd is that it can become aporetic when read with the awareness that the notion of the church as an assembly has been an integral part of Christianity ever since its inception. Before being utilized to mention the church, the Greek term ἐκκλησία was used in the city-state of Athens to refer to a political assembly of citizens. The authors of the New Testament then borrowed this term and performed a minuscule modification by using it to refer specifically to the believers of Christ instead of the citizens in general (cf. Act. 2:47; 8:1; 11:22; Rm. 16:1, 4-5; 1 Cor. 1:2; Heb. 12:23; 3 Jn. 1:6, 9-10; Rev. 1:4). Hence, the term ἐκκλησία retained its meaning as *assembly*; and this becomes apparent in the widely acknowledged definition of the church as not only “the fruit of the resurrection and gift of the Holy Spirit,” but also “the body of Christ in which the Holy Spirit brings about κοινωνία (communion) with God and among its members.”⁹ In light of Kierkegaard’s critique, the church as an assembly might amount to a crowd, and since he regarded the crowd as an untruth, the church might also amount to an untruth. Ironically, however, the New Testament testifies that the church is linked to Christ’s earthly ministry (cf. Mt. 16:13-20; Jn. 20:15-19; 1 Cor. 11:23-26). Put differently, the Christ that Kierkegaard claimed to embody truth as a single individual instead of involving himself with any crowd whatsoever is the very same Christ who devised something that amounts to untruth.

From this problem, I formulate a twofold research question: Would Kierkegaard consider the church untruth? Does Kierkegaard’s critique of the crowd make an exception to this assembly of Christ-believers? I argue that the answer to this twofold question is a double negation: that Kierkegaard would indeed

8 Kierkegaard and Moore, *Provocations*, 23; Kierkegaard, “On the Dedication to “That Single Individual,”” 4.

9 Nicholas M. Healy, “Ecclesiology,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 153.

consider the church untruth and that his critique of the crowd does not make an exception to the assembly of Christ believers. I will defend such an argument with a three-segmented explanation, each focusing on Kierkegaard's critique of the crowd, the ecclesiology of the New Testament, and the intersection between the two, respectively. Finally, I will formulate a conclusion that solidifies this three-segmented explanation and maps out a further study that this explanation demands.

METHODOLOGY

I will construct the three-segmented explanation mentioned above using descriptive and analytical thinking methods. These methods will be embodied in a comparative study of Kierkegaard's critique of the crowd and the ecclesiology of the New Testament. Regarding the former, I will formulate an exposition based on my reading of "Against the Crowd," *On the Dedication to 'That Single Individual,'* and secondary resources that explicate Kierkegaard's critique of the crowd, such as the research of Charles K. Bellinger, George Willis Williams, Karl Aho & C. Stephen Evans, and Wojciech Kaftanski.¹⁰ As for the latter, I will formulate an exposition based on my readings of some sources regarding the ecclesiology of the New Testament. Such sources include the research of Luke Timothy Johnson, Loveday C. A. Alexander, Andrew T. Lincoln, Edward Adams, C. Clifton Black, and Paul Rainbow.¹¹ After

10 Charles K. Bellinger, "'The Crowd Is Untruth': A Comparison of Kierkegaard and Girard," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 3, no. 1 (March 1996): 103–19, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ctn.1996.0011>; George Willis Williams, "Irony as the Birth of Kierkegaard's 'Single Individual' and the Beginning of Politics," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 28, no. 2 (September 2012): 309–18, <https://doi.org/10.3138/tjt.28.2.309>; Karl Aho and C. Stephen Evans, "The Single Individual Is Higher than the Universal: Kierkegaard," in *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. John Shand, 1st ed. (Wiley, 2019), 160–84, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119210054.ch6>; Wojciech Kaftanski, *Kierkegaard, Mimesis, and Modernity: A Study of Imitation, Existence, and Affect*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003142768>.

11 Luke Timothy Johnson, *Contested Issues in Christian Origins and the New Testament: Collected Essays*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum, v. 146 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2013); Loveday C. A. Alexander, "The Church in the Synoptic Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, ed. Paul D. L. Avis, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 55–98; Andrew T. Lincoln, "The Johannine Vision of the Church," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, ed. Paul D. L. Avis, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 99–118; Edward Adams, "The Shape of the Pauline Churches," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, ed. Paul D. L. Avis, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 119–46; C. Clifton Black, "The Synoptic Gospels and Acts," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Ecclesiology*, ed. Kimlyn J. Bender and D. Stephen Long, 1st ed., T&T Clark Handbooks (New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 24–38; Paul Rainbow, "The Gospel of John, the General Epistles, and Revelation," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Ecclesiology*, ed. Kimlyn J. Bender and D. Stephen Long,

formulating these expositions, I will analyze them to find points of intersection between the two that will help me answer the research question. Ultimately, the result of this analysis will determine the conclusion of this study.

