MANKIND AS INTERPERSONAL

Virgil Warren, PhD

I. Interpersonalism applies first to mankind as an explanation of God's purpose.

Humankind is "for the praise of the glory of God's grace" (Ephesians **1**:6; cp. 12, 14). Both "praise" and "grace" apply to social activity. Praise is response to grace. What God first gave from his grace we praise him for in our response. Both God and people give and receive. God gives to people in his grace and receives praise and honor. We get from grace and give in praise. Since the phenomenon consists of two-directional action between persons, from an (a) existential standpoint the purpose of people itself is interpersonal.

From a more (b) eschatological standpoint, Acts **17**:26-27 speaks of God's making *"of one* nature] *every nation of men . . . that they might feel after him and find him."* The forward thrust of human efforts (eschatological) issues in relationship (existential) even as relationship issues in purpose.

II. Interpersonalism speaks also to the very nature of man.

Out of the interpersonal nature of God as gracious comes the purpose of God to create that whereon he can bestow grace (Ephesians **1**:6). Out of the purpose of God arises the nature of man, whom he creates in his own image. That image consists of the interpersonal capacity that enables people to relate back to God in the way God first related to him. George Herbert Meade among others observed that we individually become persons by functioning relationally with other persons. God first communicates to us through creation itself as well as through special revelation; we reciprocate by praising God's previous grace.

Interpersonal relationship is the characterizing reality in Christian truth. Nowhere has this observation appeared more relevant than in the study of our race. Over the centuries extensive thought has gone into the interpretation of Genesis **1**:26-27 and related materials: *"Let's make mankind in our image after our likeness."* Traditionally there have been four proposed aspects of the "image of God." Reason has headed the list. The ability to think abstractly relates to the capacity for language, creativity, self-transcendence, responsibility (dominion), and even humor. People can penetrate a situation in thought and imagination.

Emotion distinguishes us from much of the created realm because we can care, have feelings, experience affection for other persons. Will enables us to choose between alternatives. So we are not limited to a stimulus-response existence where response answers the strongest stimulus in the environment. We also have a spirit—the aspect that transcends the flesh and

continues after the death of the body. Traditionally, then, we have been regarded as created in God's image because we have rational, emotional, volitional, and spiritual capacities.

While these proposals about the image offer significant insight into our nature, Genesis **1**:26-27 suggests a more inclusive truth connected to interpersonalism. First is the pronoun *us*. *"Let us make mankind in our image"* draws attention to the interpersonal character of God himself. "Us" refers to the three-person oneness of God. It is not majestic plural, since later in the account **3**:22 says "<u>one of</u> us." "Majestic plural" refers to using plurality for great degree—in this case the greatness of God. But there could not be "one of" such a plurality: "Man has become like one of us." An alternate interpretation takes "us" to mean God and the celestial beings. But angels do not appear in the context so as to be the antecedent of a pronoun. The word for "angel" is not used at all until Genesis **16**:7. Furthermore, we are said to be created in the image and likeness of <u>God</u>, not only here but elsewhere in scripture (Genesis **5**:1; **9**:6; 1 Corinthians **11**:7; James **3**:9; cp. Acts **17**:28-29). Such phraseology does not occur with angels. So "us" indicates the interpersonal character of God. Since we bear the image of that interpersonal God, the image of God in us means primarily our interpersonal character.

A second observation that highlights our interpersonal character comes from the parallelism in Genesis **1**:27. *"In the image of God he created man"* stands parallel to *"male and female he created them."* The image evidently pertains to what is common to the male-female nature of humanness. Since God is spirit, physical sexuality is not the point even though marriage does provide our closest, most permanent, and all-inclusive personal experience. Marriage has the character that it does primarily because in it we most distinctively demonstrate the intense, permanent, and all-inclusive oneness of the godhead. The plurality-in-oneness of marriage is <u>analogous</u> to the plurality-in-oneness of trinity.

Of special importance regarding marriage is that its interpersonal character precedes its physical distinctive. Not until there is compenetration of personhood can there naturally be compenetration of physical natures. Marriage is mutual commitment and common identity of persons before it is participation in sexual relationship. Sexual relation is communication before it is pleasure and procreation; mankind can reproduce face to face. So the relevance of image to male-female lies, not directly in the physical domain, but contextually in its interpersonal setting. Physical relationship occurs in interpersonal relationship, and physical relationship uniquely bonds interpersonal identity between husband and wife. As a result, analogy to the trinity teaches us about the divine intent in marriage as an interpersonal experience, and the interpersonal marriage experience helps us comprehend the nature of the divine trinity in whose image human persons are created. So the image of God in us lies at the corporate as well as the individual level.

The individual capacities traditionally cited do have a place in the image, not because they are the image, but because they make the image possible. Reason, emotion, will, spirit are capacities for operating interpersonally. In this way they distinguish us from animal and compare us to God.

Several advantages come from putting the *imago dei* at the level of interpersonal capacity. For one thing, it (1) <u>fosters wholeness</u>. A person is not reduced to one essence—like rationality, nor fragmented into a series of parts—reason, will, choice, spirit. Our wholeness in God's image involves even the physical body so as not to create unnatural division between body and spirit or to depreciate the physical aspect of the total self; the image include the body by analogy. The socio-physical unity in marriage bears analogy to the socio-spiritual unity in Father-Son-Spirit (note implications of 1 Corinthians **6**:17).

