

SALVATION AS INTERPERSONAL

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The Problem

Christianity analyzes the human predicament as stemming from faulty personal relationship, which in turn stems from improper personal behavior. A great amount of suffering in the world comes from inappropriate social activity. So we cannot expect the answer to our condition to be a chemical, scientific, materialistic, or miraculous solution. As a result, Christianity does not attempt to solve the problem of our human predicament in the same realm, through the same means, or by the same method the world tries to use. It is not primarily by science or scientific technology that we raise the quality of life. It is not primarily through political, military, or legal processes that we achieve peace and happiness.

The Nature of Salvation

Salvation is primarily reconciliation. Lostness means alienation, estrangement, and separation from God and other people. Salvation reverses that condition. Reconciliation is a Pauline imagery for restoring fellowship between persons (Romans 5:10-11; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20; Ephesians 2:14-18; 4:14-16; Colossians 1:19-23).

Sin means action resulting from a personal choice that breaks relationship between persons. Sin is anti-social behavior. It is egocentric action that bespeaks a negative type of individualism. Egocentrism behaves in I-it fashion in an I-you circumstance. It manipulates and coerces by physical force, economic duress, subliminal manipulation, emotional pressure in a way that bypass the will of another. Sin does not care for the welfare of others, only for itself; it denies the interpersonal matrix. Sin is not a kind of substance or a defect in the form of substance. Sin is an act that causes a state of relationship. Original sin, as used in historical theology, is set aside because sin is an action not a hypostatic state.

Guilt and its consequences cannot transfer from one person to another. An act cannot transfer from one person to another, so the guilt for an act cannot transfer nor can the penalty for that act. Guilt is not transferable because it arises from an act relative to a standard for action. Sin as a personal affront to another cannot create alienation with third parties not involved in the disobedience. Legal transfer of guilt is foreign to the nature of an interpersonal situation. Original guilt is therefore set aside as well because sin is personal action toward other persons.

Sources of Sin

Sin is transmitted socially from one generation to the next rather than biologically through fallen nature. There is (1) sinful example, misunderstood good example, social pressure, and social reinforcement. Sin consists also in (2) the failure to transcend our viewpoint of consciousness and to live interpersonally by projecting our consciousness over behind the eyes of the other person. Finally, sin comes from (3) pervertible bodily drives—pervertible by meeting them in inappropriate ways.

Sin vs. the Imputation of Sin

It is one thing to sin; it is another to have it held against us. One reason God might not “impute” sin is **(a)** that the disobedience occurred in ignorance. Right intent should connect with right action, but two possibilities exist: right outer action issuing from wrong inner motivation and right motivation leading to wrong action. Ignorance is the connector between good motives and bad actions. Education (evangelism) can remove that impediment (Acts 17:30-31). Interpersonalism comes into the picture in distinction to the law itself. Sincere ignorance may justify not imputing a sin to us or at least holding it in abeyance until we can learn better. Such ignorance does not include deliberate ignorance or ignorance due to disinterest.

Removal of Sin via Repentance and Forgiveness

Interpersonalism means that practical righteousness can be the case despite past deliberate failure and sin. We have already said that action from ignorance can be sufficient reason to disregard the act in considering someone righteous. Now we observe that **(b)** even when the misbehavior did not stem from ignorance, righteousness unto relationship can still exist through repentance and forgiveness. The past cannot be undone, but the problem is not the past but the present. If persons do not allow past conduct to affect present associations, righteousness unto relationship can exist. Repentance plus forgiveness removes the past from impacting the present. Repentance-forgiveness makes up the difference between performance and perfection. Repentance separates sinners from their past act as far as the offending parties are concerned. Forgiveness separates sinners from their past act as far as the offended parties are concerned. If the past no longer affects present association, sinners are righteous for all practical purposes: they have righteousness in effective—friendship.

In addition to action from ignorance and the repentance-forgiveness process, **(c)** identification with Christ stands between the sinner and righteousness unto relationship. Jesus Christ possessed in the human situation the full righteousness the Father prescribed for him. By carrying to the point of suffering violent death his own obedience to Father, he qualified himself to be appointed by the Father as the object of identification for our being viewed as righteous like him (Acts 17:31).

