

provocations
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spiritual writings of
KIERKEGAARD

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Kierkegaard's writings seem to get more "contemporary" every year. This well-selected collection of writings should be read and re-read by everyone who is attempting to minister to our present generation.

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| **Provocations**



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Provocations

Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard

Compiled and Edited by Charles E. Moore

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Published by Plough Publishing House
Walden, New York
Robertsbridge, England
Elsmore, Australia
www.plough.com

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ISBN: 978-0-87486-643-8

20 19 18 17 16 15 14 12 11 10 9 8 7 6

Woodcut on cover and frontispiece: Karl Mahr, 1925

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

The Library of Congress has catalogued an earlier edition as follows:

Kierkegaard, Søren, 1813–1855.

[Selections. English. 1999]

Provocations: spiritual writings of Kierkegaard/Søren

Kierkegaard; compiled and edited by Charles E. Moore.--1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-87486-981-1 (pbk.)

1. Christian life--Lutheran authors. 2. Spiritual life--
Christianity. I. Moore, Charles E., 1956-. II. Title.

BV4501.2.K4885213 1999

248.4'841--dc21

99-28648

CIP

Printed in the USA

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Introduction

Søren Kierkegaard has been accused of being one of the most frustrating authors to read. He has also been praised as one of the most rewarding. Frustrating, because his style is so dense, his thought so complex, and his words so harsh. Rewarding, because embedded within his writings and journals are metaphors and truths so deep and vivid that they can overwhelm you with an almost blinding clarity. Kierkegaard is not one to be read lightly, lest you get burned.

The purpose of this collection is twofold. The first is to make Kierkegaard accessible. Even for the brightest, Kierkegaard is tough going. Walter Lowrie, Kierkegaard's most devoted biographer, writes: "Kierkegaard exacts of his reader a very great effort. He declines to make things easy for him by presenting a 'conclusion,' and he obliges him, therefore, to approach the goal by the same difficult path he himself has trod."

Even Kierkegaard's fellow Danes found him difficult. This is unfortunate. Contained within his writings are some of the richest, most illuminating passages on faith and commitment ever penned. To help unearth some of these treasures, I have taken the liberty to abridge lengthy pieces, paraphrase complex passages, and tighten and simplify convoluted constructions.

Secondly, this collection is meant to present in as concise a way as possible the "heart" of Kierkegaard. By heart I mean first those pieces that are concerned with the core themes of his

prolific output, second, those that exemplify the essence of his thought, and last but not least, his passion.

Kierkegaard's Central Passion

Kierkegaard wrote industriously and rapidly, and under a variety of pen-names, presenting various esthetic, ethical, and religious viewpoints on life. His writings display such a wide range of genre and style, and his thought covers such a variety of subjects that even he himself felt compelled to write a book to explain his agenda. Despite this, Kierkegaard was single-mindedly driven. He writes in his Journal: “The category for my undertaking is: to make people aware of what is essentially Christian.” Two things are noteworthy. First, Kierkegaard aims to make us *aware*. “I have worked for a restlessness oriented toward inward deepening.” “My whole life is an epigram calculated to make people aware.” In short, Kierkegaard’s task was not the introduction of new ideas, a theology or philosophy of life. Rather, he said “My task is in the service of truth; and its essential form is obedience.” Kierkegaard was fundamentally existential: “to keep people awake, in order that religion may not again become an indolent habit...” His aim was to provoke the individual so as to become an individual in the truth. The last thing Kierkegaard wanted to do was to leave his reader the same – intellectually enlightened yet inwardly unchanged.

Early in his life, Kierkegaard made the discovery that one must “find a truth which is true *for me* – the idea for which I can live and die.” Part of the human predicament was that we are all interested in far too many things and thus are not decidedly committed to any one thing. As he writes in his Journal:

What I really lack is to be clear in my mind *what I am to do*, not what I am to know, except in so far as a certain understanding must precede every action. The thing is to understand myself, to see what

God really wishes *me* to do... What good would it do me if the truth stood before me, cold and naked, not caring whether I recognized her or not, and producing in me a shudder of fear rather than a trusting devotion? Must not the truth *be taken up into my life*? That is what I now recognize as the most important thing.

