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Of Men and Mantles
Kierkegaard on the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle

John S. Tanner

I was once asked to introduce Elder Neal A. Maxwell to a group of BYU English majors. This assignment caused me some concern. I feared that my audience might be inclined to revere Elder Maxwell for the wrong reasons, or at least for secondary reasons—namely, for his considerable gifts as a writer rather than for his apostolic authority. So rather than rehearse Elder Maxwell’s résumé, I decided to frame my introduction with insights borrowed from a remarkable essay by Søren Kierkegaard entitled “The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle.” In it, Kierkegaard emphasizes that human genius does not confer genuine religious authority. Thus, to honor an Apostle like Paul as a profound thinker or notable stylist is to miss the point. Paul’s brilliance is no more relevant to his real claim on us than is his skill as a tentmaker.¹

I reminded my audience of fellow English majors that likewise, although we may properly admire Elder Maxwell for his metaphors, we ought to heed his message for his mantle. Moreover, we need to remember that the intent of his turning a phrase is to turn our hearts to God, that his rhetoric is meant not to impress but to bless, not to be marveled at but to move us. Years later, I made the same point in an exchange of letters with a Church leader:

[D]isciples don’t hearken to Christ because his teachings are more eloquent or beautiful or profound than those of Buddha or Lao-Tzu, but because he is the Son of God. The same applies to apostles and to all those called of God. They make a claim on us not because they are the most clever people but because they speak as ones having authority.

We who love Elder Maxwell treasure his talents, rejoice that God has called one with gifts that fire the mind, please the ear, and fill the heart. But fundamentally his words command our attention because he is, in very fact, an apostle.²

And once again, I shared a copy of Kierkegaard’s insightful essay “The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle.”
Shared Views of Kierkegaard, Religious Philosopher, and Erastus Snow, Apostle

Søren Kierkegaard’s analysis of what qualifies a man as an apostle deserves to be better known among Latter-day Saints than it is. So does his work generally, for much of it agrees with and illuminates the restored gospel. Often considered the father of modern existentialism, Kierkegaard did not regard himself as the founder of a philosophical movement but as a religious writer. He sought to reconceive philosophy (which was then dominated by Hegel) according to Christian rather than Greek premises. He also strove to reintroduce genuine Christianity into the moribund but nominally Christian culture of nineteenth-century Denmark, which Kierkegaard felt possessed a form of godliness but lacked genuine religious passion. In this latter role especially, his message to the Christian world can resemble Joseph Smith’s—except Kierkegaard repeatedly insists that he himself is no prophet, that he writes “without authority.”

A contemporary of Joseph Smith, Kierkegaard knew of Mormonism but likely not much about it. Although he lived in Copenhagen when the missionaries first arrived in 1850 and may have seen them about town, there is no evidence that he ever met a Latter-day Saint. Nevertheless, he understood what it meant to be a Christian in much the same way as they. The story of a possible near encounter with Elder Erastus Snow serves to highlight similarities in the way both Kierkegaard and a latter-day Apostle regarded such fundamental matters as apostles, authority, and revelation.

On Friday, July 19, 1850, Erastus Snow (fig. 1), an Apostle newly arrived in Denmark, went to the Vor Frue Kirke to watch Bishop J. P. Mynster ordain a priest. There, surrounded by Bertel Thorvaldsen’s famous statues of the Christus and the

Fig. 1. Erastus Snow (1818–1888). In 1850, Elder Snow attended an ordination of a priest in the Vor Frue Kirke, where he was surrounded by statues of Christ’s Twelve Apostles. Elder Snow, a modern Apostle, reflected that were those Apostles alive, they would likely be rejected by traditional nineteenth-century Christianity. Photograph by Charles R. Savage, 1850. Church Archives.
Twelve Apostles (fig. 2), Elder Snow reflected on the apostate condition of the State Church of Denmark. His journal entry reads as follows:

19th July I attended an ordination of a Priest in “Frue Kirke” (Lady's Church) Which was attended with much pomp and show. This “Frue Kirke” . . . is truly an elegant & costly building. At the head of the main Saloon before the Alter [sic] stands Jesus in Statuary in the act of preaching & on either side of the room are the full size statues of the 12 Apostles which were carved in marble in Rome: and while viewing this scene & the curious ceremonies of the day, I had such feelings as I never before had. How long (thought I) if these were liveing [sic] figures teaching & acting as they did 1800 years ago; would they be permitted to grace this temple of the “Great Whore” or even suffered to exist among this people. But a short time ago these very Priests who with their long robes are now officiating were the chief instruments in imprisoning [sic] P. C. Mönster [a Baptist minister] for teaching the people to repent & be baptised in the name of Jesus, (infant sprinkling being then the only baptism in Denmark).

It would seem . . . that after the “Great Mother of Harlots” had made war with the Saints & overcome them slain Jesus and his apostles—“transgressed their laws & changed their ordinances” that now she had placed their Statues in her Temples to “Grace her Triumph.”

FIG. 2. Four of the life-size statues of the Twelve Apostles sculpted by Bertel Thorvaldsen and housed in the Vor Frue Kirke (Our Lady’s Chapel), Copenhagen, Denmark. Courtesy John W. Welch.
Subsequently, in a report of his first year in Denmark, Elder Snow expanded upon these reflections, with even more pointed comments about Bishop Mynster (fig. 3) and the established church:

While the chief Bishop, surrounded by his clergy, in sacerdotal robes, was engaged in the services of the occasion, I asked myself these questions: If these [statues] were living figures, what would be their language to these men and this assembly? were they to give utterance to the doctrines they taught while living, how long would they be permitted to grace this building? I reflected that by the influence of these clergy, and at the instigation of this Bishop, was P. C. Mönster repeatedly imprisoned for preaching to the people that they must follow Jesus down into the water and be baptized. This was the Bishop that thought it the duty of government to protect the people from this “dangerous sect”—the Latter-day Saints. These are the men, who, while they allow the people to have access to the Bible, put a padlock upon it and pocket the key. I exclaimed in my heart at the scene before me, surely the great mother of abominations, with her numerous progeny of the protestant family, after their fathers martyred Jesus and his apostles, transgressed his laws, changed his ordinances, broke his everlasting covenant, and drove the last vestige of his kingdom from the earth, have now placed their statues in her temples to grace her triumph.

These reflections regarding the Danish church and its probable reaction to living Apostles are remarkably congruent with the sentiments of Søren Kierkegaard. Although Kierkegaard appears to have remained entirely unknown to the early Mormon missionaries, he may very well have sat in the shadows of Thorvaldsen’s apostles with Erastus Snow that July day. For Kierkegaard lived in an apartment at Norregade no. 43, only a short distance from the Vor Frue Kirke. And he faithfully attended the cathedral to hear Bishop Mynster preach. Indeed, Walter Lowrie says that Kierkegaard never “missed a single sermon of Mynster’s except the last.” This means that Kierkegaard would have regularly

![Fig. 3. Bishop J. P. Mynster (1775–1854). Mynster officiated in an ordination witnessed by Erastus Snow, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. Kierkegaard rejected the claim that Mynster was a true witness of God in the mold of the Apostles. Painting by C. A. Jensen (1792–1870). Courtesy of The Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Copenhagen, Denmark.](https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol40/iss2/7)
attended ordination services, for Bishop Mynster delivered many sermons on such occasions, as is evident from the fact that Mynster published three volumes of ordination sermons between 1840 and 1851.11

Whether or not Kierkegaard shared the Vor Frue Kirke with Erastus Snow that day, he certainly shared similar views about apostles and the established church. These similarities became increasingly evident in his writings during the late 1840s and 1850s. In 1849, Kierkegaard (fig. 4) published his remarkable essay “The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle”; this essay resonates strongly with a Latter-day Saint understanding of living prophets and apostles.12

