

COMMUNION AND THE REMISSION OF SIN:

A Kierkegaardian Account

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Abstract: *In this paper, I argue that by drawing comparisons between Søren Kierkegaard's discussion of Communion in his Discourses at Communion on Fridays and the account of sin presented in the pseudonymous *The Sickness Unto Death*, we can address a problem discussed in contemporary philosophy of religion. This problem, as Terence Cuneo describes it, is just how the seemingly mundane acts involved in the practice of the Eucharist can play a role in the remission of sin. I argue that by expanding Kierkegaard's discussion of sin in the Discourses at Communion on Fridays with reference to the account of sin presented in *The Sickness Unto Death*, we can provide a response to Cuneo's problem. According to this Kierkegaardian response, what prevents a person from being united to God in this life is not a lack of God's forgiveness, but rather, a weakness and fragmentedness of the human will. Not only does the practice of Communion bring about an awareness of one's willed distance from God, but it also strengthens the will in such a way that one draws closer to Christ. Thus, by drawing together these seemingly distinct areas of Kierkegaard's writings, I will show that we can begin to explain how the ordinary actions involved in the Eucharist can release human beings from the grip of sin.*

Introduction

The sacrament of Holy Communion (or, the Eucharist), is of central importance to almost every Christian tradition; it is a practice which unites churches both geographically and historically. However, just what the nature of this practice is has raised countless theological schisms and debates in the history of the Church. Yet, despite widespread theological disagreement on both the nature and the practice of Communion, as Eleonore Stump notes, typically there is agreement amongst theologians in holding that “Christ’s passion and death work their effect of saving human beings through faith from the human proclivity to sin... the means by which this process is effected can (and ideally should) include the Eucharist.”¹ Just how the Eucharist plays a role in overcoming the problem of sin and allowing for reconciliation with Christ is where things become less clear. This is the issue to which this paper seeks to provide a response.

In this paper, I argue that Søren Kierkegaard’s extensive work on Communion (which largely consists of a number of sermon like discourses written for the occasion of a Communion service) can provide an account of what Terence Cuneo describes as “remission of sin.”² I begin by outlining the problem of the remission of sin in the Eucharist as it outlined in Cuneo’s work and explore his own response to the problem. Then, by drawing a parallel between Kierkegaard’s discussion of the Communion in the *Discourses at Communion on Fridays* and his account of sin in *The Sickness Unto Death*, I suggest an alternative solution to this problem. According to this solution, the remission of sin is achieved by means of a person’s encounter with Christ at the Communion table. This encounter allows an individual to become conscious of her sin in a way which she could not achieve by herself, and thus, by focusing on Christ, a person can be released from the bonds of sin and draw near to him.

¹ Eleonore Stump, “Atonement and Eucharist,” in *Locating Atonement: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 221.

² Terence Cuneo, *Ritualized Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 188.

Communion and the Remission of Sins: The Problem

As Cuneo describes the problem of the remission of sin in the Eucharist,

it is difficult to see what the connection could be between the activities of participating in the Eucharist... on the one hand, and the state of enjoying remission of sin on the other... If these activities do effect the remission of sin, they appear to do so (at least in part) at a sub-doxastic level. How they accomplish this, however, is something that is not easy to understand.³

Before considering Cuneo's solution to this problem, let us get clear on just what the problem is. To do so, it will be important to clarify the terms involved more specifically.

First, to see how there could be remission of sin, it will be important to give an account of sin. As Cuneo defines it, sin is "a state of deep disorder, which has moral, legal, aesthetic, and therapeutic dimensions, some of these dimensions being such that they needn't imply that an agent who suffers from them is morally guilty in virtue of suffering from them."⁴ In developing the Kierkegaardian account of sin, I will refine this definition further, but for now, let us assume this definition as correct.

Second, following Cuneo, we can make a distinction between "forgiveness" and "remission."⁵ To be forgiven for some wrongdoing is often taken to involve no longer holding that wrongdoing against a person.⁶ In contrast to forgiveness, Cuneo claims that remission "is best rendered as something along the lines of *being*

³ Ibid., 186-187.

⁴ Ibid., 189.

⁵ Ibid., 188-89.

⁶ See, for instance, Richard Swinburne's account of forgiveness which holds that forgiveness is the removal of someone's objective guilt by means of the victim of wrongdoing no longer holding the act of wrongdoing against them. Richard Swinburne, "The Christian Scheme of Salvation," in *Oxford Readings in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Michael Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), vol. 1, 299.

released or liberated from the grip of sin."⁷ A helpful way of mapping out this difference between remission and forgiveness, as I intend to use it, can be seen by focusing on Stump's distinction between the "problem of past sin" and "the problem of future sin."⁸ If David, an alcoholic, kills his friend Susan's daughter in a car accident, Stump imagines, Susan can *forgive* David, thereby focusing on David's past actions. However, there still remains the ongoing effects of David's alcoholism to be addressed.⁹ That is, David needs to receive remission for his alcoholism to come into right relationship with Susan. The same is true for our sin, Stump thinks; whilst God can *forgive* our past sin, what remains after being forgiven is the ongoing grip of the sin disease from which we need to receive *remission*.

