

Kierkegaard on Apostolic Authority. For delivery & discussion at the 2013 Baylor Symposium on Faith & Culture, at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, on 2 November 2013. Paul J. Griffiths, Warren Chair of Catholic Theology at Duke Divinity School.

[Parenthetical page numbers are to: Soren Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, Kierkegaard's Writings vol. XXIV, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).]

This is a talk about apostleship, in conversation with Soren Kierkegaard (SK). Its central questions are: What is it to be an apostle? What kind of authority do apostles have? How ought those who receive an apostolic call respond to it? How ought those who are not themselves apostles respond when they find themselves faced and addressed with apostolic authority by those who are apostles? Where, if anywhere, is apostolic authority to be found among those living now? Authority is the thread that connects all these questions: As we shall see, the question about apostolicity is, in the end, a question about authority – at least so far as Christians are concerned.

It will be helpful to have before us as we begin SK's understanding of what an apostle is: "An apostle is not born; an apostle is a man who is called and appointed by God and sent by him on a mission" (176). And: "The apostle is the one who has *divine authority to command* both the crowd and the public" (188). These are definitions he repeats and embroiders. I'll return to them.

The talk is framed by an overture and a coda, which have the form of a brief commentary on and response to two passages from Luke 1. And its central part has three movements, the first of which is an exposition of the case of one Adolph Peter Adler, a Danish Lutheran pastor contemporary with SK who took himself to have received a direct verbal revelation from Jesus Christ and thus to have been commissioned as an apostle. The second movement is a depiction and analysis of SK's treatment of Adler's case in his *Book on Adler*, a work in which much is said not only about Adler's case in particular, but also about the idea of apostleship in general. And the third movement is a suggestion about how to understand and respond to apostolic calls, whether one's own or another's, which I take to be an improvement on Adler's response to his own case, and SK's analysis of that response.

Disagreeing with SK, which I will do in that third movement of the talk, is always a risky thing; he was one of the most sharp-witted and dialectically skilled people ever to have walked the earth, and to attempt disagreement with him is usually to find oneself on a very sticky wicket indeed. The attempt to push through a criticism of him usually runs aground on the discovery that he's already thought of and forestalled that problem, and that may well be the case this time too. Nevertheless, I'll give it a try.

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First, then, the overture, for which my texts are taken from the first chapter of Luke's Gospel, in which there are two annunciations, one to Zechariah (Luke 1:11-20) and one to Mary (Luke 1:26-38). In the first of these, the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah in the Jerusalem Temple, tells him that his wife, Elizabeth, is pregnant with a boy, and instructs him that he should name the boy John. In the second, the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, tells her that she will conceive a son, and instructs her that she should call him Jesus. In both annunciations, the angel provides some details about the future careers of these two infants in utero.

These two annunciation stories fit perfectly the definition of apostleship with which we're working. Both Zechariah and Mary are directly called and commissioned by the LORD, or at least by an angel speaking the LORD's words, and are instructed to perform a specific task, which is to say given a mission. The mission includes, in both cases, the act of naming. Mary and Zechariah do not, however, respond in the same way. Zechariah asks, "How shall I know this?" and follows the question with a mention of what he apparently takes to be the principal evidence against the truth of what the angel says, which is that both he and Elizabeth are old, beyond the age of childbearing. "How shall I know this?" is a perfectly ordinary kind of question in response to a claim that seems to you to promise something that's very unlikely to happen. It's a question that takes us into the realm of epistemology. Zechariah doesn't believe what the angel says to be true; he thinks there's very strong evidence against it; and he wants to defer acting on his apostolic commission until he's been given enough evidence to convince him that he should. The angel doesn't like Zechariah's answer. He strikes Zechariah dumb "until the day that these things come to pass," and gives as reason for doing so that Zechariah has shown a lack of faith.