In 1850, Kierkegaard published Training in Christianity, setting forth the way authentic Christianity differed from its lifeless, modern imitation.13 In that book Kierkegaard, like Snow, implicitly critiques both Bishop Mynster and the state church by imagining what it would mean to be a disciple if Christ and his Apostles were to come back to life in nineteenth-century Denmark. True disciples in every age, Kierkegaard avers, must follow Christ as though they were his contemporaries. Christianity requires “contemporaneity” with Christ as a despised man who is also God and, by implication, with his disciples as common men who are also Apostles of God.

And in 1855, shortly after Mynster’s death, Kierkegaard launched a frontal attack on the state church, explicitly rejecting the claim that Mynster (and much less his successor, Professor Martensen) was a true witness of God in the mold of the Apostles. On the contrary, he asserted, “The Christianity of the New Testament simply does not exist.”14

In many respects Kierkegaard’s critique of Christendom resembles that delivered by the early Mormon missionaries. Like them, he raised a voice of warning against the established church. Like them, he measured modern Christian practice against the conditions for discipleship that obtained in Christ’s day and found conventional Christians wanting. Like them, he became a figure of controversy and scorn, expecting to be persecuted and perhaps executed for his attack.15 And like them, he attempted to reintroduce authentic Christianity into its flaccid simulacrum, which he derisively called Christendom: “Christendom has done away with Christianity, without being quite aware of it,” he proclaims. “My one thesis is that Christianity no longer exists . . . my task is to reintroduce Christianity into Christendom.”16

The first Mormons came to Copenhagen with substantially the same mission. Had they known Kierkegaard’s views on such matters as apostles, authority, and revelation, they might have enlisted his work in support of their cause. As it was, Kierkegaard seems to have been entirely unknown by the first missionaries and remains too little appreciated among Latter-day Saints even today.
The Authority of an Apostle

Kierkegaard’s “Difference between a Genius and an Apostle” is his best brief statement about apostles, authority, and revelation. The essay derives from his Book on Adler, a work unpublished in Kierkegaard’s lifetime and first translated in English under the title On Authority and Revelation. According to Kierkegaard’s preface, this book “is basically an ethical inquiry into the concept of a revelation, into what it means to be called by a revelation . . . Or, what amounts to the same thing, the whole book is basically an inquiry into the concept of authority.”¹⁷

Nominally, the book is aimed against Adolph Peter Adler, a Danish priest who in 1842 claimed to have received a revelation from Christ only to hedge this claim when threatened with suspension from his position in the state church. “Revelation was perhaps too strong an expression,” he later conceded.¹⁸ In a larger sense, the book is about not only Adler but the modern age.¹⁹ It anticipates Training in Christianity as well as Kierkegaard’s attack on Professor Martensen’s claim that Bishop Mynster was a “genuine witness to the truth.”²⁰ Further, Kierkegaard’s reflections on the nature of an apostle may have been influenced by sculptor Thorvaldsen’s depiction of the apostles as martyrs, “standing there with the instruments of their martyrdom in their hands, silently fac[ing] the Christus,” who paradoxically bids them, “Come unto me . . . and I will give you rest.”²¹

The Adler case illustrated to Kierkegaard how fundamentally confused both Adler and his age were about what it would mean to be called by a revelation.²² Having domesticated revealed religion, his age fashioned a faith void of fear and trembling, forgetting that the God it nominally worshipped could require radical, inexplicable,
paradoxical discipleship—such as that manifest in the command that Abraham sacrifice Isaac. Religion must not be confused with a system of ethics, Kierkegaard warned, though it encompasses morality; nor conflated with esthetics, though its teachings may be beautiful.23 Likewise an apostle must not be confused with a brilliant philosopher or eloquent poet such that an apostle “becomes neither more nor less than a genius.”24 Human genius has nothing to do with one’s divine authority as an apostle. As Kierkegaard wryly observes, Paul’s beautiful metaphors are no more relevant to his apostleship than are his tent-making abilities. The essential fact is that Paul was called by a divine revelation.25

