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**THE PREACHER WITHOUT A PULPITⁱ - SØREN KIERKEGAARD
IN MEMORY OF JONATHAN STENSETH AND HIS PARENTS INGER AND
JUNIUS STENSETHⁱⁱ**

Abstract

Facing Kierkegaard's many faceted personality and achievements, this paper portrays the Danish philosopher as a Christian, who was in a theological battle and never ceased trying to reach the Christian ideals. An overview of Kierkegaard's prayers and attitudes toward prayer shows the enormous importance prayer had for his inner life and the profound Christian dimension of his unconventional thought.

There is no better conservation partner for thinking about faith than the lyrical Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)¹.

Gordon D. Marino

Sometimes it is said that small countries, unlike large ones, cannot influence history in any major way. In a way this is true, but if we take the kingdom of Denmark, we can see that their role in the world is certainly not insignificant. There are several anniversaries that remind us of this fact, let us mention some the 200th anniversary of Hans Christian Andersens birth, the 120th anniversary of Karen Bixen (1885-1962), who wrote under the name of Isak Dinesen. The Danes are very skilled people in literature; they have been awarded three Nobel prizes, Karl Adolph Gjellerup and Henrik Pontoppidam (1917) and Johannes Jensen (1944).

This year is also the 150th anniversary of Søren Aabye Kierkegaard's death (1813-1855). He spent most of his life in Denmark, the only exception being his

three visits to Germany. Who was Søren Kierkegaard? Was he a philosopher, religious thinker, theologian², prophet³ or a reformer⁴? There are many answers to this question but the truth is, Kierkegaard studied protestant theology (1830-1840) in Copenhagen and all of his work and

² Philosoph und Schriftsteller In: Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart, 4. Aufl., Band 4, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002, p. 954. Robert Perkins addressed the connection between existentialism and Kierkegaard, when he wrote: Much of the earlier writing on Kierkegaard was concerned with his relation to the philosophy of existence. Existentialism is probably the most abused philosophic word in the twentieth century and he concluded the relation of Kierkegaard to existentialism needs to be investigated. Perkins, L. Robert. In: The Sickness unto Death. International Kierkegaard Commentary. Ed. Robert L. Perkins, Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987, p. 4. According to a famous Danish scholar Niels Jorgen Cappelorn, Kierkegaard was: dänischer Theologe

³ K. wollte weder Prophet sein noch Reformator der Kirche; er versteht sich als Korrektiv. Anz, Wilhelm. In: Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart. 3. Aufl., Band 3, Tübingen Mohr Siebeck, 1959, p. 1270

⁴ Diem, Hermann. Kierkegaard. Frankfurt/M: Fischer Bücherei, 1956, p. 190. In one of his lectures (1951) Karl Jaspers called Kierkegaard a Christian philosopher, but a special one one, who does not confess his Christianity Jaspers, Karl. Rechenschaft und Ausblick, Reden und Aufsätze. München: R. Piper, 1958, p. 138.

¹ Marino, D. Gordon. Alastair Hannay, Kierkegaard: A Biography. Reviews. Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter, No. 44, September, 2002.

thinking borderlines between theology and philosophy⁵. Herman Deuser, however, gave us his accurate notion of Kierkegaard:

Kierkegaard did not develop his conception of religiousness with a historical, theological, or dogmatic intention⁶.

Kierkegaard published about 40 works⁷ and is famous also for his unpublished documents in Papers (International title for Kierkegaard's journals and unpublished works titled Pap.), that give an insight into his very interesting life⁸. Altogether we have about 30 000 handwritten pages.

The publishing house Gads Forlag is currently (since October 10th, 1997) working to publish Søren Kierkegaard's complete works supplemented with a detailed commentary Søren Kierkegaard's skrifter in 55 volumes. There will be 28

textual volumes and 27 volumes of commentary. This is a complete edition of everything that Kierkegaard has ever written. It is estimated that the edition will be on the market in 2009, together with an electronic version translated also into English, German and French.

This study "The Preacher without a Pulpit. Søren Kierkegaard" portrays Kierkegaard as a Christian, who was in a theological battle and never ceasing to proclaim the thought of trying to reach the Christian ideals. We can see his attitudes both in his published works and Papers, where at the beginning he starts with a prayer that reflects the union of his life and his way of thinking.

Kierkegaard's prayers and his thoughts about prayer helped him to fulfill his main role his role that consists of clarifying and fulfilling the thought of what it means to be a Christian. As we look at his prayers, we will understand more about how Kierkegaard prayed and how important prayer was to him.