Atonement

Among New Testament passages on atonement, Hebrews speaks extensively on the inadequacy of the Mosaic provision for the forgiveness of sins (objective) and the cleansing of conscience (subjective). The blood of bulls and goats cannot take away human sins (10:4). The Hebrew writer does not simply affirm that point by prophetic or apostolic authority; he couches his presentation in terms supplied from the Old Testament scripture in Psalm 40:6-8. Additionally, the lack of efficacy in animal sacrifice comes from the nature of the case.

The nature of the case brings up the interpersonal character of what must happen for atonement to be made possible in principle and to occur in specific cases. One deficiency was the failure to recognize that solving interpersonal problems must be by interpersonal means. (a) Animals are not persons so using them does not fit with the problem of alienation between persons. The author also observes in 2:14-18 that Christ did not provide angels with salvation, but people (*“seed of Abraham”*); and so Christ partook of the same condition for appropriateness sake (*“behooved”*) as well as for helping human persons identify with him (*“able to help”*). Animals are not moral beings, much less sinless ones. Amoral things cannot solve moral problems; a bar of soap cannot cleanse sin.

Furthermore, (b) animal sacrifice was not voluntary. In contrast, the Messiah *“offered himself”* (9:25-26). Finally, (c) animal sacrifice was not interpersonal. It operated in legal fashion. That is the only reason animal sacrifice could have anything to do with cleansing. Law can be foreign to the nature of things and still work because the authority of law can say so.

Theory of the Atonement

Identification is the mechanism by which sinful people connect with the righteous Messiah. People are viewed as righteous, not because they are righteous, but because they have identified themselves with him who is righteous, thereby showing their concern to have what they do not fully achieve. Their aspiration for righteousness finds expression in their being drawn to the Righteous One, committing themselves to him and to his values and purposes, giving him their allegiance in contrast to all parallel possibilities, and sensing nearness and oneness with him. Identification means liking the same things, wanting to be around the other person, spending time together, thinking what the other person wants and does. Identification means resembling the other person in attitude, mannerisms, habits, and actions. Identification with Christ carries all these same implications plus accepting his lordship in our lives because he is greater than we are and because he is our creator.

One indication that the atonement does not literally turn on the penal substitution principle seems implied by Romans 4:25. Jesus was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for

our justification. Substitution theory considers the death of Christ the discrete replacement for what should have been our own death. How is it that the resurrection can have anything to do with justification if that was accomplished in the death? The resurrection is not a substitute for anything.

It may be thought of as the flip side of death, but resurrection only brings us back from what death took. Resurrection might be said to prove that his death had the meaning Jesus predicted it would have—basis for salvation. But that idea makes resurrection evidence for the meaning of the death; Paul evidently speaks of it as part of the meaning.

It seems more likely that resurrection contributes to justification by preserving Jesus in the category of humanity really and psychologically. We can more easily identify with him since he is resurrected man. Identifying with Christ to the point of violent death is the most we can give to God. Christ's resurrection brings back before our eyes the One with whom we have to do.

Atonement and salvation occur in the mind of God as a change in the way he regards us. It is not a transfer of righteousness from Christ to us nor a transfer of guilt from us to him. He is not a penal substitute for sinners. Rather, he is the one we identify with, which in this case means committing ourselves to him because he is the One who embodies the values we agree to live by. If we are willing to do that, God is willing to view us as like him.

Scope of the atonement

Interpersonalism affects the scope of the atonement because it is not natural for a caring, personal God arbitrarily to choose some and condemn others irrespective of any act on their part.

Nature of Grace-Faith

The salvation process requires input from both God and us, because personal relationships can be established, condemned, and restored only by acts on both sides of them. If the salvation "problem" were something besides a personal relationship, it might be that we could solve it alone. If we were "lost" in the woods, we might be able to "save" ourselves by finding a way out on our own. If we were sick, we might figure out a way to heal ourselves. If the problem were poverty, we might discover a way to work our way out of it. But this problem involves two parties. It is not established by God alone as in "recognition" (Calvinism) nor by us alone as in merit (Phariseeism); yet action is involved contrary to antinomianism (Gnosticism). Not saving ourselves does not mean that we cannot do something, but that our doing something does not save us. Not saving ourselves also does not mean that we cannot do anything outward, but that we cannot by ourselves do anything inward or outward that saves us. We cannot save ourselves before God because it takes willing actions on both sides of a relationship to restore it, and because the offended party is the only one acting in the finalizing the restoration.