Critical Differences between a Genius and an Apostle

Let me briefly summarize Kierkegaard’s essay, highlighting aspects that resonate with Mormonism. A genius belongs to the finite realm of the temporal (the realm of immanence), while an apostle belongs to an infinite and eternal order (the transcendent). Thus a “genius is born,” while an “apostle is not born” but “is called and appointed by God and sent by him on a mission,” as the term “apostle” denotes.26 Likewise, the genius may develop over time, becoming a greater or lesser genius according to how he develops his gifts, while the apostle is either called by God or is not; there is no question of degree. Further, an apostle does not necessarily become more intelligent or accomplished by his call, nor is he necessarily “distinguished by natural gifts.” Indeed, “perhaps he was what we call a simple person, but by a paradoxical fact he was called to proclaim this new thing.”27 The genius may be ahead of his time, but eventually he will be assimilated by history in such a way that his words no longer seem new or paradoxical, for they are the fruits of immanence, not transcendence. The apostle, by contrast, will never be assimilated; what he has to proclaim will forever remain “just as new and just as paradoxical,” because his doctrine came into the world by revelation.28

The distinguishing feature of the genius is that his words are profound, beautiful, eloquent, or brilliant; the distinguishing fact about an apostle is his authority. “I am not to listen to Paul because he is brilliant,” writes Kierkegaard, “but I am to submit to Paul because he has divine authority.” An apostle’s authority makes the hearer “eternally responsible” for how he heeds the message.29 Kierkegaard illustrates this distinction by contrasting the utterances of a king to those of a poet or philosopher. A royal command exercises a claim upon us that is categorically distinct from its poetic eloquence or philosophical profundity:

When someone who has the authority to say it says to a person, Go! and when someone who does not have the authority says, Go! the utterance (Go!) and
its content are indeed identical; evaluated esthetically, it is, if you like, equally well spoken, but the authority makes the difference.\textsuperscript{50} To ask if a king is a genius, and in that case be willing to obey him, is basically high treason. . . . To honor one’s father because he is exceptionally intelligent is impiety.\textsuperscript{31} Likewise, “to ask whether Christ is profound is blasphemy and is an attempt (be it conscious or unconscious) to destroy him in a subtle way.”\textsuperscript{32} When Christ proclaims that life is eternal, the issue is not if the doctrine is profound or eloquent but if it is true. Hence, \textit{who} speaks is decisive: Christ or a professor of theology.\textsuperscript{33} These same principles apply to the apostle, who “is what he is by having divine authority.”\textsuperscript{34}

The end (or \textit{telos}) of the apostle’s life is to bear witness (“bear” is used here in its literal sense of “to convey”). Kierkegaard compares the apostle to a postman or envoy to a foreign court, whose job is not to invent the content of the message but to convey it properly: “The doctrine communicated to him is not a task given to him to cogitate about; it is not given to him for his own sake. On the contrary, he is on a mission and has to proclaim the doctrine and to use authority.”\textsuperscript{35} The apostle “exists entirely for the sake of others” but is accountable only to God. His life is determined by a telos beyond itself: he exists “in order to.” In the apostle’s case, he exists in order to proclaim a revealed message, a duty which remains unchanged throughout his life and which requires that he sacrifice his life, either literally or spiritually, for it.\textsuperscript{36}

Finally, his life and his word are all that the apostle personally has to validate his authority; he cannot demonstrate it externally or objectively: “If he could demonstrate it \textit{physically}, he would simply be no apostle.”\textsuperscript{37} Entrusted with a message from God, the apostle offers believers no “physical certainty” of his calling—not even miracles, which are themselves the objects of faith.\textsuperscript{38} The apostle thus has no way to demonstrate his authority that does not require faith in his testimony—a witness for which he must be willing to die:

An apostle has no other evidence than his own statement, and at most his willingness to suffer everything joyfully for the sake of that statement. His speech in this regard will be brief: “I am called by God; do with me now what you will; flog me, persecute me, but my last words will be my first: I am called by God, and I make you eternally responsible for what you do to me.”\textsuperscript{39}

Such is Kierkegaard’s analysis of the difference between a genius and an apostle. Although couched in philosophical language unfamiliar to Mormons and based on a categorical distinction between human capability and divine calling sometimes blurred in Mormon culture, Kierkegaard’s essay nevertheless accords remarkably well with a Latter-day Saint understanding of apostolic authority. Latter-day Saint doctrine also recognizes a
similar fundamental distinction between the mantle and the man.40 Had Erastus Snow known and understood Kierkegaard's essay, he doubtless would have found much in it to applaud. After all, Snow himself was to counsel the Saints in a way that bespeaks a similar understanding of what it means to be a witness:

If we are called upon to bear the vessels of the Lord, to be witnesses of those things that we have seen and heard, and to go forth to a gainsaying and reviling world, we have got to lay aside personal considerations . . . and go forth trusting in God, and have all confidence in him, taking our lives in our hands, like the disciples of Christ went, as lambs in the midst of wolves, and bear witness of the truth, nothing wavering or flinching.41

Moreover, as the first modern Apostle to Scandinavia, Elder Snow knew full well that he was not called for his profundity or eloquence—which were initially far beyond his reach in Danish in any event, forced as he was to speak "more with my eyes and fingers than with my tongue."42 He was called for what he knew by revelation, namely, that God had spoken to a new prophet.

**Joseph Smith as an Apostle in the Kierkegaardian Sense**

Joseph Smith exemplifies Kierkegaard's concept of apostle even more conspicuously than Elder Snow, for Joseph received his calling as prophet in an open vision of God and his ordination as Apostle under the hands of the resurrected Peter, James, and John.43 Unlike Adler, the Prophet Joseph betrayed no hint of backpedaling about his claim to revelation. From first to last, his testimony was "I am called of God"—a statement for which he was willing to die.

An uneducated farm boy, Joseph Smith claimed divine authority, not by virtue of human profundity or eloquence, but by virtue of divine revelation. The Prophet's doctrine remains essentially new and paradoxical "however long it is proclaimed in the world,"44 for it is not the product of human genius but of divine revelation. It belongs essentially to the realm of transcendence, not of immanence. Hence, neither Joseph nor his revelations can be assimilated into history simply as American originals. Rather, they are essentially paradoxical—situated in the immanent but ultimately inexplicable by history, sociology, psychology, literary genius, or any other naturalistic explanation.

As an authentic Apostle, Joseph is a man like other men but at the same time one "made paradoxically different from all other human beings" because he is sent by God.45 As an Apostle, he makes an absolute religious claim upon the world, rather than an esthetic one. The question of the beauty or profundity of his teachings is, from this point of view, completely
beside the point. Rather, the fundamental questions are, "Are they true?" "Are they from God?" As one who has been sent, the Prophet Joseph Smith renders the world eternally responsible for how it receives his testimony. Yet he offers no proof of his divine authority that does not require faith and the immaterial evidence of the Spirit.