Kierkegaard's central task as an author, therefore, was to help the reader make the truth his own. He deliberately and carefully plotted his entire authorship to show his readers what it means to exist, and what inwardness and subjectivity signify. His strategy was to help them take a decisive stand: "I wish to make people aware so that they do not squander and dissipate their lives."

Secondly, Kierkegaard is concerned with what is essentially Christian: "Through my writings I hope to achieve the following: to leave behind me so accurate a characterization of Christianity and its relationships in the world that an enthusiastic, noble-minded young person will be able to find in it a map of relationships as accurate as any topographical map from the most famous institutes."

Of what does this map consist? In *Practice of Christianity*, Kierkegaard writes: "If anything is to be done, one must try to introduce Christianity into Christendom." The backdrop to his entire authorship was a Danish Lutheranism that had degenerated into a nominal state-religion. Three things, in particular, marred the church of his day: (1) Intellectualism – the "direct mental assent to a sum of doctrines"; (2) Formalism – "battalions upon battalions" of unbelieving believers; and (3) Pharisaism – a herd of hypocritical clergy that ignore the Christianity they were hired to preach. It was in this climate that Kierkegaard felt compelled to reintroduce Christianity. He sought to provide a kind of map that would, for the sake of Christian truth, steer people away from Christendom. "An apostle's task is to spread Christianity, to win people to Christianity. My task is to dis-

abuse people of the illusion that they are Christians – yet I am serving Christianity?”

By Christianity Kierkegaard did not mean a system of correct doctrine or a set of behaviors: “The struggle is not between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. My struggle, much more inward, is about the *how* of the doctrine. I say that someone can accept the whole doctrine, but in presenting it he destroys it.” Kierkegaard’s contention was that despite sound doctrine, or the *what* of faith, “the lives people live demonstrate that there is really no Christianity – or very little.” Genuine Christianity, according to Kierkegaard, is anything but doctrine. It is a way of being in the truth before God by following Jesus in self-denial, sacrifice, suffering, and by seeking a primitive relationship with God. Unfortunately, doctrine is what people want. And the reason for this is “because doctrine is the indolence of aping and mimicking for the learner, and doctrine is the way to power for the teacher, and doctrine collects people.”

Kierkegaard’s thinking originated in a violent revulsion for the spurious spirituality of his day. His difficulty was to find a way out of the confusion that consistently undermined anything truly Christian. How in the world are we to get out of the mess of Christendom, he wondered, when millions, due to the accident of geography, are Christians? How are we to get Christendom to drop its whole mass of nominal members when “it is the interest of the clergyman’s trade that there be as many Christians as possible?” How, exactly, are we to *become* Christian, especially when “one is a Christian of a sort?”

Kierkegaard’s strategy was to act as a corrective. He explains: “The person who is to provide the corrective must study the weak sides of the established order scrupulously and penetratingly and then one-sidedly present the opposite – with expert one-sidedness.” This revelation is important to keep in mind while reading Kierkegaard. All the same he said, “a corrective

made into the norm is by that very fact confusing.” Therefore, one should not lift his thought up and turn it into a norm. He felt his situation to be desperate, so he sounded the alarm accordingly. Yet he did not do this as some self-proclaimed prophet. He wrote as one who was without authority and who himself needed reforming: “What I have said to myself about myself is true – I am a kind of secret agent in the highest service. The police use secret agents, too...But the police do not think of reforming their secret agents. God does.”

Kierkegaard was adamant about his own Christian deficiency: “For my part I do not call myself a ‘Christian’ (thus keeping the ideal free), but I am able to make it evident that the others are still less than I.” This is not meant as a judgment. Kierkegaard’s hope was to arouse, to expose the deception he, as well as everyone else, was under. He never felt worthy of doing this. But he was compelled to strike out. “I want to make the crowd aware of their own ruin. Understand me – or do not misunderstand me. I do not intend to strike them (alas, one cannot strike the crowd) – no, I will constrain them to strike me.”

Kierkegaard in Context

In reading Kierkegaard it would be a mistake to ignore the inner anguish of his own personal life. The currents of his thought spring forth from within, as much as they do from his broader cultural setting. Although a complete biography of Kierkegaard is beyond the scope of this introduction, it is important for our purposes to understand the four significant crisis relationships in his life. These relationships constitute Kierkegaard the man, and grasping them is paramount in understanding him as a writer.