As grace summarizes God's action in reconciliation, faith summarizes our part in the process. God is gracious to do it; we can only trust him to do it. Faith occurs in an interpersonal context and so refers to an interpersonal act: trust. Faith means more than intellectual assent, or belief. Faith does not particularly mean something inner vs. something outer. Faith includes the expression of it—active faith. Faith involves a non-causal connection between action and result; it is an act toward another who considers it an appropriate basis (condition) for giving a result that the act itself did not produce in whole or in part. We behaviorally trust him who graciously promises to give what our behavior cannot cause. Faith has the character of conditionality. It refers to the principle of trust in another to give what we cannot earn. While sinners' actions cannot cause their righteousness in the eyes of the other, they can serve as conditions for considering them righteous in the eyes of the other. A trust situation includes a second person who stands in the gap between our act and the desired effect. The connector between our acts and those results is the choice of the other person, not the authority of law, the force of nature, or the logic of ideas. In logic, authority, and force no second person contributes to the process; so they do not involve the interpersonal element distinctive to faith.

What acts apply to reconciliation is determined by appropriateness and need. With choice connecting act and consequence, there is more “play” in the interpersonal system than there is in nature, law, and logic; yet the requirements are not arbitrary, as they could be under law. The full significance of the act does not rest in the act itself (its nature) nor in the intention of the doer, but also in the one who stipulates the act as a condition.

Inner vs. outer factors cannot really be separate—only analytically in the mind. So, inner action cannot be the condition contemplated aside from overt expression of it. Besides, inner and outer actions interact reciprocally as outer reinforces inner that leads to visible action.

The salvation provision by God and the nature of response by people comprise the two central aspects of soteriology as reconciliation. Interpersonalism characterizes each individually and both conjointly. In the atonement, identification provides the mechanism—theory of the atonement—of connection between Christ's righteousness and our righteousness unto relationship. Here stands grace. A person serves as the object of identification, and persons can identify with that other Person.

In the application of salvation, conditionality—as distinguished from causality, recognition, and antinomianism—hinges on the presence of another person. Here stands faith, where a person stands in the gap between our acts and the bestowed result. Salvation does not involve antinomianism or recognition, which partakes of the legal category; nor does it involve causality, which belongs to the category of nature. Salvation is interpersonal through and through.

Interpersonalism clarifies why salvation cannot be by works. It takes actions on both sides to recreate a relationship. “Works” in Paul means works of law, where they themselves produce righteousness in contrast to having righteousness reckoned to them as in interpersonal contexts. Under law, works are impersonal actions insofar as they relate to an ideal standard rather than an ideal person. In such a context, people do them to create merit more than to please a person.

Goodness is interpersonal goodness. It is not simply a goodness people have, but a goodness they are viewed as having. Goodness is in the person; but more importantly for relationship purposes, goodness is in the eyes of the beholder.

Works may refer to the behavior patterns required by an abstract standard. Interpersonalism regards the standard as the will of one person for another unto relationship.

Viewing salvation as interpersonal rather than legal gives a feel for how, and in what sense, salvation is a process more than a point. A formal act can focalize into a point what is really a process. Societies generate rites of passage to help people conceptualize where they are. They generate rituals to focalize intangible matters. For that reason, baptism, for example, is more for the candidate than for God, because it gives the person something to focalize the process at. The friendship itself, however, is more a matter of degree than of category. That is not to say that interpersonal process can have no time-when’s. There is a time of decision within the person, and there is a time when the person overtly commits himself to another—say in a handshake.

Asking at what point God begins to consider someone righteous may reflect a legal mentality because legal transactions occur at points in time. Entering a relationship, nevertheless, may involve a “break point,” or “conversion point,” a conviction point and a commitment point, a handshake, a statement of apology, *etc.* Whether God begins to consider someone saved in the living room or later as that person comes out of the baptistry is not a highly important issue to settle since God knows ahead of time that the believer will be coming up out of the baptistry later.