Steven M. Emmanuel summarizes Kierkegaard's understanding of the nature of an apostle as follows:

The true religious exception will not only have been entrusted with a new doctrine to communicate, but he will act in the service of God and devote his life entirely to the mission upon which he has been sent. Such a person will speak with divine authority, calling attention to the revelation as his justification. Furthermore, he will be a witness of unusual conviction, prepared to endure ridicule and personal sacrifice for the sake of the truth.46

This assessment reflects unfavorably on Adler, but it compares very well to Joseph Smith. To cite but one example, consider the Prophet's response to the disbelief and persecution he faced when, as a boy, he recounted his first vision:

However, it was nevertheless a fact that I had beheld a vision. I have thought since, that I felt much like Paul . . . before King Agrippa . . . ; some said he [Paul] was dishonest, others said he was mad; and he was ridiculed and reviled. But all this did not destroy the reality of his vision. . . . So it was with me. I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two Personages, and they did in reality speak to me; and though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true; . . . I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I do it. (JS–H 1:24–25)

While Kierkegaard may or may not have accepted such a testimony,47 he surely would have conceded its consistency with the Prophet's claim to be an apostle. It is unlike the religious discourse of either an Adler or a Mynster. It rings with authority, precisely the sort of religious authority Kierkegaard felt was missing from Denmark in his age. The early Mormon missionaries recognized the same absence of genuine religious authority in Denmark. It is no wonder, then, that among the earliest Mormon tracts translated into Danish is Orson Pratt's Divine Authority; or, The Question, Was Joseph Smith Sent of God?48

Three Dimensions of Authentic Christian Discipleship

Those who responded to the Mormon message that Joseph was indeed a prophet courted scandal and scorn. They became the "ugly ducklings" of Scandinavia.49 Ironically, however, this standing put them into a more authentic religious position than that of their more respectable neighbors, according to a Kierkegaardian understanding of Christian discipleship.50 Mormonism forced its early converts into an existential position analogous to that required of disciples in the New Testament with respect to three
dimensions of authentic Christian discipleship. These Kierkegaard discusses under the rubrics “contemporaneity,” “scandal,” and “incognito.”

Those who were contemporary with Christ had to follow Jesus before he became universally admired and before his movement became a triumphant world religion. The same was true of the Danes who first embraced Joseph Smith and Mormonism. They did not need to exercise much imagination to feel a sense of contemporaneity with a despised and rejected living Christ, for they experienced a similar predicament in following his despised and rejected living prophet. Moreover, those who first embraced Mormonism embraced scandal.

Christ’s message that he is God’s only begotten son was a scandal, an offense. The same is true of Joseph’s claim to be the Lord’s chosen prophet. So, too, are his claims to have translated gold plates, to have conversed with God and angels, and to have restored the “only true and living church” (D&C 130). So, too, are many of his doctrines on the nature of God, man, and marriage. The scandal of Mormonism to the nineteenth century is captured by Charles Dickens, who with a contemptuous sniff—“visions in the age of railways”—dismissed Joseph Smith’s claim to revelation.51

Likewise, Christ came to earth incognito. No nimbus or other physical sign betrayed his divinity. Just the reverse: outwardly he appeared as a “lowly man who at the same time . . . declared that He was God.”52 Similarly, Joseph Smith and the first modern Apostles arrived incognito, as very ordinary men from the lower classes, men who at the same time declared that they had been sent by God. To follow apostles and living prophets is perforce to look beneath the man to the mantle, much like Jesus’ first followers had to see the God beneath the incognito of a carpenter’s son.

In these three ways, Mormonism reintroduced Christianity into Christendom, not merely doctrinally, but also existentially. The early missionaries to Denmark proclaimed that Mormonism restored primitive Christianity in doctrine, ordinance, and apostolic authority. Kierkegaard implicitly points to another dimension of the Restoration: Mormonism restored for its converts the original dynamics of Christian discipleship, which had been lost, ironically, by the success of Christendom. To follow a living prophet is to be reeducated in scandal, contemporaneity, and incognito.

