



Mark A. Tietjen (PhD, Baylor University) is chaplain and Grace Palmer Johnston Chair of Bible at The Stony Brook School in Stony Brook, New York. He previously served as associate professor and program director of philosophy at the University of West Georgia. Former secretary-treasurer of the Søren Kierkegaard Society, Tietjen is the author of *Kierkegaard, Communication, and Virtue: Authorship as Edification* and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals and books, including *Faith and Philosophy*, *International Philosophical Quarterly* and the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*.

What Christians Can Learn from Kierkegaard

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) had a mission to reintroduce the Christian faith to a church that had become weak, flabby and inconsequential. In this book, Mark Tietjen examines core Christian doctrines in order to demonstrate how Kierkegaard's critique of his contemporaries strikes close to home today. IVP Academic Editor David Congdon and Tietjen recently discussed the thought behind Kierkegaard: A Christian Missionary to Christians.

What motivated you to write a book about Søren Kierkegaard?

Mark Tietjen: I was motivated to write this book to explain the value of Kierkegaard's thought to my own family, but more broadly to Christians who have not studied philosophy but are interested in growing in their faith. My approach of translating Kierkegaard's thought for a lay audience is distinctive because Kierkegaard has regularly been ignored or condemned by evangelical Christians and has, instead, been primarily the focus of academics.

How did you first become interested in Kierkegaard?

Tietjen: I took a course with the late Dr. James Loder, professor at Princeton Seminary, and the course was entirely on Kierkegaard. Dr. Loder was himself deeply and openly moved and edified by Kierkegaard, and I found that as I began to read the works of Kierkegaard I had a similar response. In some ways I felt Kierkegaard was saying things I had thought but couldn't articulate. In other ways I felt he was saying things about the gospel or human life that I had never heard before but rang true. Either way, I benefited from his writing and found him to be a helpful companion on my walk of faith.

What do you hope Christians reading Kierkegaard today take away from his work?

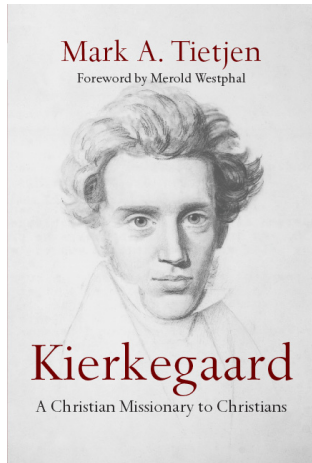
Tietjen: Kierkegaard simultaneously challenges our faith—our complacency, hypocrisy, our half-hearted attempts at following Jesus—but also encourages our faith. He understands human existence and the deep, emotional make-up of humans, and he understands and articulates how the gospel speaks to these emotions and needs. In a non-trivial and non-trendy way Kierkegaard makes relevant God's love for humanity in Jesus Christ.

Kierkegaard is famous for his "attack upon Christendom." What exactly was he attacking and how does it relate to the church today?

Tietjen: Kierkegaard does not attack Christianity like Nietzsche, who quite literally condemns Christian faith, but rather he attacks Christians, somewhat like the prophets "attacked" an unfaithful Israel or Jesus "attacked" religious hypocrites. The call to Israel and to the religious ultimately is a call to return to God, to their first love, and away from their superficial and often unjust religious show. I think Kierkegaard's attack is similar.

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*Kierkegaard: A Christian
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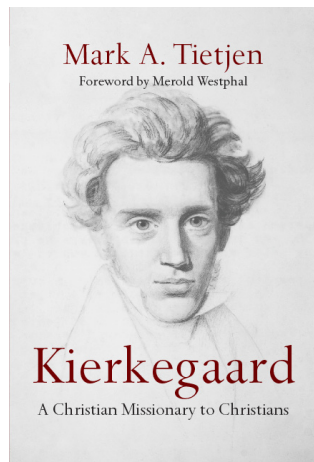
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Kierkegaard’s attack was aimed toward the established state church, the cultural behemoth that wielded great religious and cultural authority in his day. His attack wasn’t targeted so much at its power or its wealth but rather at its faithlessness in living up to (and calling others to live up to) the gospel. Jesus’ way is the way of persecution, of suffering, and yet the established church and its clergy enjoyed esteemed status and privilege. For Kierkegaard, the church and its leaders failed to take up their cross.