The image as interpersonal capacity (2) <u>clarifies the man-animal distinction</u>. No animal is said to be created in God's image. Man found no mate in the animal kingdom (Genesis **2**:18-20). Animals could be killed but not mankind (Genesis **9**:6). Cohabitation between mankind and animal called for capital punishment (Leviticus **20**:15). To be distinguished from animal, mankind does not have to be unique in every respect nor absolutely unique in any one respect. Rather, the <u>degree</u> to which we possess these abilities is sufficiently greater that in combination they produce our uniqueness—the interpersonal capacity. Our uniqueness from animals is not qualified by rudimentary intelligence seen in crude tool making (*vs.* just tool using) or perhaps in elementary language learning—which has not actually been demonstrated despite claims to that effect.

The image as interpersonal capacity (3) <u>provides theological foundation for interpreting sexuality</u>. It affirms the equal worth of both sexes (Galatians **3**:28) and defines the proper relationship between them (1 Corinthians **6**:13-20). Sexual difference is subsumed under the divine image common to both and expressed in the union of the two (Genesis **2**:24). The dignity of marriage, nevertheless, harmonizes with the wholeness of personhood in the unmarried, because the interpersonal capacity accentuated in marriage finds expression in all other social relations as well. The total, permanent, exclusive identity of husband-wife is reminiscent of the Father-Son-Spirit. In his own image God created them male and female.

People are persons before they are male or female persons. God has personhood without sexuality. Being persons before we are sexual persons is not only illustrated in the non-sexuality of personal deity and angelic personhood; it appears in the pre-puberty aspect of life, where it does not significantly differentiate modes of personhood. The same commonality returns in the maturity of senior years. Chronological order (God before adult and childhood before puberty) mirrors logical order in the history of things.

Placing personhood ahead of sexuality means that we have access to the prime personal capacity—love. Love provides a basis for the experience of meaningfulness and personal worth that stands alternative to competition. One plague in modern Western culture is people's discomfort with sexuality. It results in homosexuality, unisex, cohabitation, sexual abuse, which represent disorientation within individual persons. They have not integrated themselves fully and are attempting to rationalize perverted ways of not having to face that lack.

Unisex results from the death of absolutes and the denial of antitheses, which establish contrast and difference. People want to deny antitheses because they do not know how to obtain meaningfulness aside from competition, in which by the nature of the situation most people do not fare well—they do not "win." Obscuring differences attempts to avoid failures and therefore meaninglessness in the arena of competition. They cannot readily handle unity amidst diversity. They could, however, choose complementariness rather than attempt to eliminate difference. In other words, interpersonalism via love provides the means and goal alternative to competition and loss of uniqueness.

The *imago dei* as interpersonal capacity (4) <u>connects the natural and ethical usages of the "image of God" expression</u> (Genesis **1**:26; **5**:1; **9**:6; 1 Corinthians **11**:7; James **3**:9 *vs*. [Romans **8**:29?]; 2 Corinthians **3**:18; Colossians **3**:10). Not only were we created in the image of God; we are redeemed from being sinners to "put on the new man that is being renewed to knowledge after the image" of our creator (Colossians **3**:10). Ethics and morality apply only to interpersonal circumstances. The natural image amounts to the interpersonal capacity; the ethical image amounts to proper interpersonal behavior. The use of "image" to mean ethical character confirms our understanding of the image as interpersonal capacity.

Interpersonalism gives fundamental definition to biblical anthropology inasmuch as we are created in the image of God. *Imago dei* as interpersonal capacity, explains why being "alone" is not good (Genesis **2**:18): we are relational beings. Because interpersonal relationship is our defining mark, we acknowledge no superiority of worth among human subsets either in regard to sex, race, or social status. We all share the elemental capacity that makes us what we are—we have interpersonal capacity.

Mind helps us function interpersonally. It enables us to receive word revelation from personal deity. It enables us to live by revealed values rather than genetic instinct, innate drive, chemical response, conditioned reflex, or trained habit. It gives us self-transcendence so we can experience transcendent (John **3**:3-8; 1 Corinthians **15**:50; Romans **12**:2), crucified living (Galatians **2**:20; **5**:24; **6**:14), the resurrected lifestyle (Romans **6**:2b-13; **8**:11; 1 Corinthians **15**:33-34), the ascended lifestyle (Colossians **3**:1-5; Philippians **3**:17-21). We can "get out of ourselves" for other people. Mind gives orientation to emotions, boundaries to drives, direction to will, and guidelines for conscience. It enables us to relate socially by projecting consciousness

over behind the eyes of another. It enables us to reorganize reality and live by the internal world we create.

Identifying the interpersonal capacity as the image of God (5) <u>involves us in seeing mankind as society</u>. It makes sensible the normal use of trinitarianism as a model for society. Traditionally trinity has supplied the characteristics for the relational category, which applies most fully to persons in relationship. The principal factors are <u>unity</u> (oneness, homoousia—same substance, relatedness), <u>diversity</u> (individuality, distinction, contrast, difference), and <u>equality</u> (commonality, mutuality, compenetration, impartiality, interdependence, co-importance, equally essential to the whole). Since people are created in God's image, what applies to the trinity in these matters applies to people relationally—in marriage and in society as a whole, epitomized in the family. The points made in this entry have appeared in many places, one being Paul T. Arveson's article "A Relational Analysis of Social Groups" in the December 1987 issue of *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, pp. 190-197.

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