Mary's response to her apostolic commission is quite different. Her question to the angel is, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" This question Gabriel answers directly by explaining, in veiled terms, the Holy Spirit's part in the affair, and Mary then responds with the words of acceptance, "Ecce ancilla Domini; fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum." She, the Gospel account makes abundantly clear, has asked the right question. She doesn't ask to be convinced that what the angel promises will occur. She knows that in the usual way of things pregnancy requires sexual intercourse between a man and a woman, and she is interested to know how it will occur in her case, without such intercourse. The angel explains, and that is enough for her to speak the words of acceptance.

That's the overture. It presents us with two apostles according to the definition we're working with, two human beings called and commissioned by the LORD. Neither of these two doubts that they are in this condition, that they have been given an apostolic commission. Zechariah's doubts aren't about that. They're about whether he has enough evidence to make it proper for him to give his consent to his commission without being given further evidence that the deeply surprising state of affairs the angel describes will in fact come to pass.

Mary has no doubts of that kind. She'd just like some more details about how what the angel promises will happen. The difference between her response and Zechariah's is subtle, perhaps, but real and of great importance. It's marked in the Scriptural texts by the deeply different responses the angel gives to Mary's and Zechariah's questions. With it in mind, let's now turn to the first movement of this talk, which is a brief description of the apostolic commission of Adolph Peter Adler.

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In 1843, in Copenhagen, Adolph Peter Adler published a collection of his sermons. Adler was a Lutheran minister with care of two small parishes on the Baltic island of Bornholm, a long way to the east of mainland Denmark. For the time and place and for a man with such a position, publication of a collection of sermons was ordinary enough. One thing about the collection, however, was not so ordinary. In it, Pastor Adler described a revelation he had received. Here's one part of what he wrote about it:

One evening I had just given an account of the origin of evil; then I perceived as if in a flash that everything depended not upon thought but upon spirit and that there existed an evil spirit. That same night, a hideous sound descended into our room. Then the *Savior* commanded me to get up and go in and write down these words: The first human beings could have had an eternal life, because when thought joins God's spirit with the body, then the human being is God's child; so Adam would have been God's son. But they sinned. Thought immersed itself in itself without the world, without the body. It separated the spirit from the body, the spirit from the world. And when the human being himself, when thought itself separates the spirit from the body and the spirit from the world, the human being must die and the world and the body become evil. (339)

There is more, another few lines about the origin of evil, each about as murky and inflated as what I've quoted. When Adler finishes reporting what Jesus has said to him, he writes this: "Then Jesus commanded me to burn my own works and in the future to keep to the Bible. As for the sermons [Adler refers to the sermons published in the book to which his account of the revelation is prefaced] from no. VI to the end, I know that they were written with Jesus' collaborating grace, so that I have been only an instrument" (340). And Adler goes on to say that he obeyed Jesus' command to burn his own works, which were on Hegel's philosophy, and especially his logic. After the publication of this volume of

sermons, and of several more works, Adler was eventually subjected to discipline by the Danish Lutheran Church, and was finally removed from the pastorate.

So much for Adler and his revelation. He was an almost exact contemporary of SK's, of the same social class and education, and was like SK as well in being a prolific writer. The two men knew one another – middle-class Denmark in the first half of the nineteenth century was a tiny community in which everyone knew everyone else – though they were not intimate. Adler and his revelation would no doubt have vanished from history had his case not caught SK's interest. In 1845-1846 a mass of documents about the Adler case was published in Copenhagen, including the records of the ecclesiastical proceedings against him, and no less than four volumes of writings by him. SK bought all this material, read at least some of it, and in 1846-1847 wrote a book about the case which has come down to us as *The Book on Adler*. It's on that book that the remarks I'm going to make are based. However, although SK revised and re-revised *The Book on Adler* obsessively in the years following 1847, he never published it. Only one small section of it, the essay on the difference between a genius and an apostle, appeared in print during SK's life, and that in a version with most of the references to the Adler case removed. *The Book on Adler* has, I think, the distinction of being the most revised and least-published of all SK's works. It has also received less attention by those thinking and writing about SK these last fifty years or so than just about anything else he wrote. So, what is it that interested SK so much about the Adler case, and why is it that his concern with the case has proved so comparatively uninteresting to SK-scholars of recent years?