DISCUSSION

Considering Kierkegaard's Critique of the Crowd

Kierkegaard's "Against the Crowd" and *On the Dedication to "That Single Individual"* share many similarities in both argumentation and rhetoric. The latter, however, spans more in length than the former; a condition that might stem from the fact that it is a "revised and considerably enlarged" version of an earlier work (possibly "Against the Crowd") written in 1846, the same year in which Kierkegaard had an affair with a certain weekly tabloid bearing the name *The Corsair*.¹² The affair itself was, in all likelihood, the root of the Danish thinker's negative sentiment toward the crowd in general. It all began when the tabloid published a review of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, his first and most significant work. Kierkegaard, perceiving the review as an attempt to make him a laughingstock, retaliated through a caustic pseudonymous article. Such a response resulted in a back-and-forth between the two that lasted more than a year. *The Corsair* turned Kierkegaard into an object of ridicule through *ad hominem*, parodying his habits, sense of fashion, and physical features. Embittered and deeply hurt, Kierkegaard decided to see the whole affair as a clarification of his conviction "that Christianity and 'the public' are opposite terms," antithetical to each other.¹³

"Against the Crowd" takes the concept of the crowd and contrasts it to the truth, which, according to Kierkegaard, is granted only to human beings who dare to bear their individuality.¹⁴ In upholding this argument, Kierkegaard designated Christ as the champion of the truth, whereas the crowd essentially perverts the

1st ed., T&T Clark Handbooks (New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 54–70.

12 Kierkegaard, "On the Dedication to "That Single Individual,"" 7; Kierkegaard and Moore, *Provocations*, xvi–xvii.

13 Kierkegaard and Moore, *Provocations*, xvii.

14 Kierkegaard and Moore, 23–24.

truth with its dedication to “lust and vice.”¹⁵ Christ “did not want to form a party, an interest group, [or] a mass movement,” he said, even though “his work is to be involved with all people.”¹⁶ As the truth, Christ disassociated himself from the crowd and was eventually put to death solely for this dissociation. With this perspective, Kierkegaard performed a rhetorical attack on those who serve the crowd or relinquish their individuality by joining it. “Those who speak to the crowd, coveting its approval,” he sneered, “those who deferentially bow and scrape before it must be regarded as being worse than prostitutes.”¹⁷

In turn, *On the Dedication to “That Single Individual”* develops the argument posited in “Against the Crowd” by adding more nuance to its definition of the crowd and the attainment of truth.¹⁸ Here, Kierkegaard clarified that he defined the crowd as an abstraction that deals with a number of people gathering together. The crowd abolishes its constituents’ individuality and emphasizes the herd’s validity “as a decisive court of last resort” concerning temporal, ethical, and religious matters.¹⁹ This was by far the most objectionable characteristic of the crowd for Kierkegaard; it was the X factor that eventually propelled him to designate the crowd as untruth. As an abstraction that rids human beings of their individuality, the crowd instills in them a form of courage that is absent when they are apart from each other.

Observe, there was not a single soldier who dared lay a hand on Caius Marius; this was the truth. But given three or four women with the consciousness or idea of being a crowd, with a certain hope in the possibility that no one could definitely say who it was or who started it: then they had the courage for it; what untruth! The untruth is first that it is “the crowd,” which does either what only the single individual in the crowd does, or in every case what each single individual does. ...In the next place, the untruth is that the crowd had “the courage” for it, since never at any time was even the most cowardly of all single individuals so cowardly as the crowd always is.²⁰

Regarding attaining truth, Kierkegaard posited, in addition to his appellation of Christ, an interpretation of 1 Corinthians 9:24.²¹ He read this verse as a testimony

15 Kierkegaard and Moore, 23.

16 Kierkegaard and Moore, 23–24.

17 Kierkegaard and Moore, 24.

18 Kierkegaard, “On the Dedication to “That Single Individual,”” 2–4.

19 Kierkegaard, 4.

20 Kierkegaard, 3–4.

21 Kierkegaard, 2–3, 5–6.

that the truth is only available to the single individual. According to him, human beings as a single individual are essentially in kinship with the divine. But when they blend in with the crowd, this kinship is substituted with the modern definition of man, which favors the collective over the individual.²² Such a condition entails that human beings can only work toward the truth when they retain their individuality while allowing God to help them. By holding on to their kinship with divinity, human beings as single individuals would be able to attain the truth, which can only be communicated by God alone. Therefore, the personal God is both the truth itself and its middle term. Only by entering this one-to-one relationship—which demands schooling, discipline, abstinence, self-denial, honest self-concern, and patient labor from the single individual—can human beings complete their quest for truth.