I | To
Will
One
Thing

1 | Dare to Decide

Can there be something in life that has power over us which little by little causes us to forget all that is good? And can this ever happen to anyone who has heard the call of eternity quite clearly and strongly?

If this can ever be, then one must look for a cure against it. Praise be to God that such a cure exists – to quietly make a decision. A decision joins us to the eternal. It brings what is eternal into time. A decision raises us with a shock from the slumber of monotony. A decision breaks the magic spell of custom. A decision breaks the long row of weary thoughts. A decision pronounces its blessing upon even the weakest beginning, as long as it is a real beginning. Decision is the awakening to the eternal.

One could say that all this is very simple. It is just a matter of moments, make a decision and all is well. Dare like a bold swimmer to plunge into the sea, and dare to believe that the weight of the swimmer will go to the goal against all opposing currents.

Yet, our approach must begin differently from this. First, we must reject the devil's web of deception. Making decisions is often dangerous, or rather, talking about them is. Before you learn to walk you have to crawl on all fours; to try to fly right before walking is a dangerous set-up. Certainly there must be great decisions, but even in connection with them the important thing is to get under way with *your* decision. Do not fly so

high with your decisions that you forget that a decision is but a beginning.

How wretched and miserable it is to find in a person many good intentions but few good deeds. And there are other dangers too, dangers of sin. With all your good intentions, you must not forget your duty, neither should you forget to do it with joy. And strive to carry your burdens and responsibilities in a surrendered way. If you don't, there is a danger of losing your decisiveness; of going through life without courage and fading away in death.

So what about the decision, which was after all meant so very well? A road well begun is the battle half won. The important thing is to make a beginning and get under way. There is nothing more harmful for your soul than to hold back and not get moving.

The path of an honest fighter is a difficult one. And when the fighter grows cool in the evening of his life this is still no excuse to retire into games and amusement. Whoever remains faithful to his decision will realize that his whole life is a struggle. Such a person does not fall into the temptation of proudly telling others of what he has done with his life. Nor will he talk about the "great decisions" he has made. He knows full well that at decisive moments you have to renew your resolve again and again and that this alone makes good the decision and the decision good.

In the end, the archenemy of decision is cowardice. Cowardice is constantly at work trying to break off the good agreement of decision with eternity. When the minister preaches a sermon against pride, he has many listeners. But if he wants to warn his listeners against cowardice, things look very different. His listeners look around to see if there is any such miserable fellow among them. A cowardly soul – after all, that is the most miserable thing one can imagine, that is something one simply can't

endure. We can put up with one who is spoiled or decadent in some way or another, even if he is proud, but only if he is not a coward.

And yet the separation of cowardice and pride is a false one, for these two are really one and the same. The proud person always wants to do the right thing, the great thing. But because he wants to do it in his own strength, he is fighting not with man but with God. He wants to have a great task set before himself and to carry it through on his own accord. And then he is very pleased with his place. Many have taken the first leap of pride into life, many stop there. But the next leap is different.

How? The proud person, ironically, begins looking around for people of like mind who want to be sufficient unto themselves in their pride. This is because anyone who stands alone for any length of time soon discovers that there is a God. Such a realization is something no one can endure. And so one becomes cowardly. Of course, cowardice never shows itself as such. It won't make a great noise. No, it is quite hidden and quiet. And yet it joins all other passions to it, because cowardice is very comfortable and obliging in associating with other passions. It knows very well how to make friends with them.

Cowardice settles deep in our souls like the idle mists on stagnant waters. From it arise unhealthy vapors and deceiving phantoms. The thing that cowardice fears most is decision; for decision always scatters the mists, at least for a moment. Cowardice thus hides behind the thought it likes best of all: the crutch of time. Cowardice and time always find a reason for not hurrying, for saying, "Not today, but tomorrow," whereas God in heaven and the eternal say: "Do it today. Now is the day of salvation." The eternal refrain of decision is: "Today, today." But cowardice holds back, holds us up. If only cowardice would appear in all its baseness, one could recognize it for what it is and fight it immediately.