The issue that interested SK, and that also interests me, is that of apostolic authority. Following the definition I've already mentioned, an apostle is someone appointed and called by the LORD to a particular mission and someone thereby given authority. One becomes an apostle not because of any virtues peculiar to oneself; one is not an apostle because one is intelligent or energetic or beautiful or (even) possessed of an unusually accurate and penetrating understanding of the nature of Christianity. No. Rather, it's both necessary and sufficient for being an apostle that one be made so by the LORD's call. SK is surely right about this. Those whom the LORD calls and commissions typically lack the qualifications the world might think necessary for the work. Think about David, or Paul, or Ignatius Loyola, or Thérèse of Lisieux. They're as likely to be weak, stupid, violent, and corrupt as they are to be strong, brilliant, peacemakers, and virtuous; and they're more likely to resist being made apostles than they are to seek such status, or than they are to accept an apostolic call.

Adler's case fits this definition of the apostle perfectly well. He is directly addressed by Jesus and told to do three things. The first is to write down some words, including the ones I quoted to you just now. The second is to burn his own earlier writings, which SK (it will come as no surprise to learn) interprets to mean keep away from Hegel – for a Kierkegaardian, if Jesus says anything at all, he's likely to say that. By his own account, Adler is called by means of auditions: he hears a noise ("a hideous sound," recall) which appears to presage or announce the voice of Jesus; and then he hears that voice, directly, instructing him as noted. And then, again by his own account, he does what's asked of him, in that way fulfilling his apostolic commission and in the process leaving a

record, a literary deposit, of what he has been told to do and of his having done it. So Adler, if he has in fact been spoken to by Jesus – and in a fashion typical of apostles, Adler's record of his own call and commission offers no comment on how it is that he knows the voice that speaks to him to be the voice of Jesus – is almost the ideal type of the apostle. According to the definition, at least, Adler is every bit as much the apostle as S. Paul; and, of course, Adler's own account of his call is influenced, causally speaking, by the Old Testament accounts of prophetic commissioning, and most especially by the account of Paul's call given in the Book of Acts. SK recurs most often in *The Book on Adler* to the example of Paul as the ideal type of the apostle.

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Now the second movement: SK on Adler.

Some preliminary distinctions will help us here. The first is that between the apostle who is convinced that he is one, convinced, that is, that he has received a commission from the LORD; and the apostle who, though he has in fact received such a call and therefore is in fact an apostle – an apostle in the order of being, we might say – is unaware of this fact about himself or in denial about it. Adler is in the first category, and it is almost exclusively those who belong to it that interest SK. He's concerned with self-aware apostles, apostles who take themselves to be such, at least at the time of their call, and has little to say about those unaware of or in denial about their apostleship, though he is interested in those whose behavior or attitudes subsequent to their call performatively contradict it. A second distinction is that between the authority of the apostle's call for himself and its authority for others. The degree of authoritativeness given by Saul-about-to-become-Paul to the LORD's words to him on the Damascus Road must in some sense be different for Paul than for those who hear him or read him and take him to be an apostle – and certainly so for those who do not take him to be an apostle at all. SK is concerned with this difference, as we shall soon see. And a third is that between the content of what the apostle hears and says and is commissioned to do, on the one hand, and the fact of being called and commissioned on the other. SK is interested in the fact of apostleship much more than in the content of any particular apostolic call or commission. In fact, it is not far from the truth to say that he is interested not at all in the content of a particular revelatory call, but only in the fact of it as a call, or, more exactly, in what it ought to mean for an apostle to have been called as one, and in what it ought to mean for those who are faced with and addressed by an apostle to be so faced and so addressed.