Near the end of *On the Dedication to "That Single Individual,"* Kierkegaard puts forth his final attack against the crowd by introducing the notion of the neighbour.²³ He argued that, in contrast to the crowd, which divides human beings based on abstractly constructed identities, the neighbour can express human equality under the condition that the latter of Christ's greatest commandments (cf. Mt. 22:39) is implemented. "Everyone who in truth loves the neighbour, expresses unconditional human equality," Kierkegaard said; and "everyone who is really aware (even if he admits, like I, that his effort is weak and imperfect) that the task is to love the neighbour, he is also aware of what human equality is."²⁴ Moreover, Kierkegaard pointed out that the Scripture never commands its readers to love the crowd nor recognize its validity as a last resort in relation to truth. The crowd, therefore, is indeed untruth. It is merely "the way to truly gain power, the way to all sorts of temporal and worldly advantage."²⁵

Here, an important question arises: How can we make sense of this sweeping critique of the crowd in relation to the church? To answer this question,

22 In this context, the modern definition of a human being is "a specimen which belongs to a race gifted with reason." Kierkegaard, 3.

23 Kierkegaard, 3, 6.

24 Kierkegaard, 6.

25 Kierkegaard, 6.

we need to consider how such a critique works in the framework of Kierkegaard's ethical thought as a whole.²⁶ The main point that Kierkegaard tried to emphasize throughout his ethical works is that a stable and purposeful life can only be achieved by human beings who conserve their individuality and their one-to-one relationship with God. This point puts the Danish thinker at odds with the two prevalent streams of thought in 19th-century Denmark: Hegelianism and Protestantism. Consequently, Kierkegaard's notions are generally two-pronged in nature: on one hand, philosophical, and on the other hand, biblical. His critique of the crowd is no exception to this two-pronged trait, and it is with this in mind that we are to interpret it.

The philosophical content of Kierkegaard's critique of the crowd is manifested in his emphasis on the single individual.²⁷ This notion demonstrates his resistance to Georg W. F. Hegel's notion of *Sittlichkeit*, which favors abstract social categories (e.g., race, class, and culture) over human subjectivity.²⁸ Contrary to Hegel's habitus of locating ethical formation in society, Kierkegaard asserted that social conventions are insufficient to satisfy the ethical requirements of humanity. The only thing social conventions do well, argued the Danish thinker, is submerging human beings in cultures and institutions that cannot reach the human ideal. Therefore, the only way for human beings to fulfill their ethical requirements is to separate themselves from the conformist tendencies of society and develop their ethics as responsible individuals through lived experience. Only after they mature

26 Bellinger, "'The Crowd Is Untruth': A Comparison of Kierkegaard and Girard," 106; Aho and Evans, "The Single Individual Is Higher than the Universal: Kierkegaard," 163; Kaftanski, *Kierkegaard, Mimesis, and Modernity: A Study of Imitation, Existence, and Affect*, 24, 26.

27 Williams, "Irony as the Birth of Kierkegaard's 'Single Individual' and the Beginning of Politics," 309–14; Aho and Evans, "The Single Individual Is Higher than the Universal: Kierkegaard," 165; Kaftanski, *Kierkegaard, Mimesis, and Modernity: A Study of Imitation, Existence, and Affect*, 24.

28 Broadly speaking, Hegel's notion of *Sittlichkeit* accentuates the dependence of the moral and intellectual development of every individual on the prevailing socio-political environment in their context. Hegel divided this environment into three categories, i.e., family, civil society, and the state. Whereas Kierkegaard asserted that the socio-political environment abolishes the individuality of human beings, Hegel believed that human beings achieve their individuality by participating in the socio-political environment. For a more thorough review of Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*, see Reijo Miettinen, "Hegel's Political and Social Theory: Ethical Life (*Sittlichkeit*) as a Historical-Institutional Context of Human Development," *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 27, no. 4 (October 1, 2020): 360–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2020.1725059>.

as single individuals who willingly bear the burden of their own morality can these human beings re-enter the world aright.

Whereas the philosophical content of Kierkegaard's critique is manifested in his notion of the single individual, the biblical content is inherent in his treatment of the crowd.²⁹ In constructing his rhetoric against the crowd, Kierkegaard used the Scripture to highlight the capacity of the crowd to become an echo chamber that takes away the individuality of human beings, incites them into a state of frenzy, and amplifies the power of mere opinions into dictums that shape laws and customs of the public sphere. This depiction explicitly showcases his conviction that the truth is not found among "phenomena that followed the emergence of mass society."³⁰ The truth is to be discovered instead in the relation of every single individual to their Creator, as the Danish thinker has argued through his reading of 1 Corinthians 9:24 above.

From what we have seen of Kierkegaard's critique of the crowd, there is a striking detail: Whereas there seems to be no explicit mention of the church, Kierkegaard does not exclude the church from his critique either. Indeed, one can even argue that, given Kierkegaard's complicated relationship with the church of his time, he implicitly perceived the church to be one of the many embodiments of the crowd. This argument gains its merit when one considers the fact that the Danish thinker deemed the collective appropriation of virtues, even Christian virtues (e.g., faithfulness), as "cheating in the world of spirit."³¹ Consequently, there is no correlation between the content the crowd promulgates and its violent capacity. The crowd, therefore, has no trouble inhibiting human beings from accomplishing their quest for truth even when it orients itself to the very same truth.