Although this is not a distinction on which Kierkegaard draws (at least not explicitly), as we will see, Kierkegaard is interested in discussing both the forgiveness of sin and the remission of sin in the context of Communion. Before outlining my own Kierkegaardian account, however, I will first consider Cuneo's response to this problem, which will provide a helpful contrast with the account I go on to develop.

Cuneo suggests that eating and drinking the elements in the Eucharist might play a similar role to that played by the eating of food in cases of anorexia.¹⁰ As he notes, drawing from Harriet Brown's discussion of having a child with anorexia, "rational persuasion, therapy and... pharmaceuticals tend not to help, at least not on their own," but rather, "the road to recovery lies in getting them to eat."¹¹ As Cuneo describes it, recovery from anorexia is not primarily a cognitive process, but rather, the power of eating as medicine acts in a sub-doxastic way.¹² The result is that the individual comes to see food and the world in a different way. It is not that

⁷ Cuneo (2016), 189.

⁸ Eleanore Stump, "Atonement According to Aquinas," in *Oxford Readings in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Michael Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), vol. 1, 270.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 278.

¹⁰ Cuneo (2016), 194.

¹¹ *Ibid.* See Harriet Brown, *Brave Girl Eating* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010).

¹² Cuneo (2016), 195.

she is persuaded to come out of her eating disorder, but rather, her eating causes her to see the world differently. Cuneo argues that something very similar happens in the remission from the grip of the sin disorder by partaking in the Eucharist. He writes,

important elements that contribute to the loosening of the grip of the disorder do not consist in the presentation or acceptance of propositions about God or God's activity or experiences that aim to evoke beliefs about God or God's activity... instead... there are important elements that contribute to the loosening of the grip of the sin-disorder that operate — at least in large measure — at a sub-doxastic level, below the level of understanding or belief.¹³

By participating in the Eucharist, Cuneo thinks that an individual in the grip of the sin disorder can come to see her own sin in a new light. Thus, the elements of bread and wine undergo a change in "function" when they are consecrated by the priest, namely, the function of bringing about communion with God.¹⁴ As he goes on to describe it, the elements somehow provide "a point of contact... with God" and thereby play a functional role in the loosening of sin disorder.¹⁵

In the remainder of this paper, I develop an alternative account of remission of sins, drawn from Kierkegaard's works, according to which the remission of sin is not achieved by the acts of eating, but rather through an encounter with the presence of the living Christ.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 198.

¹⁵ Ibid., 202. Whereas it is the sub-doxastic act of eating which provides the solution to the problem of sin remission for Cuneo, for Stump, it is the engagement in the narrative of liturgy which plays this role. Stump maintains that the Church's practice of the Eucharist consists in retelling the story of Christ's passion and death in such a way that it brings home to the participant certain features of their sin and God's forgiveness; Stump (2015), 218-224. As Stump describes, the participant in the Eucharist "will have in mind her own need for help in consequence of things in herself that she herself finds hateful. But she will also have brought home to her that, however alienated she may be from herself, God is not alienated from her." The result of this kind of personal engagement, Stump suggests, is that the Eucharist allows the participant to "be strengthened for perseverance, in virtue of growing in love of God and in experience of God's continued love and presence to her." Stump (2015), 223-224.

Sin Remission in Kierkegaard's *Communion Discourses*

It might be surprising to some, given his disdain for the established Church, that Kierkegaard has anything resembling a theology of the Eucharist.¹⁶ Yet, whilst Kierkegaard's writing is often anti-ecclesial, it is not anti-praxis. And central to Kierkegaard's understanding of Christian practice is the sacrament of Communion. In his journals, for instance, he affirms that Communion is the "true center" of the Church.¹⁷ Indeed, we know that Kierkegaard gave prominence to this practice throughout his life.¹⁸ Along with three discourses which Kierkegaard prepared to deliver at a Friday Communion service in Copenhagen, he also produced another ten discourses intended for, or written in the style of, a Friday Communion sermon. As Sylvia Walsh notes, these *Communion Discourses* formed an important genre of writing in Kierkegaard's oeuvre, and Kierkegaard wished to give an important role to them in his authorship.¹⁹ It is here, in the *Communion Discourses*, that we can find something resembling the issue which Cuneo is attempting to address. I will begin by drawing on relevant passages from Kierkegaard's thirteen *Communion*

¹⁶ Throughout his writings, Kierkegaard shows a distrust and disdain for organised religion. As Pattison summarises, "[i]n his later writings on the Church, Kierkegaard puts the very idea of a Church as such up for question to the extent that what he effectively asks is, simply: Does Christianity actually need a Church?" George Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Theology of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 203.

¹⁷ *JP*, 5: 5089.

¹⁸ In the 19th Century Danish Lutheran Church, into which Kierkegaard was confirmed, the Sunday service focused around the preaching of the Word, with an optional Communion attached to the service, for those who wished to receive it. The Friday service, in contrast to this, focused around the practice of Communion, with preaching attached to the sacrament. We know that Kierkegaard was a regular attendee at Friday Communion, but hardly ever attended church on a Sunday; Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, "Søren Kierkegaard at Friday Communion in the Church of Our Lady," *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Without Authority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 258-264.