Cowardice wants to prevent the step of making a decision. To accomplish this it takes to itself a host of glorious names. In the name of caution cowardice abhors any over-hastiness. It is against doing anything before the time is ripe. Besides, “Is it not best to speak of a continued endeavor, which is by far the superior act, rather than of a sudden decision?” Ah, not decision, but continual striving, continuous endeavor; what a glorious expression. What a glorious deception!

Whereas decision reminds us of the end to come, cowardice turns us away from finality. Hence, cowardice is adaptable and takes pride in being able to meet various opinions in different ways. If, for example, someone’s ideas are first-rate, then cowardice will argue: “Well if such a one as you is so well equipped, then why hurry? Why limit yourself so?” What pride! And the thing of it is that for such a person it is not that the task is too easy but that it is too difficult.

Or consider the person whose advantages are few. Cowardice is now quick to sing a different tune: “What you’ve got is far too little to make a good beginning.” This, of course, is particularly stupid. If we always need more to begin with we would never begin. But “God does not give us the spirit of cowardice, but the spirit of power, and of love and of self-control” (1 Tm. 1:7). Cowardice does not come from God. One who wants to build a tower sits down and makes an estimate as to how high he can build it. But if no decision is ever made then no tower is ever built. A good decision is our will to do everything we can within our power. It means to serve God with all we’ve got, be it little or much. Every person can do that.

In the end, failure to decide prevents one from doing what is good. It keeps us from doing that great thing to which each of us is bound by virtue of the eternal. This does not mean that everything is decided once a decision is made, nor does it mean that only in great decisions is one lifted to a higher plane – a place

where one now no longer needs to bother about little things, petty things. Such thinking amounts to nothing more than a fine show.

We must not support high and important things while ignoring the practical, daily stuff of life. Indeed, decision is something truly great; the life of eternity shines over decision. But the light of eternity does not shine on every decision. Decision may be once and for all; but decision itself is only the first thing. Genuine decision is always eager to change its clothes and get down to practical matters. The real significance of decision is that it gives us an inner connection. Decision gets us on our way, and here there are no longer little things. Decision lays its demanding hand on us from start to finish. Cowardice, on the other hand, wants only to concern itself with the really important, big things, not in order to carry something out wholeheartedly but to be flattered by doing something that is noble and great. Yet hiding behind the exalted is nothing but an excuse for not conquering all the little things one has omitted, simply because they were little.

Therefore, don't be fooled. It may well be that with great decisions others will marvel at you. All the same, you miss the one thing that is needful. You may be honored in this life, remembered by monuments set up in your honor, but God will say to you: "You unhappy person. Why did you not choose the better path? Confess your weakness and face it."

Perhaps just in this weakness God will meet you and come to your aid. This much is certain: the greatest thing each person can do is to give himself to God utterly and unconditionally – weaknesses, fears, and all. For God loves obedience more than good intentions or second-best offerings, which are all too often made under the guise of weakness.

Therefore, dare to renew your decision. It will lift you up again to have trust in God. For God is a spirit of power and

love and self-control, and it is before God and for him that every decision is to be made. Dare to act on the good that lies buried within your heart. Confess your decision and do not go ashamed with downcast eyes as if you were treading on forbidden ground. If you are ashamed of your own imperfections, then cast your eyes down before God, not man. Better yet, in weakness decide and go forth!

2 | Either/Or

A choice! Do you, my listener, know how to express in a single word anything more magnificent? Do you realize, even if you were to discuss year in and year out how you could mention nothing more awesome than a choice, what it is to have choice! For though it is certainly true that the ultimate blessing is to choose rightly, yet the faculty of choice itself is still the glorious prerequisite. What does it matter to the young lover to take inventory of all the outstanding qualities of her fiancé if she herself cannot choose? And, on the other hand, whether others praise her beloved's many perfections or enumerate his faults, what more magnificent thing could she say than when she says, He is my heart's choice!