However, such an important detail also comes with a loophole: For Kierkegaard, the essence of the crowd lies first and foremost in its capacity to

29 Bellinger, "The Crowd Is Untruth': A Comparison of Kierkegaard and Girard," 104–11; Kaftanski, *Kierkegaard, Mimesis, and Modernity: A Study of Imitation, Existence, and Affect*, 23–29.

30 Kaftanski, *Kierkegaard, Mimesis, and Modernity: A Study of Imitation, Existence, and Affect*, 23.

31 Kaftanski, 24.

take away the individuality of human beings.³² Consequently, Kierkegaard does not consider communities that “motivate individuals and assist them in finding an authentic life” as crowds.³³ This is the reason his notion of the single individual implies a return to the world, and his critique culminates in the notion of the neighbour. The human being’s disassociation from the crowd serves not as isolation for its own sake but as a means through which the human being may live a life that transcends the wisdom of this world.

In summary, Kierkegaard’s critique of the crowd applies to the church insofar as the latter takes away the individuality (and with it the responsibility) of its every fellow. Therefore, the nature of the church is of utmost importance, and it is to the church now we shall turn. The next segment will reveal the fundamental characteristics of this assembly of Christ believers by investigating the ecclesiology of the New Testament. I will consult the findings of the discourse of the New Testament in the past decade, using sources that I can get my hands on.

Considering the Ecclesiology of the New Testament

The New Testament is widely considered as the canon of the Scripture. It consists of manuscripts compiled into a unified guidebook, becoming the most authoritative source of Christian theology. At a glance, this unification might suggest that the New Testament posits only one ecclesiology and that this ecclesiology is interpreted differently by the streams of Christianity existing today. However, those who attempted a review of the recent discourse of New Testament ecclesiology will realize that such a suggestion is far from the truth. In the last decade, the New Testament scholarship has categorized the ecclesiology of the New Testament into three distinct categories based on its source: Pauline corpus, Synoptic Gospels (which includes Acts of the Apostles), and Johannine corpus.³⁴ In light of the

32 Williams, “Irony as the Birth of Kierkegaard’s ‘Single Individual’ and the Beginning of Politics,” 311, 314; Aho and Evans, “The Single Individual Is Higher than the Universal: Kierkegaard,” 168.

33 Kaftanski, *Kierkegaard, Mimesis, and Modernity: A Study of Imitation, Existence, and Affect*, 29.

34 I intentionally omit the General Epistles (James, Jude, and 1-2 Peter) and Revelation from this segment for the sake of brevity. Such an omission is also grounded in my consideration that in the context of this paper, the significance of the addition these manuscripts provide (i.e.,

aforementioned situation, the purpose of this segment is to elaborate upon these different ecclesiologies and unify them into a holistic account. It is this holistic account that will denote the fundamental characteristics of the church as an assembly.

First, we consider the ecclesiology of the Pauline corpus.³⁵ Paul usually addressed his churches with the term ἐκκλησία (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1). Yet, one of the defining characteristics of Pauline churches is contained in the phrase κατ' οἶκον ἐκκλησία ('assemblies at home'), which only appears four times throughout Paul's epistles (Rm. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philem. 2). Per this phrase, scholars suggest that Paul primarily carried out his evangelization by converting the head of the household under the conviction that the whole household would then convert along with them. The conversion would then ripple across many households through the social networks where the former household was located; thus, the local ἐκκλησία was formed. Due to their dependence upon the household for their formation, Pauline churches were modeled after the flexible assemblies of Hellenistic clubs and Jewish synagogues. The meetings were held regularly with a structure similar to the twofold stage of Graeco-Roman dinner parties, commencing from the Lord's Supper to open worship (1 Cor. 11:17-34; 14:27-40). The local leaders held a functional position without a definite theological legitimation, similar to the eldership of the diaspora synagogues.

The Pauline churches are often described as a "fictive family"—made up of the kinship of their members as the children of God instead of a biological bond—or a heterogeneous assembly.³⁶ They mainly consisted of Gentiles (1 Cor. 12:2; Gal. 4:8-9; 1 Thess. 1:9; 4:5) and some Jewish people (Rm. 16:7, 11, 21). Both men and women were reportedly included (for mentions of women, see 1 Cor. 16:19; 7:11;

the church as an assembly that is elected by God "before the foundation of the world") to this segment falls in comparison to the three sources already mentioned. See Rainbow, "The Gospel of John, the General Epistles, and Revelation," 54–56, 58–59.

35 Johnson, *Contested Issues in Christian Origins and the New Testament: Collected Essays*, 319, 326; Adams, "The Shape of the Pauline Churches," 120–23, 131, 136.