We tend to think that a Christian is something one is or isn’t, like a box we check on a survey. Kierkegaard speaks of Christians always becoming Christians. Could you explain what he means?

Tietjen: I think this claim comes from two sources, the first of which is Scripture. Paul talks about *working out* our salvation in fear and trembling. The implication is that salvation is an ongoing project of God’s and one in which we are invited to obey and to trust God. The other comes from Kierkegaard’s observation of humanity, including himself. All the ideals we hold for ourselves are ideals we fail to live up to at any given time, and yet those ideals remain and we continue to strive toward them. That we are becoming who we are can thus be applied to any number of areas in life, but it is true as well of Christian faith. There’s no point this side of heaven at which we sit back and declare we’ve arrived, we are perfected. That might be a claim of other faiths, but not of Christian faith as Kierkegaard sees it.



Kierkegaard: A Christian Missionary to Christians
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“Kierkegaard famously described his task as ‘reintroducing Christianity into Christendom.’ In this wonderfully rich and clearly written book Mark Tietjen helps us understand what Kierkegaard meant by this, and thereby helps us see how vital it is for the contemporary church to encounter Kierkegaard’s thought. Kierkegaard’s message will pull us away from complacency and help us understand anew what it means to be a follower of Jesus.”

– C. Stephen Evans, Baylor University

Kierkegaard: Friend to Christians?

I have become convinced that Kierkegaard not only has something to say to me but to all who call themselves Christians.

As the people of God Christians are called to seek wisdom from God’s people of earlier times. Whether in the stories of Scripture, the writings of theologians or the counsel of a parent or grandparent, God speaks to us through those who have journeyed before us. In terms of Christian history Søren Kierkegaard is a relatively recent voice, though I strongly suspect his thought offers a timely challenge and corrective to the pervasive cultural Christianity and endless chatter of Christianese that abounds in much of America.

Bearing in mind that Kierkegaard in particular and philosophy in general can be difficult and intimidating undertakings for the uninitiated, I have written this book not for scholars and professors but for everyday people. Kierkegaard has been accused of being confusing, long-winded and contradictory, and while I think these accusations are mostly cheap shots, I fully admit that there are any number of other Christian authors that are easier going.

Because Kierkegaard participates in longrunning conversations in philosophy and theology, his writing makes use of technical concepts and language that will have little meaning to those who do not regularly read such material. For that reason, I have done my best to avoid Kierkegaardian or otherwise philosophical jargon; instead I’ve aimed to translate his words and concepts into a language Christians today will comprehend without too much difficulty. Though this might earn the ire of the Kierkegaard scholar, I am guessing it will come as welcome news to my reader.

This book is not intended as an introduction to Kierkegaard’s thought; it is not at all concerned with the all-too-interesting life of Kierkegaard; and it does not explore Kierkegaard solely as a philosopher. Rather, his thought is presented in such a way that the reader might gain insight into how better to live a Christian life.

In chapter one I introduce Kierkegaard, explaining a bit about his life and thought and addressing some concerns Christians may have about studying him. Several Christian writers have offered warnings about interacting with Kierkegaard, claiming his thought is unbiblical or dangerous. I take up a number of those issues directly.

Chapters two through five are arranged according to central themes of Kierkegaard’s corpus, each of which is central to the life of the Christian. Chapter two concerns theology: Who is Jesus and what mistakes plague our understanding of him, his gift of salvation to us and his work in our life?

Chapter three explores Kierkegaard’s psychology, including the following sorts of questions:



BOOK EXCERPT

What sort of thing is a human self? How does the self flourish, and how is the self related to God?

“My goal is to convince Christians as I have been convinced that Søren Kierkegaard is a voice that should be sought and heard for the edification of the church.”

Chapter four takes up the communication of Christian truth to the world: How might I faithfully testify to God’s love and saving grace to the world around me?

Chapter five addresses the dominant concept of Kierkegaard’s Christian ethics, love.

As a philosopher and a Christian I am familiar with the hesitation some in the church have about entertaining insights from philosophy. On the other hand, some Christians may hold philosophy in a positive light, but they are skeptical that Kierkegaard is a voice that can be trusted. My goal is to convince Christians as I have been convinced that Søren Kierkegaard is a voice that should be sought and heard for the edification of the church.

– Adapted from the introduction and chapter one, “Kierkegaard: Friend to Christians?”