In more detail. SK identifies his investigation of Adler's case as "an inquiry into the concept of authority, what it means to have divine authority, into the confusion, so that the concept of authority has been completely forgotten in our confused age" (4). He wants, that is, to investigate Adler's response to his apostolic call as a paradigmatic instance of how to misunderstand what such a call is. He does this by allowing, for the sake of the argument, that Adler really

has been called, that Jesus really has spoken to him as Adler reports him having done, and really has instructed him to burn his books and so on. Anyone in such a condition, SK thinks, ought to understand that what has happened to him belongs to the religious sphere: he has been given a revelation, and this "must be accentuated unconditionally" (21) as something that outstrips or exceeds in an utterly radical way anything that belongs to the ethical or aesthetic spheres. To be an apostle – to be in possession of a revelation-fact, as SK again and again puts it – is not to be given anything that can enter as premise into an argument about what is good, what is beautiful, or what ought to be done or not done. Those conversations belong to the world; they are ethical or aesthetic or (even) political discussions, and with such the properly religious, the revelatory or apostle-constituting, has nothing at all to do as SK sees things.

To treat the revelation or call that one has received exactly as such, exactly as a word from the LORD, is to treat it as something whose authority is beyond question. It is not an exaggeration, I think, to say that for SK there can in principle be no criteria for assessing the validity or reliability of the apostolic call extrinsic to itself. It is not quite right even to say that an apostolic call is self-validating; better to say that as soon as the question of its validity arises, as soon as the one who has received such a call asks herself whether she has in fact received it, as soon, that is, as she goes epistemic (recall Zechariah) rather than remains in the open-handed mode of receiving the gift given, she has begun to show that she does not take herself to have received a revelation, and thus does not understand herself as an apostle. It's rather like etiquette: if, on meeting you for the first time, I have to consider whether you're the kind of person whose hand I should shake, then I have already exited the sphere of politeness. Even if I do then shake your hand, I do so not as a matter of etiquette but rather something different, and worse. Just so with going epistemic on an apostolic call. To decide on the basis of evidence that the voice addressing one is the voice of Jesus is exactly, as SK would see it, not to respond to it as the voice of Jesus, but rather as a conclusion to an argument.

How then should Adler, as recipient of an apostolic call, respond to the fact of it? He "must," writes SK, "understand himself in this, that it has happened to him, that it is the most certain of all that it has happened to him, and that, without any subsequent chatter, without any turning and twisting, it was and is and remains a revelation" (23). These are familiar Kierkegardian themes. The apostolic call is a matter of inwardness; it neither needs nor can get validation or support from anything external to itself. In the order of knowing, or, as we may say, at the epistemic level, it is more certain than anything else is or can be. It is an instance of what later philosophy would call, sometimes affirmingly and sometimes critically, the given, and the apostle is, above all else, one who is in receipt of the gift. What the apostle is given is himself-as-creature, himself before the LORD, himself as dialectically related to the LORD and as gifted by the LORD with authority. The apostle finds himself both under authority, which is to say the authority of the revelation given to him, and with authority for others because he has been commissioned to speak to them as an apostle (32). There is, both for the apostle and for those who hear him a single and simple question: "Will you obey or will you not obey?" (34)

The rejection of "chatter" is also important: the apostle does not need to be loquacious, either in explication or justification of the call he has received; much

less does he need to turn and twist in trying to understand or interpret his revelation, or in seeking endorsement of it from others. What the apostle does need is to find in the fact of his call an understanding of himself as he is, before the LORD, a creature called and established as a creature gifted. That, really, is all. The man or woman in such a condition has quiet assurance of their condition, and is extraordinary both statistically – apostles are few – and in virtue of the authority he possesses because of his apostleship. Those who have no apostolic call should be obedient to those who do (26) because the authority given by such a commission is of a different order than any worldly authority. And those who have such a call should, of course, themselves be obedient to it.