36 Johnson, *Contested Issues in Christian Origins and the New Testament: Collected Essays*, 320–21, 324, 327; Adams, "The Shape of the Pauline Churches," 123–24.

Gal. 3:28; Phil. 2:4; Col. 4:15; Philem. 2). The churches also embraced a wide social stratum, encompassing people from lower to upper echelons in terms of economic spectrum, “with only the top-most and bottom-most echelons missing.”³⁷ These churches might owe their pluralistic trait to the Pauline principle of inclusivity in Christ (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11), which nullifies the ethnicity, gender, and social class that divide its fellows and distinguish them from one another.

The mission of the Pauline churches is to live according to their calling as God’s elect people (Eph. 4:1).³⁸ While the rite of baptism (Eph. 5:26) marked the boundary that distinguishes them from other forms of assembly or gathering, the defining feature of the churches is manifested in the purity and moral integrity of their members (Rm. 6:1-11; 1 Cor. 7:19; 2 Cor. 7:1). Here, the humanity of Christ becomes their primary role model (Gal. 4:19). Such a condition renders the implementation of the love of neighbour, self-emptying, and faithful obedience towards God’s commandments (Rm. 13:8-10; Phil. 2:5-11); and as a result, there can be no room for rivalry nor competition among the members of the Pauline churches (Gal. 5:16-21; Col. 2:16, 23). The metaphors employed by Paul to describe the identity of his churches—the body (1 Cor. 6:15; 10:17; 12:12-27), the building/temple (1 Cor. 3:9-10, 16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:20-22), and the household (Rm. 14:4, 10, 15, 21; 1 Cor. 4:14-15; 7:15; Gal. 4:19; 6:10; Eph. 2:19; 1 Thess. 2:11; 4:6; 1 Tim. 3:5; 2 Tim. 2:20-21)—further solidify the priority of the collective over the individual; showing that Paul was “constantly concerned that his churches mature as communities of reciprocal gift-giving and fellowship” instead of some morally perfect single individuals.³⁹

We then consider the ecclesiology that constitutes the sub-structure of the Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles.⁴⁰ Mark was the first to portray the church implicitly throughout his gospel, which became the foundation upon which

37 Adams, “The Shape of the Pauline Churches,” 124.

38 Johnson, *Contested Issues in Christian Origins and the New Testament: Collected Essays*, 319–20, 322–25; Adams, “The Shape of the Pauline Churches,” 125–30, 134.

39 Johnson, *Contested Issues in Christian Origins and the New Testament: Collected Essays*, 322.

40 Alexander, “The Church in the Synoptic Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles,” 60–64, 67–69; Black, “The Synoptic Gospels and Acts,” 24–25, 27–28.

Matthew and Luke expanded. For Mark, the church is an assembly that responds to Jesus's sheer calling by repenting and following him (cf. Mk. 1:16-20). Through the imitation of the actions of the Messiah, the church embodies an existence that is in accord with the will of God, i.e., to help those in need without hesitation, uphold the Decalogue, resist inner temptations, and love God as well as the neighbour (Mk. 3:1-6, 35; 7:1-23; 10:18-19; 12:29-31), and bears witness to the imminent advent of God's kingdom, which includes in it the whole human race (Mk. 1:14-15, 38; 4:11; 9:40; 11:10).

What is striking in Mark's depiction of the church is his insistence on showing that those responding to Jesus's calling will be subjected to worldly torments (Mk. 4:13-20; 16:6).⁴¹ These might include family ruptures (Mk. 3:19-20, 31-32; 6:4; 10:29) and persecution by the world (Mk. 8:34-38; 10:38-39; 13:9-13). In bearing such torments, some church members, like Peter (Mk. 14:72), might break their commitment, while others hold fast and pay the ultimate price. Mark believes, however, that since Jesus primarily came for sinners (Mk. 2:15-17), those who defected from the church are not to be condemned entirely. The church must instead welcome the repenting defector with open arms, similar to how Christ maintains his fidelity to Peter and the other disciples (Mk. 14:27-28; 16:7).

Using Mark's gospel as his framework, Matthew developed an ecclesiology that emphasizes righteousness (*δικαιοσύνη*) as the core responsibility of the members of the church.⁴² Matthew's gospel depicts the kingdom of heaven as an eschatological reality that is currently irrupting the world and will eventually be consummated at a time of the heavenly Father's choosing (Mt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; 13:11, 33; 24:36). Such a consummation is accompanied by divine judgment (Mt. 8:12; 13:50; 22:13; 24:51); henceforth, the church is called to turn their attention towards God and live according to Jesus's example of obedience until the designated time comes. Regarding this calling, Matthew believed that righteousness, a virtue

41 Alexander, "The Church in the Synoptic Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles," 63, 65-66; Black, "The Synoptic Gospels and Acts," 25, 27-28.