Or at least it was when the Mormons first arrived on Danish shores. With the passage of time and the success of Mormonism as a world religion, it may seem less scandalous now to believe in the Restoration, especially since the Church has dropped such “offensive” practices as polygamy. Fundamentally, however, I think this perception is mistaken. By laying claim to miraculous origins (visions, gold plates, angels), continuing revelation (living prophets), and singular authority (as the only “true and living”
church), Mormonism is inherently offensive to both the secular and sectarian world. It cannot be fully assimilated by the world—even though as a social phenomenon Mormonism can degenerate into mere Mormondom, particularly for Mormons themselves. It is all too easy, for example, for contemporary Latter-day Saints to begin to regard a living prophet mainly as a celebrity—to focus almost exclusively on his talk-show appearances and best seller. Likewise, it is possible to regard today’s Apostles, who are now far more outwardly accomplished than were the early Apostles, as geniuses—especially when they are regularly introduced with long citations of their accomplishments, a practice that I fear may offend the Spirit and mislead the audience about the essential character of the Apostles’ holy calling.

Conclusion

Early in this article, I referred to an anecdote about Erastus Snow’s experience in the Vor Frue Kirke. Let me conclude by recalling the visit of another Latter-day Saint Apostle to the same cathedral. Here is the story as recounted by Elder Boyd K. Packer:

> In 1976 an area general conference was held in Copenhagen, Denmark. Following the closing session, President Kimball [fig. 5] expressed a desire to visit the Vor Frue Church, where the Thorvaldsen statues of the Christus and of the Twelve Apostles stand. . . .

> The church was closed for renovation, nevertheless arrangements were quickly made for us to be admitted for a few minutes. There were just a few of us.

> To the front of the church, behind the altar, stands the familiar statue of the Christus. . . . Along each side stand the statues of the Apostles, Peter at the front on the right side of the church, and the other Apostles in order. It is not a large building, and these beautiful statues make an impressive sight indeed.

> Most of the group were near the rear of the chapel, where the custodian, through an interpreter, was giving some explanation. I stood with President Kimball . . . and President Bentine, the stake president, before the statue of Peter [fig. 6]. In his hand, depicted in marble, is a set of heavy keys. President Kimball pointed to them and explained what they symbolized.
Then, in an act I shall never forget, he turned to President Bentine and with unaccustomed sternness pointed his finger at him and said with firm, impressive words, "I want you to tell every Lutheran in Denmark that they do not hold the keys! . . . We hold the real keys and we use them every day." . . .

We walked to the other end of the chapel where the rest of the group were standing. Pointing to the statues, President Kimball said to the kind custodian who was showing us the building, "These are the dead Apostles. Here we have the living Apostles." Pointing to me he said, "Elder Packer is an Apostle." He designated the others and said, "Elder Monson and Elder Perry are Apostles, and I am an Apostle. We are the living Apostles. . . ."

The custodian, who to that time had shown no particular emotion, suddenly was in tears.53

Erastus Snow had wondered what Thorvaldsen's apostles might say if they could come to life. President Kimball's actions suggest an answer—an answer consistent with Kierkegaard's concept of apostleship. A living Apostle might challenge the establishment and boldly testify of his authority: "You do not hold the keys! I hold the keys! I am an Apostle." When he bore witness, he would address his hearers not primarily in the role of a genius but as one having authority. Beyond this, an Apostle might not look quite as impressive as Thorvaldsen's massive figures. Rather, he might look like President Kimball—a little man with a raspy voice; God's servant incognito. I only wish that Kierkegaard had been there with the custodian that day to have heard a genuine apostolic witness—unvarnished by the esthetic polish of a Mynster sermon and unmarred by the religious confusion of a bogus Adler "revelation."

![Fig. 6. Bertel Thorvaldsen's statue of Peter holding the keys to the Christian church. Located in the Vor Frue Kirke, Copenhagen, this statue inspired President Spencer W. Kimball to declare, "We hold the real keys and we use them every day." Courtesy the Diocese of Copenhagen.](image)

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5. I have found only one reference by Kierkegaard to Mormonism. It is a positive comment about a report that Mormons believe God is not omnipresent but moves from one star to another. Soren Kierkegaard, Soren Kirkegaards Papirer, ed. P. A. Heiberg and others, 16 vols. (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968–78), 11A: 591.