A choice! Yes, this is the pearl of great price, yet it is not intended to be buried and hidden away. A choice that is not used is worse than nothing; it is a snare in which a person has trapped himself as a slave who did not become free – by choosing. It is a good thing that you can never be rid of it. It remains with you, and if you do not use it, it becomes a curse. A choice – not between red and green, not between silver and gold – no, a choice between God and the world! Do you know anything in comparison to choice? Do you know of any more overwhelming and humbling expression for God's condescension and extravagance towards us human beings than that he places himself, so to say, on the same level of choice with the world, just so

that we may be able to choose; that God, if language dare speak thus, woos humankind – that he, the eternally strong one, woos sapless humanity? Yet, how insignificant is the young lover’s choice between her pursuers by comparison with this choice between God and the world!

A choice! Or is it perhaps an imperfection in the choice under discussion here that a human being not only *can* choose but that he *must* choose? Would it not be to the young lover’s advantage if she had a zealous father who said, “My dear girl, you have your freedom, you yourself may choose, but you must choose.” Or would it be better that she had the choice but coyly picked and picked and never really chose?

No, a person must choose, for in this way God retains his honor while at the same time has a fatherly concern for humankind. Though God has lowered himself to being that which can be chosen, yet each person must on his part choose. God is not mocked. Therefore the matter stands thus: If a person avoids choosing, this is the same as the presumption of choosing the world.

Each person must choose *between God and the world, God and mammon*. This is the eternal, unchangeable condition of choice that can never be evaded – no, never in all eternity. No one can say, “God and world, they are not, after all, so absolutely different. One can combine them both in one choice.” This is to refrain from choosing. When there is a choice between two, then to want to choose both is just to shrink from the choice “to one’s own destruction” (Heb. 10:39). No one can say, “One can choose a little mammon and also God as well.” No, it is presumptuous ridicule of God if someone thinks that only the person who desires great wealth chooses mammon. Alas, the person who insists on having a penny without God, wants to have a penny all for himself. He thereby chooses mammon. A

penny is enough, the choice is made, he has chosen mammon; that it is little makes not the slightest difference.

The love of God is hatred of the world and love of the world hatred of God. This is the colossal point of contention, either love or hate. This is the place where the most terrible fight must be fought. And where is this place? In a person's innermost being. Whether the struggle is over millions or over a penny, it is a matter of loving and preferring God – the most terrible fight is the struggle for the highest. What immeasurable happiness is promised to the one who rightly chooses. If anyone is unable to understand this, the reason is that he is unwilling to accept that God is present in the moment of choice, not in order to watch but in order to be chosen. Therefore, each person must choose. Terrible is the battle, in a person's innermost being, between God and the world. The crowning risk involved lies in the possession of choice.

Whatsoever a person chooses, when he does not choose God he has missed the either/or, or rather he is in perdition with his either/or. So then: either God/...What does this either/or signify? What does God demand by this either/or? He demands obedience, unconditional obedience. If you are not obedient in everything unconditionally, without qualification, you don't love him, and if you don't love him – then you hate him. If you are not obedient in everything unconditionally, then you are not bound to him, and if you are not bound to him then you despise him.

If you can become absolutely obedient, then when you pray, "Lead us not into temptation" there will be no ambiguity in you, you will be undivided and single before God. And there is one thing that all Satan's cunning and all the snares of temptation cannot take by surprise – an undivided will. What Satan spies with keenness of sight as his prey, what all temptation aims at

certain of its prey, is the ambiguous. When unclarity resides, there is temptation, and there it proves only too easily the stronger. Wherever there is ambiguity, wherever there is wavering, there is disobedience down at the bottom.

Where there is no ambiguity, Satan and temptation are powerless. But with the merest glimpse of wavering, Satan is strong and temptation is enticing, and keen-sighted is the evil one whose trap is called temptation and whose prey is called the human soul. Of course, it is not really from Satan that temptation comes, but ambiguity cannot hide itself from him. If he discovers it, temptation is always at hand. But the person who surrenders absolutely to God, with no reservations, is absolutely safe. From this safe hiding-place he can see the devil, but the devil cannot see him. And if with absolute obedience he remains in his hiding-place, then he is “delivered from the evil one.”

There is a tremendous danger in which we find ourselves by being human, a danger that consists in the fact that we are placed between two tremendous powers. The choice is left to us. We must either love or hate, and not to love is to hate. So hostile are these two powers that the slightest inclination towards the one side becomes absolute opposition to the other. Let us not forget this tremendous danger in which we exist. To forget is to have made your choice.