42 Alexander, "The Church in the Synoptic Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles," 70-72; Black, "The Synoptic Gospels and Acts," 28-30.

already upheld by Judaism since ancient times (cf., Pss. 9:8-9; 71:2; Isa. 5:16; Jer. 9:24), proves to be most essential in conforming the church to their sole master (cf. Mt. 23:10). It is the same righteousness that is given a new formulation in Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, which exhorts the members of the church to not fall into rage and throw insults (Mt. 5:21-22); to not dehumanize women (Mt. 5:27-32); to forgive one another (Mt. 5:38-42); to love even their enemies (Mt. 5:43-44); to be modest in their piety (Mt. 6:1-18); to avoid the temptation of wealth (Mt. 6:19-24); to trust in God's providence (Mt. 7:7-12); and to not be fooled by false prophets and wonderworkers (Mt. 7:15-23).

What is worth noting concerning Matthew's ecclesiology is that he is the only source among the Synoptic Gospels (excluding Luke's Acts) to explicitly use the term ἐκκλησία twice, both in 16:18 and 18:17.⁴³ The first of the two instances is notorious for being one of the most contentious passages of the New Testament.⁴⁴ Following the interest of this paper, however, it suffices to say that 16:18 only portrays Peter as the prototype disciple in the same way as John's gospel depicts the Beloved Disciple. Jesus remains the true architect of the church, and 16:18 posits Peter as one of the many foundations of this soon-to-be-universal assembly, besides the other apostles and the members of the church itself (cf. 1 Cor. 3:10-17; Eph. 2:10). In a different fashion to 16:18, 18:17 concerns the exercise of church discipline. The church must solve scandals, such as brotherly disputes and lapses, for the presence of Jesus among its fellows allows it to "make authoritative and binding legal decisions" (Mt. 18:10-20).⁴⁵

43 Alexander, "The Church in the Synoptic Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles," 74-78; Black, "The Synoptic Gospels and Acts," 32-33.

44 Alexander deems Matthew 16:18 as contentious since there are at least four confessional interpretations of it: (1) the Papal (which affirms the authority of the Pope as stemming from the apostolicity of Peter); (2) the typological (which perceives Peter as the prototype of a faithful, pneumatic person); (3) the Eastern (which sees Peter as 'the guarantor of genuine and public apostolic tradition'); (4) the Augustinian (which reads the 'rock' in the passage as a reference to Christ himself). See Alexander, "The Church in the Synoptic Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles," 75-76.

45 Alexander, 74.

Whilst Matthew developed the centripetal dimension of Mark's ecclesiology, Luke cultivated its centrifugal counterpart.⁴⁶ Both Luke's gospel and the Acts painted a vision of the church that is at once rooted in God's promise to restore the people of Israel—including the Samaritans—and open to the inclusion of the Gentiles, especially those who are marginalized and poor (Lk. 1:54-55, 70-73; 2:32; 3:6; 4:18; 7:22; 9:52-56; 10:25-37; Act. 1:8; 8:25-28; 10:34-36, 42-43; 13:46-47; 15:17; 17:22-31). In light of this vision, Luke defined the church as an assembly of individuals (ὀνόματα, ψυχαί; cf., Act. 1:15; 2:41, 43) who have experienced a personal encounter with God through the works of the apostles (Act. 4:1-4; 8:12-14; 13:43; 15:7; 17:2-4, 34). The church is meant to operate as a unified body in exalting the humble, dethroning the strong, and defining itself in terms of "worship, salvation, and forgiveness" (Lk. 1:46-55, 73-74, 79; Act. 2:43-47; 4:32-37).⁴⁷ On the one hand, the church should avoid and sharply criticize greed and religious hypocrisy (cf. Lk. 12:1-3, 13-21); on the other, it should be steadfast in responsible stewardship and practical charity (Lk. 16:10-13, 19-31).

Another unique aspect of Luke's ecclesiology compared to its Markan and Matthean counterparts is the former's accentuation of prophecy as the church's mode of existence.⁴⁸ For Luke, true prophecy comprises the responsiveness to the Holy Spirit and God's vision of the world (Lk. 3:16; Act. 1:5, 22; 2:3, 7-11, 19; 4:31; 6:3-5; 10:37; 19:6). The people of Jerusalem, lacking in both of these qualities, rejected Jesus's mission as the Anointed One and faced destruction as its consequence (Lk. 19:42-44; 21:20; Act. 13:27). By contrast, the apostles and the faithful early church embodies the aforementioned true prophecy and were able to participate into "the breaking-in of God's reign in the here and now," serving as witnesses to the signs of the to-be-consummated kingdom (Lk. 17:20-24; Act. 1:7).⁴⁹

46 Alexander, 78–81, 83–87; Black, "The Synoptic Gospels and Acts," 33–37.

47 Alexander, "The Church in the Synoptic Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles," 79.

48 Alexander, 82–86; Black, "The Synoptic Gospels and Acts," 34–35.

49 Alexander, "The Church in the Synoptic Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles," 83.

Finally, we consider the ecclesiology of the Johannine corpus.⁵⁰ Similar to two of its synoptic counterparts (i.e., Mark and Luke), John's gospel contains no mention of ἐκκλησία. His epistles only mention the term three times (3 Jn. 6, 9, 10), each referring to a local assembly. Yet the corpus compensates for this deficiency through the prologue of the gospel (Jn. 1) and its farewell discourses (Jn. 15-17) that address the life of the early church subsequent to Jesus's departure. The parts of John's third epistle, which briefly mentions ἐκκλησία, also contribute to the corpus by displaying the Beloved Disciple's concern for the churches associated with him.