7. Erastus Snow, One Year in Scandinavia (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1851), 20. Elsewhere Snow indicates that the “chief bishop” (Mynster) wrote a pamphlet in opposition to a bill that would have liberalized laws relating to dissenting religions. According to Snow, the pamphlet contained a “catalogue of transatlantic lies” about the Mormons. See Snow, One Year, 13. Snow is probably alluding here to the Veisenhuuset, a law that gave the clergy the exclusive right to distribute the Bible. Snow, One Year in Scandinavia, 20; William Mulder, Homeward to Zion: The Mormon Migration from Scandinavia (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1957; reprint, with a foreword by William Mulder, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press in cooperation with Brigham Young University Press, 2000), 40.

8. Eric Andersen, who also speculates that both Kierkegaard and Snow may have been in the Vor Frue Kirke on July 19, 1850, was able to locate only one direct mention of Kierkegaard in early Mormon journals. Eric Andersen, “Kingdoms in Conflict: The Founding of Mormonism in Denmark” (senior thesis, Brigham Young University, 1974), 33–34.


15. Hohenberg, Soren Kierkegaard, 240.

16. Kierkegaard, Training in Christianity, 39 n. 1; italics in original.

Kierkegaard on the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle


21. Roger Poole, Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 23. Poole argues at length that Kierkegaard was deeply influenced by the paradoxical relationship between Thorvaldsen’s Christus, which beckons believers with the great invitation “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest,” and the Apostles, who suffered martyrdom as they heeded the call to become witnesses of Christ to all the world (23, 233–61). See also David J. Gouwens, Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 129–30; and Lowrie, Short Life of Kierkegaard, 217–18.

22. For a good discussion of this issue, see Steven M. Emmanuel, Kierkegaard and the Concept of Revelation (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 113–27.


43. According to Lowrie, Kierkegaard recognized a distinction between apostle and prophet that echoes the difference between Erastus Snow and Joseph Smith. Lowrie adds that Kierkegaard “alone in his age had an eye open to the possibility of the recurrence of this extraordinary ministry” of prophet. Lowrie, Short Life of Kierkegaard, 194.


47. On June 25, 1878, Lawrence Christian Mariger, a Danish convert, presented himself in the St. George Temple and was baptized by proxy for Søren Kierkegaard. *St. George Temple Records of Baptisms for the Dead*, 210–11, microfilm of typescript, Family History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City. Mariger had emigrated from Denmark as a boy of eleven. His father, a Lutheran chaplain, divorced his mother when she converted to Mormonism. She smuggled her children out of the country under false names and brought them to Zion; she died in Nebraska on the way. Davis Bitton, *Guide to Mormon Diaries and Autobiographies* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1977), 226. Mariger must have remained proud of his Danish heritage. According to his journal, he was baptized for “all the Kings of Denmark . . . and also for many of [the] leading men of Denmark and Scandinavia [sic] who had died without a knowledge of the Gospel.” Lawrence Christian Mariger, *Journal*, *Church Archives, Family and Church History Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City*, as extracted by Church Archives staff. Among those for whom Mariger was baptized on June 25, 1878, were not only Søren Kierkegaard but Bertel Thorvaldsen, J. P. Mynster, and N. F. S. Grundtvig. *St. George Temple Records*, 210–11.

Coincidentally, Erastus Snow lived only a few blocks away from the St. George Temple at the time, although he spent June 25, 1878, at a political convention, where he was chosen as a delegate to the Territorial Convention. “Local and Other Matters, Washington County Convention,” *Deseret News Semi-weekly*, July 10, 1878, 361. We can only hope that by now Elder Snow has met this remarkable Dane and fellow disciple in Christ.


49. See Mulder, *Homeward to Zion*, 102–34.

50. See Kierkegaard’s *Training in Christianity* for his discussion of Christian discipleship.