The following thoughts on the topic of prayer are characteristic of Kierkegaard:

Father in heaven! You hold all the good gifts in your gentle. Your abundance is richer than can be grasped by human understanding. You are very willing to give, and your goodness is beyond the understanding of a human heart, because you fulfill every prayer and give, what we pray for or what is far better than what we pray for. Give everyone his allotted share as it is well pleasing to you, but also give everyone the assurance that everything comes from you, so that joy will not tears us away from you in the forgetfulness of pleasure, so that sorrow will not separate you from us⁹.

⁵ The difference between Kierkegaard's philosophy and theology in comparison to the understanding of Paul Tillich, can be found In: Králík, Roman. Kierkegaard a Tillich - teológovia na hranici. Cirkevné listy, 2002, vol. 115, no. 8, p. 122-126. For Kierkegaard is The only solution is for man to turn to God and a word-for-word interpretation of the Bible. Op. cit. 126.

⁶ Deuser, Hermann. Religious dialectics and Christology. In: The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard. Ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge University Press 1998, p.377.

⁷ Julia Watkin poses another question in the introduction to her translation of Kierkegaard's articles from the years 1834-1938: When did Kierkegaard begin his authorship? Watkin, Julia. Historical Introduction. In: Kierkegaard, Søren. Early Polemical Writings. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, p. vii. Kierkegaard himself considered Either Or (his first extensive publication from 1843) as his very first work, it was published as early as 1834.

⁸ His strict upbringing, Kierkegaard's conflicts with the journalists, Hans Christian Andersen, the leaders of the church and his relationship to his fiancé Regina Olsen. There is also another very inspiring study in Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana, vol. 12 Kierkegaard as a Person, ed. Niels Thulstrup and Marie Mikulová Thulstrup, Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Forlag A/S., 1983. 194 p. Its main focus is the life and relationships of Søren Kierkegaard.

⁹ Kierkegaard, Søren. Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 79.

Prayer is a manifestation of the human spirit in its relation to God and cannot exist without God being active¹⁰. Similarly, he considered prayer to be a good and perfect gift from the Fathers of lights¹¹ and the greatest joy on earth (Pap. VIII 1, A 532) Prayer is God orders (Pap. IX, A 316), God, whose his eye surveys mankind with anxious care¹². Kierkegaard's personal prayers found in the Papers are from the years 1834-1842¹³ and say much about the hardships he had to overcome in his life, and also about how he solved his health problems: Give a person such a productive talent, and along with that such feeble health, and verily he will learn to pray¹⁴. His relationship to his father: How I thank you, Father in heaven, for having kept an earthly father present for a time here on earth, where I so greatly need him with your help His father Michael Pedersen was a very religious man, strongly influenced with pietism and the devout nature of Moravian brethren, was strict with his son. In the Corsair Affair¹⁵, a weekly magazine that was mocked at the time, he expressed his thankfulness to God: God be praised that all the assaults of rabble barbarism have come upon me. (Pap. VII 1 A 229) Kierkegaard prayed even when he was deciding about his future work as a priest: For several months I

have been praying to God to keep on helping me, for it has been clear to me (Pap. VII 1, A 4)

He prayed about his relationship to Regina Olsen his fiancé: think of her in prayer¹⁶. There is an interesting entry for August 1848: I quit praying for Rasmus Nielsen, for I was not patient with him, but as soon as I felt I was sinning against him, I talked it out in my relationship with God. (Journals, 815). Kierkegaard was firm in one aspect: If God does not know me, all is lost. (Pap. VI B 161)

He sought help with God to renew his mind: O Lord, my God, give me again the courage to hope. Merciful God, let hope once again make fertile my sterile and barren mind. (Pap. III A 91)

In one of his entries where he sums up his prayer life and admits, that at first he was praying for gifts, happiness and prosperity, then, however a change occurred: This has now changed. How did it happen? Very simply but gradually. Little by little I became more and more aware that all those whom God actually has loved, the prototypes and others, have all had to suffer in this world. (Pap. X, 5 A 72)

Kierkegaard's prayers show, how he overcame personal problems and difficulties. His spiritual experience, with help of which he was able to overcome problems, helped him in his faith. In faith, which was his goal and the prayer was its means. He was sure that avoiding the personal approach to God is a good way to open doors for all kinds of problems. (Pap. XI 2 A 134). That is why he appeals to the reader: Close your door and pray to God and you have the highest a person can have; love you're Savior and you have everything in life and death¹⁷ Prayers expressed

¹⁰ Ligu¹, Ján. *Medziľudská komunikácia*. Banská Bystrica: ZEC, 2002, p. 110.

¹¹ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 139.

¹² Kierkegaard, Søren. *Philosophical Fragments or a Fragment of Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1946, p. 25

¹³ Skjoldager, E. *His Personal Prayers*. In *Bibliotheca Kierkegardiana* vol. 12, Kierkegaard as a Person, ed. Niels Thulstrup and Marie Mikulová Thulstrup, Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Forlag A/S., 1983, p. 156.