The Johannine corpus defines the church as the children of God, a trans-ethnic assembly that anchors its identity upon the belief that Jesus is the Word of God and participates in the communion between this Word and God the Father (Jn. 1:1, 12, 13, 14, 18; 6:28-29; 17:8; 20:17, 31; 21:23; 1 Jn. 3:1, 10-11; 3 Jn. 5).⁵¹ Such participation also entails partaking in God's mission in the world as its witness, thus the church is sent as "the authorized agent of the Son" (Jn. 15:27; 17:18; 20:21).⁵² The church is instructed to abide by Jesus and represent him throughout its existence by upholding everything that he stood for, especially self-giving love (Jn. 13:8, 14-17, 34-35; 15:1-8, 12-13; 1 Jn. 3:17-18). Accompanied by the Holy Spirit as its advocate (παράκλητος, cf. Jn. 14:16, 26), the church is also ordered to testify the salvific work done by God through his only Son (Jn. 3:16; 15:26; 16:7; 17:20-21; 20:22; 1 Jn. 5:6). It is through receiving this church that the world of humanity in general receive the Word of God and God himself, and in turn attain everlasting life (Jn. 3:16; 13:20; 21:11; 1 Jn. 4:9-10).

What differentiates John's ecclesiology from other ecclesiologies mentioned above is its insistence on the importance of the substance of the church's belief.⁵³ This insistence abounds in John's epistles, through which he constantly urged his

50 Lincoln, "The Johannine Vision of the Church," 99–100; Rainbow, "The Gospel of John, the General Epistles, and Revelation," 56–57.

51 Lincoln, "The Johannine Vision of the Church," 100–105, 108–9, 113, 115; Rainbow, "The Gospel of John, the General Epistles, and Revelation," 56–57, 60, 65.

52 Lincoln, "The Johannine Vision of the Church," 101.

53 Lincoln, 104–5, 109, 114–15; Rainbow, "The Gospel of John, the General Epistles, and Revelation," 57–58.

churches to abide in Christ and warned them of the presence of heretics, the so-called “antichrists” (1 Jn. 2:6, 18-24, 27-28; 3:6, 23-24; 4:13-15; 2 Jn. 7-11). In such a context, abiding in Christ is not merely defined ethically (i.e., to keep Jesus’s commandments and live as he had lived) but also dogmatically. John deemed as antichrist those who deny their sinfulness (1 Jn. 1:6, 8, 10), perceive that loving their neighbour is not mandatory (1 Jn. 4:8, 20); and refuse to confess that Jesus Christ is the incarnate Son of God. In turn, the label separates the believers from the heterodox, defining the true church based on its way of life and the teachings that it upholds.

Considered as a whole, the New Testament envisages the church as an assembly that predicates its identity upon Jesus Christ, the emissary of the kingdom of God. This identity transcends social, economic, and cultural boundaries, which makes the church capable of welcoming all individuals who, after their personal encounter with God, seek to abide in Christ and participate in his mission in the world. Whilst adopting the flexible structure of Graeco-Roman clubs and diaspora Jewish synagogues in its local embodiment, the church is instructed—both by its sole master and his apostles—to become an assembly of elected people capable of imitating the humanity of the Anointed One and representing him in the world. The members of the church can attain such a capacity through strict maintenance of faith and moral integrity, which includes obeying the will of God, being responsive to the work of the Holy Spirit, upholding righteousness, being steadfast in the face of suffering, believing that Jesus Christ is the incarnate Word of God, and avoiding various forms of temptation, hypocrisy, false teachings, false prophets, and wonderworkers. Moreover, in doing all these, the church is encouraged to live in a condition of unity represented by a human body, a household, or a temple. In other words, the church is meant to grow into a collective representation of Christ and not some morally perfect individuals living in separation from each other.

The Crowd, the Church, and the Intersection Thereof

How would Kierkegaard perceive the church envisaged by the New Testament through his antithetical view of the crowd? The consideration provided by the last two segments points to an answer that affirms the aporia posited at the beginning of this paper. According to Kierkegaard, the New Testament church indeed amounts to a crowd, and as he considered the crowd to be untruth, the church amounts to be untruth as well. This segment serves to elucidate two intersections that prove the aforementioned answer. I categorize these intersections according to the two-pronged nature of the Danish thinker's ethical thought: biblical and philosophical.