¹⁹ Sylvia Walsh, "Introduction," from *Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*, trans. and ed. by Sylvia Walsh (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 15-17. In the preface to a collection of these discourses, found in *Without Authority*, Kierkegaard writes that the authorship, "that began with *Either/Or* and advanced step by step seeks here its decisive place of rest, at the foot of the altar" (WA, 165). Furthermore, in reflecting on the purpose and structure of his authorship in *The Point of View*, Kierkegaard lists the *Communion Discourses* as having a crucial role alongside his other texts (PV, 5-6).

Discourses, before attempting to make connections with other areas of his writings which can help us to construct a Kierkegaardian account of sin remission.

The Purpose of Communion

First, it will be helpful to begin by considering what Kierkegaard takes to be the overall purpose of Communion. Or, more specifically, what the end goal of the Christian life is, for which Communion plays a role in helping to achieve. Throughout the discourses, he emphasises that the role of Communion is to draw us near to God through Christ. For instance, in a discourse found in *Practice in Christianity*, reflecting on a verse from John's gospel (John 12:32), Anti-Climacus writes, "This was your [Christ's] task, which you have completed and which you will complete until the end of time, for just as you yourself have said it, so will do it: lifted up from earth, you will draw all to yourself."²⁰

Whilst there might be an eschatological component to Anti-Climacus' remarks here (especially given the use of "*until the end of time*"), more often than not, rather than focusing on future union with God, Kierkegaard focuses his attention on the immediate purpose of Communion, namely, renewing an individual's communion with Christ. Of course, the two are not incompatible, but Kierkegaard's focus in the discourses, as is often the case, is on the practical and the immediate, rather than on the intangible and far off. We can find examples of reference to communion with Christ in almost all of the thirteen discourses. For instance, he writes, "Father in heaven! We know well that you are the one who enables both willing and completing and that longing, when it draws us to renew communion with our Savior and Atoner, is also from you."²¹ Elsewhere, he propounds a similar idea, in writing that, "we also thank you in this way, as those who are now gathered here today, by going up to your altar in order to renew communion with you."²² As Kierkegaard presents it in many places, then, there is a specific purpose to Communion, namely, God's drawing all people to himself through the renewal of an individual's communion with Christ.

²⁰ *DACF*, 120, *PC*, 151.

²¹ *DACF*, 37; *CD*, 251.

²² *DACF*, 63; *CD*, 276.

The Problem of Sin

If the aim of Communion is to draw us into communion with Christ, then the problem which prevents this from occurring is the person's sin. As I will suggest, we can find something resembling Cuneo's distinction between forgiveness and remission. That is, in Kierkegaard's discussion of Communion we can see that we need to be forgiven from our past sin, but we also need God's assistance in recovering from the ongoing effects of sinfulness. As I will suggest in the concluding section, noticing this can help us develop a Kierkegaardian account of the remission of sin through Communion.

First, let us consider Kierkegaard's focus on God's forgiving human sin in the context of the Communion sacrament. In a number of places, Kierkegaard describes sin as requiring God's judgement and Christ as providing satisfaction, thereby making forgiveness possible. However, as Murray Rae highlights, for Kierkegaard, "Christ is not the judge in some punitive sense; rather, the infinite and unconditional nature of his love reveals the poverty of our own love. It is love then that provides the most severe judgement."²³ In reflecting on this distinction between love's judgement and punitive judgment, Kierkegaard writes that "love's judgement is the severest judgement.... The word of judgement does not say: '[The one] to whom little is forgiven sinned much, so his sins were therefore too great and too many to be forgiven.' No, judgement says: 'he loves little.'"²⁴ As Rae notes, Kierkegaard's concern here, is "essentially relational" and indicates "the re-establishment of right relationship" with God.²⁵ Nevertheless, as we can see, sin results in a kind of alienation from God due to the guilt of past action and a person's failure to love.

Yet, this focus on guilt and the need for forgiveness is not the only aspect of sin which Kierkegaard brings to light in the discourses. Arguably, the focus on remission (at least as Cuneo describes the difference) is far more prominent. Kierkegaard focuses, for instance, on the problem of unconfessed or unconscious

²³ Murray Rae, *Kierkegaard and Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2010), 103.

²⁴ *DACF*, 129-30; *WA*, 171-172.

²⁵ Rae (2010), 104.

sin which weighs heavily on a believer. To take one of many examples, he writes that “nothing else rests as heavy upon a person as sin’s heavy secret; there is only one thing that is heavier: to have to go to confession. Oh, no other secret is as frightful as the secret of sin; there is only one thing that is even more frightful: confession.”²⁶ Elsewhere, he describes unconfessed sin as having a “deep... eternal concern.”²⁷ Thus, a part of what keeps human beings from communion with Christ is that their unconfessed sin weighs heavily on their hearts, and this results in their unwillingness to seek forgiveness — we might properly describe this heaviness of heart as a lack of sin remission. The problem is not that God has not forgiven the individual, but rather, unacknowledged sin somehow prevents a person drawing near to Christ.