SK makes all these points in the first thirty pages or so of *The Book on Adler*. Much of what follows is a detailed analysis of the evidence in Adler's writing that he does not, in fact, understand himself to have received an apostolic call. More exactly, Adler performatively contradicts the putative fact of his call by what he writes about it, and by what he does as a result of having received it. If Adler has in fact received a revelation, SK writes, it would be a "paradoxical-extraordinary provision" (62n), and he would be called by it simply to teach what he has been given, and to do so with authority as S. Paul did. But Adler does not do this. Instead, he makes himself an interpreter of his own revelation, acting towards it just as contemporary exegetes act towards Scripture. In interpreting the revelation given to him, Adler recapitulates the modern history of the exegesis of Scripture in particular, and of the fact of Christianity more generally. And what is that history? It is to make Christianity, which here means something like what is given in Scripture, a set of reference points or assumptions which need to be completed or brought to perfection by the application to them of the more mature understandings arrived at by thoughtful human beings in the modern period. Christianity, on this view, is something that needs to be developed, grist for the mill of modern thought which will, with time, bring it to perfection. All this is anathema to SK. Taking such a position is, as he sees it, to subordinate Christianity to something extrinsic to itself, to make of it a moment in a Hegelian dialectic of perfection, and thus to eviscerate it, to turn it into the plaything of an established Church which no longer has any understanding of the Gospel it takes itself to preach.

These are all familiar Kierkegaardian themes. SK's critique of Adler's stance toward his apostolic call shows how the Kierkegaardian critique of the church works on a small scale. And SK tightens the screws when he analyzes the records of the Lutheran Church's proceedings against Adler. Those proceedings, on SK's reading do not directly attack Adler's claim to have received a revelation. Instead, they get Adler to show that he is confused about his own claim. Adler is prepared to entertain the possibility that he has misunderstood the fact of his call; and he is abundantly clear, in response to the questioning of his bishop, that he will subordinate what Jesus has told him in the moment of his apostolic call to the content of Scripture and to the authority of the state church. In making these moves, Adler shows himself "a man who has claimed to have had a revelation from the Savior, in which a doctrine was entrusted to him. It has now been shown ... that he does not understand himself, is not in agreement with himself, that he neither has a firm and qualitatively unshaken concept of what a revelation is nor does he stand unshakably firm by his assertion" (80). Adler, in his response to church questioning, and then in his own subsequent writings,

shows himself to write and think as a "private confused lyrical genius" (81-82) who has renounced the authority proper to the apostle. Getting Adler to such a position, as SK understands it, is consistent with what the state church is and wants: it cannot permit claims to apostleship in the strict and strong sense; it also cannot oppose them by simple denial; it must, then, persuade the apostle to deny his authority as an apostle by elevating his own lyrical-intellectual authority as interpreter of his revelation above the fact of that revelation. The Lutheran state church does, on this view, something very much like what the Soviet state used to do in its show trials. That is, it shows not that the apostle isn't one, but rather that even he doesn't take himself to be one.

So far, I've established that SK takes Adler's writings and acts subsequent to his receipt of a revelation to show that he does not take himself to be an apostle because he does not take his own apostolic authority seriously. Indeed, he contradicts that authority by subjecting it to sources of authority external to itself – his own interpretive skills, and the judgments of the state church, for example. But saying all this is neutral with respect to the question of whether SK thinks that Adler either did or could have received a revelation of the kind he reports. SK could simply be indicating a performative contradiction in the fabric of Adler's words and acts. That is, he could just be showing that you can't coherently claim to be an apostle and then subject your call to external authority, from which nothing immediately follows as to whether Adler received an apostolic call. So a first sketch of SK's argument in *The Book on Adler* is: that Adler is either a lyrical genius (according to SK's particular understanding of that phrase), or an apostle; that if we, his hearers and readers, take his call seriously we should consider him an apostle; while if we take his his behavior subsequent to his call seriously we must consider him a confused lyrical genius; and that we must take one or the other seriously. There's much in the *Book on Adler* that supports this position.