3 | Under the Spell of Good Intentions

There is a parable in the Scriptures that is seldom considered yet very instructive and inspiring. “There was a man who had two sons. The father went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ And he answered, ‘I will not’; but afterward he changed his mind and went. And the father went to the second son and said the same and he answered, ‘I will go, sir,’ but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” (Mt. 21:28–31). We could also ask in another manner: which of these two was the prodigal son? I wonder if it was not the one who said “Yes,” the one who not only said “Yes,” but said, “I will go, sir,” as if to show his unqualified, dutiful submission to his father’s will.

Now, what is the point of this parable? Is it not meant to show us the danger of saying “Yes” in too great a hurry, even if it is well meant? Though the yes-brother was not a deceiver when he said “Yes,” he nevertheless became a deceiver when he failed to keep his promise. In his very eagerness in promising he became a deceiver. When you say “Yes” or promise something, you can very easily deceive yourself and others also, as if you had already done what you promised. It is easy to think that by making a promise you have at least done part of what you promised to do, as if the promise itself were something of value.

Not at all! In fact, when you do not do what you promise, it is a long way back to the truth.

Beware! The “Yes” of promise keeping is sleep-inducing. An honest “No” possesses much more promise. It can stimulate; repentance may not be far away. He who says “No,” becomes almost afraid of himself. But he who says “Yes, I will,” is all too pleased with himself. The world is quite inclined – even eager – to make promises, for a promise appears very fine at the *moment* – it inspires! Yet for this very reason the eternal is suspicious of promises.

Now suppose that neither of the brothers did his father’s will. Then the one who said “No” was surely closer to realizing that he did not do his father’s will. A “no” does not hide anything, but a “yes” can very easily become a deception, a self-deception; which of all difficulties is the most difficult to conquer. Ah, it is all too true that, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

It is the most dangerous thing for a person to go backwards with the help of good intentions, especially with the help of promises; for it is almost impossible to discover that one is really going backwards. When a person turns his back on someone and walks away, it is easy to see which way he is going. That is that! But when a person finds a way of turning his face towards him who he is walking away from, and in so doing walks backwards while appearing to greet the person, giving assurances again and again that he is coming, or incessantly saying “Here I am” – though he gets farther and farther away by walking backwards – then it is not so easy to become aware. And so it is with the one who, rich in good intentions and quick to promise, retreats backwards farther and farther from the good. With the help of intentions and promises, he maintains the honest impression that he is moving towards the good, yet all the while he moves farther and farther away from it. With every renewed intention and promise it seems as if he is

taking a new step forward but in reality he is only standing still, no, he is really taking another step backward.

The good intention, the “Yes,” taken in vain, the unfulfilled promise leaves a residue of despair, of dejection. Beware! Good intention can very soon flare up again in more passionate declarations of intention, but only to leave behind even greater desperation. As an alcoholic constantly requires stronger and stronger drink, so the one who has fallen under the spell of good intentions and smooth-sounding declaration constantly requires more and more good intentions. And so he keeps himself from seeing that he is walking backwards.

We do not praise the son who said “No,” but we need to learn from the gospel how dangerous it is to say, “Lord, I will.” A promise with respect to action is somewhat like a changeling (an infant secretly changed for another) – one needs to be very watchful. In the very moment a child is born the mother’s joy is greatest, because her pain is gone. When because of her joy she is less watchful – so says the superstition – evil powers come and put a changeling in the child’s place. In the crucial initial moment when one sets out and begins, a dangerous time indeed, enemy forces come and slip in a changeling promise, thus hindering one from making a genuine beginning. Alas, how many have been deceived in this manner, yes, as if cast under a spell!

4 | The Greatest Danger

Imagine a kind of medicine that possesses in full dosage a laxative effect but in a half dose a constipating effect. Suppose someone is suffering from constipation. But – for some reason or other, perhaps because there is not enough for a full dose or because it is feared that such a large amount might be too much – in order to do something, he is given, with the best of intentions, a half dose: “After all, it is at least something.” What a tragedy!