However, even after acknowledging their sin, Kierkegaard thinks that individuals have difficulty in receiving forgiveness from Christ. Again, this might be described as a part of the problem of remission. For instance, Kierkegaard writes, “just as it is a difficult matter in praying rightly to be able to come to the Amen... likewise it is also a difficult matter rightly to receive the forgiveness of sins at the altar.”²⁸ Continuing on from the discussion of the judgment of love, Kierkegaard highlights the self-inflicted nature of judgment once one realises that God offers forgiveness for sin. He writes, “When love judges you, and the judgement is — oh horror! — the judgement is ‘Your sins are forgiven you!’... there is something within you that makes you feel that they are not forgiven you.”²⁹ Thus, although Kierkegaard does think that Christ must act as satisfaction to provide forgiveness for sin, there is also the ongoing problem of self-inflicted sin, even after being forgiven. The judgement of love, he writes, “thinks not of his many sins, oh no, it is willing to forget them all, it has forgotten them all.”³⁰ The problem that remains,

²⁶ *DACF*, 110; *WA*, 139.

²⁷ *DACF*, 51; *CD*, 264.

²⁸ *DACF*, 128; *WA*, 169.

²⁹ *DACF*, 131; *WA*, 173.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

then, is that "it is self-inflicted... for the charge is not his sins, no, the charge is: it is forgiven him, everything is forgiven him."³¹

We can see that what keeps human beings from communion with Christ is not God's judgement and lack of forgiveness, but rather, it is the revelation and acceptance of this loving forgiveness on the part of the individual, that is, the ongoing problem of the sin dis-order. Or, in Cuneo's terminology, the individual needs to receive remission from sin.

As we will see, the Kierkegaardian account of sin remission has a number of layers. Ultimately, for Kierkegaard, it is through becoming contemporary with Christ at the altar that an individual is cured of his sin. First, Christ must provide satisfaction for this sin in order to atone for a person's wrongdoing to allow for forgiveness. However, such forgiveness is not sufficient for remission of a person's sin. For remission to occur, a person must also come to terms with her own sin and realize the extent of the problem; there must be a consciousness of sin. Moreover, this person must accept forgiveness and be healed from the psychological torment of self-inflicted guilt. As we will see, although human striving plays some role in Kierkegaard's account, the reconciliation that is achieved is the work of God in all three of these stages.

The Solution to the Problem of Sin: Forgiveness from Sin

While, as we have seen, (at least in the way Cuneo describes the distinction) forgiveness and remission refer to different aspects of how God overcomes the problem of sin, it will be helpful for our purposes to first consider Kierkegaard's discussion of forgiveness in the context of Communion.

As Rae notes, in general, "Kierkegaard is concerned above all with how one responds to the declaration of forgiveness and grace rather than with the mechanics of how atonement is accomplished," yet within the *Communion Discourses*, Rae writes, "we gain some indication of how Kierkegaard conceives the

³¹ Ibid.

atonement doctrinally."³² As Olli-Pekka Vainio puts it, Kierkegaard's atonement theology seems to be an articulation of an "amazingly classical" substitution view.³³

We can see this, for instance, when Kierkegaard writes, "Christ put himself entirely in your place. He was God and became a human being — in this way he put himself in your place."³⁴ Later in the same discourse, he continues, "[f]or what is the 'Atoner' but a substitute who puts himself entirely in your place and in mine; and what is the consolation of the atonement but this, that the substitute, making satisfaction, puts himself entirely in your and in my place!"³⁵ Elsewhere, he describes this satisfaction in terms of Christ's hiding sin from judgement with his "*holy body*."³⁶ So, Kierkegaard clearly holds that a part of the problem of sin is that human beings need Christ to pay satisfaction for their sin to avoid judgement. What is more, this satisfaction can only be the work of God. Kierkegaard writes, "In relation to the atonement you cannot be a co-worker of Christ, not in the remotest way. You are wholly in debt, he is wholly the satisfaction."³⁷

It is important to note that whilst Christ's atonement provides the means of our being forgiven from sin, one of the important roles of Communion in providing remission from the ongoing effects of sin is to *remind* us of Christ's sacrificial atonement. Indeed, he writes that while at the pulpit the life of Christ is proclaimed, "at the altar it is his death."³⁸ While Christ's death cannot be repeated, what is repeated is that, "he died also for you, you who in his body and blood receive the pledge that he has died also for you, at the altar, where he gives you *himself* as a hiding place."³⁹

³² Rae (2010), 101-102.

³³ Olli-Pekka Vainio, "Kierkegaard's Eucharistic Spirituality," *Theology Today* 67, no. 1 (2010): 19.

³⁴ *DACF*, 93; *WA*, 116.

³⁵ *DACF*, 99; *WA*, 123.

³⁶ *DACF*, 141; *WA*, 185.

³⁷ *DACF*, 86; *CD*, 299.

³⁸ *DACF*, 142; *WA*, 186.

³⁹ *DACF*, 142; *WA* 186-87.

The Solution to the Problem of Sin: Remission and Sin-Consciousness

Let us now consider how Kierkegaard describes the role of Communion in the remission of sin.