But there is also much in the text to suggest that SK's position is that Adler has not had a revelation at all, and is therefore in no sense an apostle. Consider, for example, the following passage: "either Adler has had a revelation, and then he must stand firm by it, act according to it by virtue of it, with consistency; or he has had no revelation. He himself says that he has had a revelation, but it is easy to show by his later statements that he does not stand firm by it. Indeed, it is easy to show that he does not even hold firmly to the Christian concept of a revelation – ergo, we conclude that he has had no revelation" (121). This is pretty decisive, and it occurs as part of a long discussion of the ways in which Adler has "volatilized" the idea of a revelation (122 & passim) – not, note, a revelation proper, but, rather, the idea of a revelation. To volatilize an idea, in SK's lexicon, is to vaporize it into the mists of universal history, to turn what had been concrete and particular and unsubsumable – "the point of departure that cannot be mediated" (121), the extraordinary person's starting-point that is the intersection of time with eternity (143-154 & passim) – into an instance of something greater than itself. Adler does not understand Christianity, SK thinks, and has therefore confused the "*falling of the veil from his eyes with his having had a revelation*" (117, SK's italics). That is, roughly, Adler may have seen for a moment what Christianity is, he may have, for the first time, become a Christian, fully available to himself and to the LORD. But he lacked the conceptual equipment to understand what had happened to him, and so all he could do was take what

had happened as an apostolic commission and then performatively contradict even that taking by his later words and works. On this reading, SK is clear that Adler is no apostle, not even a confused one. And this, I think, is what SK thinks: by the time we reach the end of *The Book on Adler*, SK has forgotten that he is allowing the possibility that Adler may have received an apostolic call, and has arrived at the position that this is most certainly not the case.

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So much, too briefly, for SK's understanding of the Adler case. Now, the third movement of this talk, some thoughts as to how the idea of a contemporary apostolic commission might be better treated than SK does.

SK thinks (and here I perhaps exaggerate, but not much) that the content of every revelation, and, hence, the content of every actual and possible apostolic proclamation, is the same. That content is the essential paradox of the intersection of eternity and time which is the incarnation. The proclamation of this is what apostles do, and it is what they are commissioned to do; every instance of it "remains essentially just as new, just as paradoxical" (176) as every other instance. What S. Paul as apostle proclaimed, then, is in content no different from what Martin Luther as apostle (if he was one) proclaimed. And their proclamations require from those who hear them, if they are taken seriously as apostolic, that they be treated as commands, that those who proclaim in this way are to be obeyed. This is because SK takes apostolic authority to participate in divine authority, and therefore to participate in the "eternal essential qualitative difference" (181) that belongs to the LORD.

A difficulty for SK's analysis of the Adler case is that much in the fabric of his own thought suggests that it ought to be possible for there to be contemporary apostles – contemporary, that is, with himself, and by extension with us. If being a Christian just means arriving at a kind of contemporaneity with Jesus, a contemporaneity that is always the same, then there is no reason – or at least no obvious reason – to think that apostolicity should be limited to the period of Jesus' contemporaries. Apostolicity, after all, on the kinds of definition we have before us, is an instance exactly of contemporaneity with Jesus: the apostle is faced with Jesus, called and instructed by him. And it seems natural enough to think of apostolic contemporaneity exactly as a kind or species of the contemporaneity that is Christianity *simpliciter*. And this is exactly how SK does think of it and analyze it throughout most of the *Book on Adler*: Adler is treated as possibly being an apostle, which he could not be were apostolicity to be restricted in principle to Jesus' contemporaries. I've shown that SK arrives at the conclusion that Adler is no apostle, but that is a *de facto* conclusion, not a *de iure* one.

But if there can in principle be contemporary apostles, and if Adler is not one, then SK must have at hand criteria by which to decide whether to treat a putative apostle as a real one. The criterion he supplies in *The Book on Adler* is a negative one: it suffices for those faced with someone who claims to have been

called as an apostle to reject that claim if the claimant's treatment of his own call does not exhibit the features proper to apostles. We've seen those features to include a quiet certainty that an apostolic call has in fact been received, a proclamation of the revelation without justification of it as such, a renunciation of loquaciousness, and, above all, a refusal to subject the content of the revelation to criteria for its identification and interpretation extrinsic to itself. It's because Adler's behavior does not exhibit these features that SK in the end rejects his claim to apostleship. SK deploys here an epistemological criterion. That is, he asks Zechariah's question: How shall I know this? And he answers the question.