¹⁴ Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Point of view*. London: Oxford University Press, 1939, p. 68.

¹⁵ The Corsair affair has been called most renowned controversy in Danish literary history. Rubow, Paul. *Goldschmidt og Nemesis*. (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1968) In: Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Corsair affair*. Ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982, p.vii.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/Or* vol. II. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 319.

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Works of Love*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1995, p. 69.

Kierkegaard's relationship, hope and love for God.

Kierkegaard's asking in his prayer: Whither should we turn, if not to Thee, Lord Jesus Christ?¹⁸ To him, Jesus Christ is the only possible way of salvation. He didn't forget to mention in his allusion to priests Martensen and Mynster and theology of those days the difference between wisdom and academic knowledge, because purity of heart is precisely the wisdom that is gained by praying; a man of prayer does not pore over scholarly books but is the wise man whose eyes are opened when he kneels down {Numbers 24:16}¹⁹

Kierkegaard described God's qualities, for example His omnipotence: are still the same mighty God²⁰; His unchangeable nature [in love]: O Thou who art unchangeable, whom nothing changes! Thou who art unchangeable in love²¹ He stressed the loving relationship between God and man: You loved us first. Help us never to forget that you are love. {Pap. IV B 171}²²

Kierkegaard called Him the God of love, because you who spared nothing but in love gave everything²³ and confesses to his Father in heaven: Your abundance is richer than can be grasped by human

understanding²⁴. Through his prayers Kierkegaard wanted to point to God's love, through which God is willing to listen to sincere prayers: God to whom he prays is human, has the heart to feel humanly, the ear to hear a human being's complaints; and even though he doesn't not fulfill every wish, he still lives close to us and is moved by the strugglers cry, by his humble request²⁵.

Kierkegaard also stressed the fact that Jesus Christ prayed for His enemies²⁶. It is through prayers that Kierkegaard came to better terms with the critics in Danish society who wanted to ban further publishing of his works.

Kierkegaard also pointed out the differences between God and man and the need man has to have a relationship with God: Father in Heaven! What is a human being without You!²⁷ In his next prayer he asked God to make a person weak for the weaker we are, the stronger God becomes in us²⁸.

Another aspect of prayer was the realization of one's own guilt before God. Man has a chance to learn something new about himself and find out something new when he admits to his faults and he adds: Prayer does not change God, but it does change the one who prays.²⁹

In another prayer he begs: Lord Jesus Christ, let Thy Holy Spirit enlighten our minds and convince us thoroughly of

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Christian Discourses. Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1971, p. 361.

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1993, p. 26.

²⁰ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 7.

²¹ Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Unchangeableness of God*. In: *A Kierkegaard Anthology*. Bretall, Robert. (ed.) Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972, p. 470.

²² In this regard, it is also necessary to note the essay of M. G. Piety and his correct statement, that: Kierkegaard is fascinated by the claim at 1. Peter 4:8 that love hides a multitude of sins. Piety, M. G. *Good Faith*. In: *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses. International Kierkegaard Commentary*. Mercer University Press, Macon 2003, p. 157.

²³ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Works of Love*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1995, p. 5.

²⁴ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 79.

²⁵ *Op. cit.* p. 387

²⁶ Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Present Age. Two Minor Ethico-Religious Treatises*. London: Oxford University Press, 1940, p. 134.

²⁷ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1993, p. 7.

²⁸ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Christian Discourses, The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 133. (John 3, 30)

²⁹ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1993, p. 22.

our sin, so that, humbled and with downcast eyes, we may recognize that we stand far, far off³⁰. He compared the prayer to breathing, if a person does not pray he will die spiritually. (Pap. IX A 462)

Truly inspiring was Kierkegaard's attitude to please in his prayers: Lord, my God, I really have nothing at all for which to pray to you; even if you would promise to grant my every wish, I really cannot think of anything except that I may remain with You, as near as possible in this time of separation in which you and I are living³¹.

In another prayer a Christian does not demand help, but prays for God's grace³². Further, he expresses a wish that we would not forget what it means to be a human being and would learn from the lilies and birds, learn to silence, obedience and joy³³.

Kierkegaard was sure that living as a Christian is not something easy and second

nature, but that God demands a person's effort and expects them to follow Him³⁴.

As he prayed he asked God to show him how to follow and wants to live by the principle of no one can serve two masters. (Mathew. 6:24) That prompted the following prayer: Would that we might be willing to comply with them by doing accordingly that is, by following you!³⁵ Following with all the consequences meant to Kierkegaard having to martyr the body and soul and that is why he asks Jesus Christ for courage to follow. An example of this kind of following was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose death in a concentration camp marked his theology with reality when he did not give up his faith in Christ as the one and only Lord, when the Nazis wanted to replace Him with the cult of a God-equal man³⁶.