An important part of our restoration from the ongoing effects of sin, for Kierkegaard, is that we become more conscious of our sin. For this reason, Kierkegaard often stresses that before even approaching the Communion table, a person must be properly prepared. We know that Friday communion services which Kierkegaard attended were preceded by a confession in which the priest would absolve the sins of the people.⁴⁰ This confession ritual also included a confession discourse delivered by the priest. So, while the *Communion Discourses* are *not* confession discourses, their focus is often on the consciousness and confession of sin.⁴¹

The role of confession in preparation for Communion, as Kierkegaard describes it, is to bring to mind the sins that prevent us from enjoying communion with Christ.⁴² Kierkegaard thinks that this consciousness of sin plays an important role in a person's reconciliation with God through Christ. For instance, he states, "it is no doubt a restful position when you kneel at the foot of the altar, but God grant that this indeed may truly be only a faint intimation of your soul's finding rest in God through the consciousness of the forgiveness of sins."⁴³ As Lee Barrett has argued, there is a tension at work in Kierkegaard's writings on Communion here: there is both an emphasis on the need for human striving (he writes of the *requirement* of sin-consciousness, for instance) but at the same time, even in

⁴⁰ Cappelørn (2006), 265-272.

⁴¹ Kierkegaard writes his own discourse on the occasion of confession (see *UDVS*, 3-154). Given its length, it is very unlikely he ever intended this discourse to actually be used in such a context.

⁴² *DACF*, 37; *CD*, 251.

⁴³ *DACF*, 54; *CD*, 267.

receiving consciousness of sin, it is only God who is at work; the remission of sin is a gift of grace.⁴⁴

One of the ways that God provides the person with a consciousness of sin is through the work of the Holy Spirit in speaking through a person's conscience. Kierkegaard describes this voice as a kind of inner preacher which convicts individuals of sin.⁴⁵ So, even though he speaks of the requirement of confession and sin-consciousness, Kierkegaard is keen to stress that in Communion, it is not that we do something to achieve reconciliation with Christ. In fact, he strongly emphasises the opposite: "At the altar you are able to do nothing at all, not even this, to hold fast the thought of your unworthiness, and in this to make yourself receptive to the blessing."⁴⁶

The Solution to the Problem of Sin: Remission from Psychological Bondage

Lastly, as well as providing a context for a person to become conscious of both their sin and also the forgiveness of this sin, Kierkegaard also describes Communion as playing a role in overcoming some of the psychological effects of sin. It is in discussing the psychological burden of sin that he is closest to providing an account of something like sin remission.

As well as providing satisfaction for sin, Kierkegaard writes that Christ "came to the world in order to free us from the chains in which we were bound or in which we had bound ourselves, and in order to rescue the redeemed."⁴⁷ This freeing from the bonds of self-inflicted punishment, is described in many places as a kind of "rest" for the soul.⁴⁸ However, this rest for the soul must be connected with

⁴⁴ Lee C. Barrett, "Christ's Efficacious Love and Human Responsibility: The Lutheran Dialectic of 'Discourses at the Communion on Fridays,'" *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 17, *Christian Discourses and the Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁴⁵ *DACF*, 139; *WA*, 183.

⁴⁶ *DACF*, 87; *CD*, 300.

⁴⁷ *DACF*, 120; *PC*, 151.

⁴⁸ *DACF*, 52; *CD*, 265.

forgiveness and penitence; “only the penitent properly understands what it is to pray for rest for the soul, rest in the only thought in which there is rest for a penitent that there is forgiveness.”⁴⁹ Here, Christ’s humanity plays an important role in this freeing from the bonds of sin. Later in the same discourse, he notes, “He is indeed not only your spiritual advisor but also your savior; he understands not only all your sorrow better than you yourself understand it, oh, but he wants precisely to take the burden from you and give you rest for your soul.”⁵⁰ On Kierkegaard’s account, then, coming to the altar at Communion allows a person to be made aware of Christ’s atoning work in providing forgiveness, but also, it provides a strengthening of the will to remove an individual from the self-inflicted bonds of sin in their life.

Kierkegaard also has a clear answer to how this is made possible, namely, by a concrete encounter with the living person of Christ. As George Pattison argues, Kierkegaard clearly espouses a Lutheran view of Christ’s being truly present in the Eucharist, in which the emphasis is not on the body of Christ, but rather on the living presence of Christ.⁵¹ For instance, in the discourse on Luke 22:15, he writes that Christ “is not a dead person but one who is living.”⁵² The Communion table is particularly associated with Christ’s living presence; in *Practice in Christianity*, Anti-Climacus, opens his Communion discourse with the prayer: “God grant that at this sacred moment you may feel yourself entirely drawn to him, sense his presence, he who is present there.”⁵³ Notably, as Kierkegaard puts it elsewhere, Christ’s presence is something which the individual experiences by means of hearing Christ’s voice.⁵⁴ Whereas preaching intends to “instruct or impress” the listener, the Communion discourse, “wants to give you pause for a moment on the way to the altar.”⁵⁵ The

⁴⁹ *DACF*, 52; *CD*, 265.

⁵⁰ *DACF*, 53; *CD*, 266.

⁵¹ Pattison (2012), 158.

⁵² *DACF*, 48; *CD*, 261.

⁵³ *DACF*, 124; *PC*, 156.

⁵⁴ *DACF*, 58; *CD*, 270.