The biblical intersection concerns the connection between the human and the divine. For Kierkegaard, such a connection can only be facilitated by the essential kinship between the personal God and the single individual. His interpretation of 1 Corinthians 9:24 asserts that a retreat from society and its conventions is necessary for the communication of truth between God and human beings. Whilst the association with any kind of crowd and mass phenomenon annuls the human-divine kinship, the one-to-one relationship between God and the human individual allows humanity to attain its ethical ideal. By contrast, the New Testament perceives that although this one-to-one relationship is important, its significance falls in comparison to the collective abiding of believers in Jesus Christ, his teachings, and his mission. Even though the Lukan corpus puts personal encounters between human individuals and God at the forefront of its ecclesiology, it merely construes these encounters as a phase of initiation into the church. The most vital phase of the church life is instead the prophetic existence emulated by the church members in unison. Emphasis on individuality is nowhere to be found here; if anything, Luke's accentuation of the church's partaking in the advent of God's reign serves as a counterpoint to Kierkegaard's biblical individualism.

This particular intersection also reveals the incongruence between Kierkegaard's reading of 1 Corinthians 9:24 and the overarching ecclesiology of the Pauline corpus. While it is undeniable that the verse contains an allegory favorable to Kierkegaard's individualistic interpretation (i.e., the allegory of a race),

elsewhere, the Pauline corpus employs metaphors and attributes (e.g., the body, the temple, God's elect people, and the household) that solidify the priority of the collective over the individual in terms of living the church life. Moreover, the allegory seemingly runs counter to the kenotic virtues taught by Paul in four of his epistles (i.e., Rm. 13:8-10; Phil. 2:5-11; Gal. 5:16-21; Col. 2:16, 23). Whilst the purpose of this allegory in the context of Pauline theology is not the concern of this paper, it is safe to say that, unlike Kierkegaard, the Pauline corpus does not hold individualistic spirituality in high regard.

The philosophical intersection pertains to the loophole of Kierkegaard's critique. As stated in the first segment, Kierkegaard's opposition to the crowd does not apply to the church insofar as it does not take away the individuality of its fellows. It means that virtues and ethical principles were never his primary concern when it came to the crowd. The crowd could orient itself around an ethical ideal convertible to truth in the Kierkegaardian frame of thought. Yet its attempt to achieve this ideal would ultimately fail due to its fundamental mechanism of subsuming the individual into the collective. On the other hand, Kierkegaard had no problem with communities that nurture the individuality and authenticity of human beings. Consequently, the question of whether Kierkegaard's antithetical view of the crowd makes an exception to the church hangs upon whether the church fulfills the criteria of being a crowd.

As we can see from the previous segment, the church as an assembly of Christ-believers proves to fulfill Kierkegaard's crowd criteria right from its very outset. No matter how inclusive it is, as envisaged by the New Testament, the church does not negate social conventions by assisting the birth of single individuals who bear kinship with the divine. Instead, it performs such negation by subsuming the identity of its members into a newly constructed identity rooted in its only master, Jesus Christ. Therefore, despite being in contradistinction to the world, the church still retains one worldly characteristic: it governs itself in the same manner as the crowd. The church ultimately fails to pass the loophole of Kierkegaard's critique;

hence, it is justifiable for the Danish thinker to perceive it as an embodiment of the crowd and consecutively deem it untruth.

CONCLUSION

This paper posits a cross-reading of Kierkegaard's critique of the crowd and the New Testament ecclesiology as a contribution to the contemporary discourse of the thought of Kierkegaard. As seen in the three-segmented explanation above, Kierkegaard's depiction of the crowd as an abstraction that substitutes collective identity for the individuality of its members matches the fundamental characteristic of the New Testament church as an assembly that subsumes the identity of its fellows into a collective identity centered upon Jesus Christ. Since Kierkegaard saw this mechanism as the main reason for the crowd's violent capacity to pervert eternal truth, he deemed the crowd untruth. By fulfilling the criteria that constitute the Kierkegaardian crowd, the church, as envisaged by the New Testament, amounts to one of this crowd's manifestations. Therefore, Kierkegaard would indeed consider the church untruth; his critique of the crowd makes no exception to this assembly of Christ believers, even with its loophole being present.

This cross-reading confirms the potential aporia that haunts Kierkegaard's critique of the crowd when read in light of the New Testament ecclesiology, as I already delineated in the Introduction. As such, I argue that a further study concerning the validity of Kierkegaard's understanding of the figure of Christ would be critical, especially if the discourse were to follow Edwards' suggestion of bringing the theology of the Danish thinker back to the present-day church. In doing this study, I recommend that future researchers focus solely on analyzing and comparing Kierkegaard's individualistic portrayal of Christ to the Christ depicted by the New Testament, specifically the four gospels. Such a limited scope will prevent the study from developing into a mere cross-breeding of Kierkegaard's notion of existential truth and the ideal church vision, which would have been unfruitful if attempted.

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