Given this mode of procedure, we can ask: Could there be contemporary apostles who pass this test, apostles who behave, after they've been called, as SK thinks apostles should, which is to say as if they have in fact been called? If SK is to be consistent, the answer to this surely has to be yes. But this answer indicates a fairly serious difficulty internal to SK's thought about the nature of Christianity and about what it is to be a Christian. Christian faith, for SK, relies upon revelation: it is a dialectical and paradoxical response to something authoritatively given, something that could not be arrived at or constructed by human beings. The locus classicus for this revelation for SK is the text of Scripture, which he calls "the original text of individual human existence-relationships, the old familiar text handed down from the fathers." This text is not, and cannot be, shown to be properly apostolic, a proper locus of revelation, by a set of criteria brought to it from outside itself. To attempt that would exactly be to subject the particular revelation to the universal, to turn it into an instance of something that embraces and subsumes it – in brief, to treat it as Hegel (or at least SK's imagination of Hegel) would.

And yet, SK does subject Adler, and thereby other candidates for contemporary apostleship, to the kinds of epistemic criteria he rejects in principle as appropriate for the testing of Scripture as apostolic witness, or as appropriate for use by particular apostles as tests for the genuineness of their call. If we shouldn't go epistemic, and thereby also Hegelian as SK would see it, in the former cases, why should we do so in these latter-day instances? Why aren't we, if we do that, subsuming putative revelations and putative apostolic calls into a universal schema, one that requires evidence extraneous to themselves for the assessment of their validity?

Let's return our thoughts for a moment to the overture with which I began – I mean the distinction between Zechariah's and Mary's response to the revelation with which they were faced. Zechariah is struck dumb exactly because he retreats to epistemology when addressed by an angel; Mary is praised and blessed exactly because she does not do so. He wants to be convinced; she wants to understand. The former is the wrong thing to do; the latter the right thing – at least if what you're faced with is a revelation-fact, an apostolic call from the LORD. SK treats Adler's claim to have received an apostolic call very much as Zechariah treats his own call – at least, he does this by the time we reach the end of *The Book on Adler*. He asks to be convinced, and he is not convinced.

There are differences, certainly, between Zechariah and SK on this matter. Among the more important of these is that Zechariah responds to his own call, and SK responds to someone else's. But I don't think this makes much of a difference for the questions I'm addressing in this talk. A consistent Kierkegaardian position would ask the question, "Will you obey or will you not

obey?" (34) of someone else's revelation every bit as much as of his own – this is just how he advocates responding to S. Paul's claim to and communication of his apostolic call, for example, and without an in-principle restriction of apostolicity to the time of Jesus, which we've seen that SK doesn't and can't provide if he is to remain consistent, the same response ought be offered to contemporary claimants to apostolicity. This exactly means that the epistemological question – convince me: why should I believe you? – is ruled out, for the very asking of it already treats the apostle not as someone with a word from the LORD, but rather as what SK calls a genius, a man with an argument to be assessed in worldly terms. But if one is not to ask Zechariah's question of claimants to apostolicity, what is one to do? In suggesting an answer to that question, and in bringing this talk to an end, I'll go beyond what SK says and, I hope, resolve the tension I've identified in his thought. But before doing that, I must emphasize the deep rightness of SK's thought about the inappropriateness of asking the epistemic question about apostolicity. He sees clearly, and shows with great power, what's wrong with taking Zechariah's approach; and although I'm not aware that he ever appeals to the two annunciations in Luke 1 to support the position, I think he would like the line I've taken on these texts. I'm convinced, that's to say, by the essentials of SK's line on apostolicity; what I'm not convinced by is the fact that he doesn't apply it consistently to people like Adler.