⁵⁵ *DACF*, 58; *CD*, 270.

reason for this, Kierkegaard continues, is that, “[a]t the altar... it is *his* voice that you must hear... At the altar... no matter how many are gathered there, yes even if everyone is gathered at the altar, there is no crowd at the altar. He himself is personally present, and he knows those who are his own.”⁵⁶

It is through this encounter with the living presence of Christ, then, that a person is able to find rest for their soul and receive remission for their sin. Note again, that this release from the bondage of sin at the Communion table is not a work of human striving, but rather, it is a work of Christ. This is made apparent in Kierkegaard’s contrast between the act of human forgetting and the act of focusing on the person of Christ; by focusing on the person of Christ, Kierkegaard thinks, a person is able to somehow *forget* her sin.⁵⁷ Lastly, not only does participation in Communion bring with it a release from self-inflicted condemnation, but it also strengthens the believer’s will for the future. Kierkegaard writes, “we pray for those who are gathered here that they may go up to the Lord’s table today with heartfelt longing and that when they leave there, they may go away with increased longing for him our Savior and Atoner.”⁵⁸

Thus, as I have presented it, Kierkegaard’s account of the remission of sin in Communion is achieved by becoming aware of Christ’s work in providing satisfaction for sin, by the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing a person to consciousness of their sin and through an encounter with the living Christ at the Communion table which allows a person to be released from the self-inflicted bondage of sin and for their will to be strengthened. So, while it is clear that Communion is a means of sin remission, what is not clear from the *Communion Discourses* alone, is just how this encounter with Christ brings about sin remission. Whilst this may not be Kierkegaard’s aim in these discourses, by looking elsewhere in his writings, we can construct a more detailed account of sin remission which can help to construct a Kierkegaardian account.

⁵⁶ *DACF*, 58-59; *CD*, 270-271.

⁵⁷ *DACF*, 120-21; *PC*, 152-53.

⁵⁸ *DACF*, 37; *CD*, 251.

Sin, Sin-Consciousness, and Communion in *The Sickness Unto Death*

We have seen the role that the Eucharist plays in the remission of sin and renewal of communion between an individual and Christ. However, while David Law is surely right to note that in the *Communion Discourses*, Kierkegaard does not provide a full Eucharistic theology,⁵⁹ by looking elsewhere in Kierkegaard's writings we can provide a more detailed account of the remission of sin in the Eucharist. In particular, one aspect of Kierkegaard's account which can be supplemented by looking elsewhere is an account of the nature of the problem of sin and how encountering Christ can overcome this problem.

One of the most detailed accounts of sin in Kierkegaard's writings is found in *The Sickness Unto Death* in which the pseudonymous author, Anti-Climacus, presents a psychological view of the widespread sickness of human sin, and the possibility of its remedy through the work of Christ.

To give a brief summary of the account of sin in *Sickness*: the human sickness, according to Anti-Climacus, is that of despair, a disease of the will which prevents a person from willing to exist as a self in the appropriate way. Because despair is a disease of the will, the more self-conscious one is, the more aware one is of one's own despair. It is this disease of the will which prevents human beings from relating properly to God, the source of their selfhood. This sickness requires a medicine, which begins with a person's self-awareness, but this is not something which human beings can arrive at by themselves; they need the antidote of faith, a gift of grace from God, to reveal the extent of despair and to realign the will. This provides the Christian with a kind of *superiority* over other human beings who are in despair, that is, the Christian has an awareness of her despair.⁶⁰ Now, although the beginning of faith brings with it an awareness of one's despair, faith is an ongoing task which seeks to repair the human will and to unite the human self with

⁵⁹ David Law, "Kierkegaard's Understanding of the Eucharist in Christian Discourses, Part Four," *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 17, *Christian Discourses and the Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 275.

⁶⁰ *SUD*, 15.

God, in order that she might eventually “rest transparently in God.”⁶¹ Sin, then, is to despair before God. As it is presented in *Sickness*, whilst the Christian is given a kind of superiority because of her awareness of despair, she is yet to receive full healing from her sickness. Indeed, over the course of one’s life, sin and despair must be rooted out and repaired by the ongoing work of Christ. As Anti-Climacus puts it, “to be cured of this sickness is the Christian’s blessedness.”⁶²

As we can see already, many of the themes presented in *Sickness* reflect those themes which Kierkegaard focuses on in the *Communion Discourses*. By giving a more detailed overview of these themes, I will show that we can come to a more detailed understanding of sin remission in the practice of Communion.

The Purpose of the Christian Life

First, just as in the *Communion Discourses*, we see that in *Sickness*, Anti-Climacus holds that there is an ultimate goal or purpose for the Christian life. This is described throughout by Anti-Climacus as to “rest transparently in God,” or to rest “transparently in the power that established it.”⁶³ It is interesting, as we have seen, that this theme of *rest* is one that Kierkegaard describes throughout the *Communion Discourses* in contrast to the restlessness and weariness of sinfulness. In *Sickness*, this state of resting in God is presented as the resolution to the problem of despair, the sickness which all humanity is stricken by. Whereas despair is a willful mis-relation to oneself, what God provides by faith is a willed communion with him which brings with it a state of restfulness. Thus, as Anti-Climacus tells us, the truth of Christianity is that we are “invited to live on the most intimate terms with God.”⁶⁴

The Problem of Sin

What is it that prevents a human being from resting transparently in God and living on the most intimate terms with him? For Anti-Climacus, the answer to this

⁶¹ *SUD*, 30.