So it is with today’s Christianity. As with everything qualified by an either/or – the half has the very opposite effect from the whole. But we Christians go right on practicing this well-intentioned half-hearted act from generation to generation. We produce Christians by the millions, are proud of it – yet have no inkling that we are doing just exactly the opposite of what we intend to do.

It takes a physician to understand that a half dose can have the opposite effect to that of a full dose. Common sense, cool-minded mediocrity never catches on. It undeviatingly continues to say of the half-dosage: “After all, it is something; even if it doesn’t work very well, it is still something.” But that it should have an opposite effect – no, mediocrity does not grasp that.

The greatest danger to Christianity is, I contend, not heresies, heterodoxies, not atheists, not profane secularism – no, but the kind of orthodoxy which is cordial drivel, mediocrity served up

sweet. There is nothing that so insidiously displaces the majestic as cordiality. Perpetually polite, so small, so nice, tampering and meddling and tampering some more – the result is that majesty is completely defrauded – of course, only a little bit. And right here is the danger, for the infinite is more disposed to a violent attack than to becoming a little bit degraded – amid smiling, Christian politeness. And yet this politeness is what our Christianity amounts to. But the very essence of Christianity is utterly opposed to this mediocrity, in which it does not so much die as dwindle away.

Today's orthodoxy essentially has its abode in the cordial drivel of family life. This is utterly dangerous for Christianity. Christianity does not oppose debauchery and uncontrollable passions and the like as much as it opposes this flat mediocrity, this nauseating atmosphere, this homey, civil togetherness, where admittedly great crimes, wild excesses, and powerful aberrations cannot easily occur – but where God's unconditional demand has even greater difficulty in accomplishing what it requires: the majestic obedience of submission. Nothing is further from obeying the either/or than this sweet family drivel.

Consider what Christ thinks about mediocrity! When the apostle Peter, for instance, with good intentions wanted to keep Christ from being crucified, Christ answered: "Get behind me, Satan! You are an offense to me" (Mk. 8:33).

In the world of mediocrity in which we live it is assumed that only crackpots, fanatics, and the like should be deplored as offensive, as inspired by Satan, and that the middle way is the right way, the way that alone is exempted from any such charge. What nonsense! Christ is of another mind: mediocrity is the worst offense, the most dangerous kind of demon possession, farthest removed from the possibility of being cured. To "have" religion on the level of mediocrity is the most unqualified form of perdition.

The advantages and benefits of earthly life are bound up in mediocrity. But genuine religion has an inverse relationship to the finite. Its aim is to raise human beings up so as to transcend what is earthly. It is a matter of either/or. Either prime quality, or no quality at all; either with all your heart, all your mind, and all your strength, or not at all. Either all of God and all of you, or nothing at all!

We clever humans, however, prefer to treat faith as if it were something finite, as if it were something for the betterment and enjoyment of temporal life. It is supposed to bring us meaning and fulfillment, happiness and direction. This kind of religion is nothing but a deception. If you were honest and if you would look at it more closely, you would see that this really is contempt for religion, a dangerous and culpable irreligion. True faith insists on being an either/or. To treat it as if it were like drink and food is fundamentally to scorn it. But this is precisely the way of mediocrity.

5 | The Task

Why is it that people prefer to be addressed in groups rather than individually? Is it because conscience is one of life's greatest inconveniences, a knife that cuts too deeply? We prefer to "be part of a group," and to "form a party," for if we are part of a group it means goodnight to conscience. We cannot be two or three, a "Miller Brothers and Company" around a conscience. No, no. The only thing the group secures is the abolition of conscience.

It is the same with busyness. A person can very well eat lettuce before it has formed a heart, yet the tender delicacy of the heart and its lovely coil are something quite different from the leaves. Likewise, in the world of spirit, busyness, keeping up with others, hustling hither and yon, makes it almost impossible for an individual to form a heart, to become a responsible, alive self. Every life that is preoccupied with being like others is a wasted life, a lost life.

A sparrow, a fly, a poisonous insect is an object of God's concern. It is not a wasted or lost life. But masses of mimickers, a crowd of copycats are wasted lives. God has been merciful to us, demonstrating his grace to the point of being willing to involve himself with every person. If we prefer to be like all the others, this amounts to high treason against God. We who simply go along are guilty, and our punishment is to be ignored by God.