How might that be done? How might we renounce Zechariah's question even about people like Adler? It would have to go like this. A Christian would not ask Adler or his contemporary kin, of whom there are of course many, to convince us that they have been called and addressed by the LORD. No. We would instead ask them Mary's question: How is this? Tell me more. Tell me what you've been told. I should like to think about it, to consider it as a word of the LORD, to ponder it further – Luke's Gospel, shortly after the annunciation passages I've mentioned, says that Mary pondered all the things she'd been told by the angels, and this is the ground for ancient Christian thought that Mary is the type and model of the Christian intellectual, indeed of the theologian. Submissive pondering: that, I suggest, is the right response, and the right Kierkegaardian response, to hearing about something the LORD has said, whether to oneself or another. The submissive part of submissive pondering treats the apostle as an authority because he has been called by the LORD; and the pondering part, which Mary exemplifies in her response to the angel, and SK exemplifies in his response to Adler, tries to understand the apostolic message, and to identify what in it can be appropriated and acted upon. Notice, to return again to the Scriptural account of the angel's response to Mary, Gabriel doesn't respond to Mary's question, "How shall this be?" with anything like, 'Shut up and accept it, woman, it's a revelation isn't it.' No, he tells her something more, even if something itself puzzling and in need of further elucidation.

I can imagine you thinking: so, does he mean that we should accept all those who claim to have been called by the LORD as apostles? Aren't the streets full of crazy people who think they've been entrusted with a revelation? Surely it can't be right to accept all of them, and to treat everything they say as authoritative? Well, yes and no. Yes, if all we're considering is the properly Christian response to people like Adler: we should refuse the epistemic question for the reasons already canvassed, and we should, where we have time and space enough to do so, respond by pondering, by considering whether there's

anything here we can understand, anything here we can appropriate and act upon, anything here that can nourish and nurture our lives as Christians. Often, perhaps usually, the answer to these questions will be no. We'll find what's said by contemporary apostles murky, puzzling, incomprehensible, or in some other way dubious, I think all of that about Adler's revelation, for example, as SK clearly also did. And in such cases it'll be perfectly proper to leave what's said aside, as something we have, at the moment, no use for. A judgment such as that, however, does not require us to adopt the stance of Zechariah. Neither does it require us even to judge that the person addressing us is no apostle. It requires only the conclusion that there's nothing I can do with this at the moment, or the conclusion that something about this seems false to me.

But there is yet something more to be said, and it is, I suppose, somewhat in the nature of a Catholic altar-call, which it is a little embarrassing to be making in this deeply and properly Baptist place. I admire Baylor's Baptist heritage, and its public embrace of that heritage; I think, too, that we Catholics have a lot to learn from Baptists, and indeed from Lutherans such as SK. But there is something in the logic of the position on apostolicity I've just set forth, a Marian rather than a Zechariah-like position, that is deeply relevant to the claims of Catholic Christianity, and I'd like to end by noting it. Among the things that Christians called and gifted as apostles have often said, and continue to say, is that there is a church founded upon the rock of Peter, and that entrusted to it with a fullness of perfection not found elsewhere is the gift of preserving and explicating the Christian revelation, of showing ever more fully what that revelation means. That church is the one in full communion with the Bishop of Rome who, as I speak, bears the name of Francis. A Marian response to claims of apostolicity such as the one I've been advocating here, requires that this, too, be pondered, and I hope that you will ponder it. SK, I think, would not have pondered it for long. Among other things, it would probably have seemed too Hegelian to him, implying as it does that there is progression at least in our understanding of revelation. But still, there is much in SK's treatment of the Adler case that suggests, as I've tried to show, the possibility of a consistently Marian response to claims of apostolicity, and that permits, if not requires, the possibility of contemporary apostles. And there's a final teasing piece of evidence from SK's almost endless work of revising the text of *The Book on Adler*. It is that among the pseudonyms he considered publishing it under was 'Petrus Minor,' the little rock, a pseudonym that I think he had not used before and of course did not finally use in this case because the book was never published. But perhaps it is suggestive. Perhaps it points us in the direction of thinking about the little rock's relation to the big one, the big one being, of course, S. Peter and his successors as Bishop of Rome. But that is a conceit rather than a claim, and with it, and with an exhortation to read more SK, I'll bring this to an end.