⁶² *SUD*, 15.

⁶³ *SUD*, 30 and 14.

⁶⁴ *SUD*, 85.

question is found in focusing on the nature of the human self. He describes the self as (i) “relating itself to itself,” (ii) existing as a “synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity,” and, (iii) “in relating itself to itself relates itself to another.”⁶⁵ This account of the self is notoriously obscure and hard to understand, and we need not worry overly about its intricate details here. The important point to note is that this account of the self presents human beings as in the process of willing their own existence to various degrees of success. These success criteria are relational. Thus, a person can will to be properly related to herself, that is, she can exist in a state of self-conscious freedom in relationship to herself, or she can exist in a state of bad faith, by denying her own freedom. Moreover, for Anti-Climacus, the human self does not exist only in relation to itself, but also to God, its creator. Another way of failing to relate as a self, then, is by failing to relate properly to God. Finally, Anti-Climacus also describes the human self as existing as a relation of various competing components — she is both infinite and finite, temporal and eternal, free and necessary — by willing to relate only as a finite being, or only as a temporal being, we fail to relate properly as a self on this account.

It is in reference to this account of the self that Anti-Climacus explains the pervasive problem of human sinfulness, understood as a kind of despair. Despair, as he characterizes it, is a failure of the will to exist as a self in the way described above. This despair can occur in a variety of forms. For instance, despair can occur through ignorance and a lack of self-consciousness,⁶⁶ through a kind of weakness of the will,⁶⁷ or through a kind of defiance.⁶⁸ Building on this account of despair, Anti-Climacus holds that sin is simply a kind of despair “before God.”⁶⁹ Sin is not defined as a disobedience to some external force, but rather, the account is very similar to what Cuneo describes as the *sin dis-order*.⁷⁰ Anti-Climacus rejects defining sin in

⁶⁵ *SUD*, 13-14.

⁶⁶ *SUD*, 42.

⁶⁷ *SUD*, 67.

⁶⁸ *SUD*, 68.

⁶⁹ *SUD*, 77.

⁷⁰ Cuneo (2016), 189.

terms of action types; it is entirely possible to be “quite in order” having refrained from murder, adultery, stealing, etc., and still fail to relate properly to God.⁷¹ What is lacking from the sinful person is not right action, but, rather, a proper relation to God and to oneself.

We can see the connection between some of the psychological effects of sin, which Kierkegaard discusses in the *Communion Discourses* outlined in more precise terms in *Sickness*. For instance, Anti-Climacus talks of “[t]he sin of despairing over one’s sin” as well as “[t]he sin of despairing of the forgiveness of sins (offense).”⁷² Both of these forms of despair, he thinks, are ways of continuing to be defiant or weak before God in willing to be a self, even after becoming conscious of one’s sin. On the *despair over one’s sin*, for example, Anti-Climacus writes that, such a person “may not say: I can never forgive myself (as if he had previously forgiven himself sins — a blasphemy). No, he says that God can never forgive him for it. Alas, this is just a subterfuge. His sorrow, his cares, his despair are selfish.”⁷³ To take another example, on the sin of despairing of the forgiveness of one’s sins, Anti-Climacus maintains that, “Ordinarily defiance is: in despair to will to be oneself. Here this is weakness, in despair to will to be oneself — a sinner — in such a way that there is no forgiveness.”⁷⁴

The similarity between these kinds of despair and the discussion of self-inflicted or unconfessed sin in the *Communion Discourses* is striking. Here we also have a more explicit explanation of the nature of this sin. As Rae summarises Anti-Climacus’ position,

Sin may be conceived... as a mis-relation between the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal, freedom and necessity.... Those guilty of such mis-relation exist in despair. This does not mean that they will appear to be miserable; such people may indeed be, and often are, very comfortable and happy. Their despair, consists, rather

⁷¹ *SUD*, 81.

⁷² *SUD*, 109, 113.

⁷³ *SUD*, 112.

⁷⁴ *SUD*, 113.

in their misplaced and thus false hope. They have staked their existence on something that will not endure. [Anti-Climacus] is in no doubt that we are all to be numbered in this group. We all fall short. We have all plunged ourselves into the bondage of sin, and stand in need, therefore of forgiveness and re-creation. We are all afflicted with "the sickness unto death."⁷⁵

Thus, we can see that although the Christian's *superiority* is that they are brought to the realisation of their wilful despair by a revelation from God, a Christian does not reach the *blessedness* of being free from despair immediately. But rather, there is an ongoing problem of sin which individuals need remission from; a person must become more self-aware and somehow realign their will to eventually will only the good, thereby, coming to rest entirely in God.