Kierkegaard did not forget the last days of man and the importance of prayer when our days are numbered and the outer being is wasting away, death may not come in its own name, cold and terrible, but gentle and friendly, with greetings and news, with witness from You, our Father in Heaven!³⁷ Kierkegaard's friend, priest Emil Boesen, who visited Kierkegaard in the hospital, described their discussion from October

³⁰ Kierkegaard, Søren. Christian Discourses. Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1971, p. 371. Kierkegaard wrote that prayer expresses the greatest pathos of infinity, which is comical, for it is practically incomparable to anything we may be able to express externally. In: Kierkegaard, Søren. Concluding Unscientific Postscript. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 83.

³¹ Kierkegaard, Søren. Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 392.

³² Kierkegaard, Søren. Christian Discourses, The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 64. It is the term cheap grace of the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer that is most often joined together with Kierkegaard's attack against the Church of Denmark: Kierkegaard hat aber leidenschaftlich gegen die billige Gnade des damaligen dänischen Luthertums gekämpft. Schmidt, J. H. In: Evangelisches Lexikon für Theologie und Gemeinde. vol. 2, Wuppertal und Zürich: R. Brockhaus Verlag 1998, p. 1071. There was an essay published dealing with Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Slovakia too, by one of the prominent scholars studying the works of Bonhoeffer, Ján Liguš: Véra a teologie Dietricha Bonhoeffera. Bratislava: ECM, 1996, 112 p.

³³ Kierkegaard, Søren. The Lilies of the Field and the Birds of the Air. {trans. Walter Lowrie} Princeton: Princeton University Press 1971, p. 311-356.

³⁴ We may use Peter Gažík's words about Justin, applying them to Kierkegaard: Being a philosopher (for Justin, philosopher was Christ himself authors note) meant to him having a mission and fulfilling it. Gažík, Peter. Justín Martýr a jeho doba. Biblická kôla. Martin, 2003, p. 58.

³⁵ Kierkegaard, Søren. For Self-Examination. Judge For Yourself! Princeton: Princeton University Press 1990, p.148.

³⁶ Gažík, Peter. Ohlas niektorých európskych filozofických a teologických prúdov medzivojnového obdobia v myslení Samuela Čtefana Osuského. In: Evanjelická teológia na prahu nového tisícročia. Ondrejovič, Dušan. (ed.), Čilina: Nadácia Jana Ámosa Komenského, 2001, p. 173. See too: Julia Watkin: Certainly Bonhoeffer himself provided a living illustration of what it can mean to take the gospel seriously in Kierkegaardian terms. Watkin, Julia. Kierkegaard. London - New York: Geoffrey Chapman, 1997, p. 103.

³⁷ Kierkegaard, Søren. Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 79.

18th, 1855 when Kierkegaard told: So I pray first for the forgiveness of sins, that everything might be forgiven; then I pray that I might be free of despair at the time of my death, and I am often struck by the saying that death must be pleasing to God³⁸.

Kierkegaard died November 11th, 1855, not reconciled to church, but reconciled to God³⁹. Kierkegaard's critical view of the church is possibly one of the reasons for his religious influence being so small, not only in Denmark but in the religious world as a whole⁴⁰.

What we note from this overview of Kierkegaard's prayers and attitudes toward prayer is his spiritual (prayer) development, and we can see how important prayer was in his life. To him, prayer was his way to God and was of immense importance. This statement is confirmed by Perry LeFevre, who wrote: From the beginning of his return to Christianity until death Kierkegaard was a man of prayer⁴¹.

ⁱ I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to two contemporary Kierkegaard scholars and friends, Professor Gordon Marino from the USA and Professor Rafael Garcia from Mexico, who have deepened my understanding of Kierkegaard.

Swenson called Kierkegaard a preacher without a pulpit Swenson, F. David. Translators Introduction. In: Kierkegaard, Søren. *Philosophical Fragments or a Fragment of Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1946, p. xxvi.

ⁱⁱ Jonathan Stenseth was Kierkegaard's promising and diligent student, who died at the age of 27 of leukemia and designed the bookplate of Hong Kierkegaard Library. See: www.stolaf.edu/collections/kierkegaard/collection.html

³⁸ Kirmmse, H. Bruce. *Encounters with Kierkegaard*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 124.

³⁹ Kierkegaard's arch-enemy was Christendom, the comfortable cultural synthesis of official piety and socio-political convenience Kirmmse, H. Bruce. *Kierkegaard and 1848. History of European Ideas* 1995, vol. 20, p. 167.

⁴⁰ Walter Lowrie: At all events S. K.'s impact upon the Church in Denmark is nil. Lowrie, Walter. *Translators and Interpreters of S. K. Theology Today*, 1955, vol. XII, no. 3., p. 312.

⁴¹ LeFevre, D. Perry. *The Prayers of Kierkegaard*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956, s. 196.