The Solution to the Problem of Sin: Forgiveness and Remission in *The Sickness Unto Death*

So how does one move from a position of despair to begin the process of becoming free from despair? The structure of this solution closely fits with the account given in the *Communion Discourses* — Christ deals with the problem of sin through the cross, a person must become aware of her sin (the Christian's *superiority*), and the life of faith is the life spent repairing the damage done by sin through the remission of sin (leading to the Christian's eventual state of *blessedness*).

First, let's look at what Anti-Climacus writes on the atonement and the mechanism by which Christ deals with the enormity of human sin. Anti-Climacus describes the atonement as a "paradox" which stresses the impossibility of eliminating the widespread problem of sin but also the fact that Christ wants "wants to eliminate sin as completely as if it were drowned in the sea."⁷⁶ While Kierkegaard is uncharacteristically detailed in the *Communion Discourses* about the doctrine of atonement, we see here, in *Sickness*, that Anti-Climacus describes the doctrine as paradoxical, that is, beyond the limits of human speculation. Yet, the two positions

⁷⁵ Rae (2010), 93-94.

⁷⁶ *SUD*, 100.

are at least consistent — in both places, Kierkegaard emphasises that human sin is a problem which is pervasive and much larger than humans have comprehended, and also, that Christ eradicates human sin in some way, even if this is beyond our comprehension (at least as he describes it here).

We have also seen that the consciousness of sin is a vital stage in the process of reconciliation with God in both the *Communion Discourses* and *Sickness*. What's more, it is only God who can bring a human being to this place of realization. According to Anti-Climacus, "there must be a revelation from God to teach man what sin is and how deeply it is rooted."⁷⁷ For this reason, he writes, "salvation is, humanly speaking, utterly impossible; but for God everything is possible!"⁷⁸

Moreover, whilst the moment of salvation provides an awareness of sinfulness, the task of sin-consciousness must continue throughout a person's life for them to be released from the sickness of sin. Anti-Climacus explicitly links the consciousness of sin with a person's experience of Christ. He writes that, "The greater conception of God, the more self... the greater conception of Christ, the more self... the more self there is, the more intense sin is."⁷⁹ The sins of despairing over sin or despairing of the forgiveness of one's sins, for instance, are sins of which we must become aware in order to be cured of them. How does Anti-Climacus envisage this awareness taking place? His answer is that one must be before Christ in some way. Moreover, it is clear that this process is an ongoing process and that the moment of salvation does not entirely eradicate the sin disease from a person, despite the fact that her sin is forgiven.

Thus, as we can see, Anti-Climacus' account provides a more detailed framework for understanding just what the problem of sin is by describing it in terms of misrelation of the will and lack of self-consciousness. What is needed to be fully repaired from sin is the gradual and lifelong reorientation of the will to relate properly to oneself and to God. Whilst it is less clear is what this amounts to, at

⁷⁷ *SUD*, 96.

⁷⁸ *SUD*, 39.

⁷⁹ *SUD*, 114.

least practically, here the earlier account from the *Communion Discourses* is helpful. As we have seen, it is through the encounter with Christ at the Communion Table that a person becomes aware of her sin and by focusing on Christ, she can receive the strengthening of her will and can worship God in faith. As Anti-Climacus describes it, "Faith is: that the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God."⁸⁰

A Kierkegaardian Account of Communion and the Remission of Sin

Let us return to Cuneo's question. What is the connection between "the activities of participating in the Eucharist... on the one hand, and the state of enjoying remission of sin on the other?"⁸¹ As we have seen, Cuneo claims that the elements themselves provide a kind of sub-doxastic medicine for our disease, which slowly train us to see the world differently in light of God's forgiveness. Kierkegaard's account is vastly different to this in a number of ways. For Kierkegaard, the elements seem to be of very little significance in explaining how it is that we are repaired from the damage of sin. Instead, it is primarily by our encounter with the living Christ at the Communion table that we are made aware of sin, reminded of Christ's sacrifice and receive Christ's help in strengthening and repairing our will.

By drawing comparisons between the discussions of sin and sin-consciousness in *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Discourses at Communion on Fridays* I have outlined a different Kierkegaardian response to this problem. In both texts, Kierkegaard focuses primarily on the presence of Christ as providing something like remission for human sin. As we have seen, the sin which prevents a person being united to God in this life is not removed by God's forgiving us. But rather, there remains an ongoing sickness which is best characterized as a sickness of the will, by which human beings fail to will to be united to God because of their lack of self-awareness and sin-consciousness, or because of a weakness of the will in which they are too psychologically fragmented by sin to will union with God. The

⁸⁰ *SUD*, 82.

⁸¹ Cuneo (2016), 186-87.

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important feature of recovering from sickness is self-awareness. In becoming aware of just who one is and how one is related (or misrelated) to Christ, one is more able to receive Christ's grace, and thereby repair the will. Not only does Communion bring about an awareness of one's willed distance from God, but it also strengthens the will in such a way that one draws closer to Christ. Whilst there is no doubt much more to be said on this issue, by drawing together these seemingly distinct areas of Kierkegaard's writings, I have shown that we can begin to explain how the ordinary actions involved in the Eucharist can release human beings from the grip of sin. Thus, unlike Cuneo's account, the bread and wine do not play a therapeutic role in the restoration of right relationship with God. For Kierkegaard, only the living presence of Christ could play such a role.