Besides being something of a process, salvation also involves a process more than a sequence. Persons can integrate the subsequent with the previous and use the previous to qualify the subsequent. Persons have memory of the past, intention for the future, and attitude toward other persons in the present; so they can break down sheer sequence. Law, logic, and nature, however, are helplessly sequential in unalterable ways.

Apostasy

Interpersonalism provides a way of answering the question of how many sins it takes to knock a person out of salvation. That objection to apostasy poses a quantitative question for a

qualitative problem. First, in friendships and marriage there comes a “point,” we say, when the friendship breaks off or the spouse is no longer willing to continue in the marriage. Neither the friend nor the spouse would have indicated how many sins would cause the decision to end the relationship, but there does “come a time” when it ends.

The time comes because the offended person decides that enough insensitive acts have happened to indicate the attitude that caused them. It is not so much the number of acts but the underlying attitude they represent that causes the other party to dissolve the association. It will take some general number of such behaviors, but the qualitative attitude rather than the quantitative number forms the basis for judgment.

Interpersonal relationships are by nature reversible. To guarantee perseverance of the saints, there would have to be a pre-empting of the will, which is a requirement for personhood. Denying free will reduces a person to a stimulus-response organism and adopts impersonal determinism.

Eternal security is also not acceptable because it becomes a kind of antinomianism. Making behavior irrelevant to relationship does not conform to the nature of relationship.

Assurance of salvation exists in the apostasy model more than in either perseverance or eternal security, even though much of the argument for these other two viewpoints comes from their supposed superior guarantee of assurance. If in the perseverance model people turn aside from the Christian life, their conversion experience was not genuine, or it would have lasted. Such a proposal welds together the present condition and the final state. Since people cannot know their future condition, they cannot now have full assurance of present salvation because they cannot now have full assurance of future faithfulness. Ontic regeneration provides the foundation for conversion, which ties salvation status to a kind of being and thereby undercuts assurance.

But when assurance occurs in interpersonal terms, it rests on the personal character of God as loving us (Romans 8:32), willing that all should be saved (2 Peter 3:9), and being constant and trustworthy (Hebrews 6:17-18). It rests on his promise to protect from overwhelming temptation (1 Corinthians 10:13) and from Satanic conquest (John 10:28-29) as well as his promise to empower (1 Corinthians 10:13) and guide (2 Peter 1:3). We develop expectations natural to the relationship instead of expectations like perfect health or privileged wealth. Our post-conversion weaknesses, failures, and sins do not destroy us, because we understand that relationships do not dissolve over one sin, especially when the repentance-forgiveness process continues. We deal qualitatively in attitude, aspirations, and intents of the heart rather than quantitatively in perfectionist and legal terms.

Continued assurance grows along with continued growth. Growth in life quality includes growth through fellowship with the faithful (Hebrews 10:24-25), imitation of the faithful (Hebrews 13:7), and service to all mankind (Hebrews 13:2).

Terminal Sin

Interpersonalism helps clarify the meaning of “deliberate sin” and what the scripture says is unforgivable. Every act we perform is deliberate to some degree. But a deliberate act can be later reconsidered and repented of. The present, not the past, dictates present relationship.

Jesus spoke to the Pharisees about a son who refused to obey but later repented. When the son refused, he knew he was doing so. It was deliberate but later forgiven. The opposite of deliberate sin, then, is not being ignorant that we are sinning, even though the term “deliberate” could mean that.

Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit and other expressions about terminal sin must refer to a degree of “hardenedness” that from a practical standpoint influence can no longer touch. If Spirit is associated with interpersonalism, that would fit nicely. The hardened legalist and the hardened sinner get to the point where “you can’t reason with them,” “you can’t talk to them.” During Jesus’ ministry the Pharisees’ speaking a word against him meant they were not convinced about who he was. But after sufficient evidence had come and the witness of the resurrection had been confirmed by the continuation and growth of the Messianic movement after his crucifixion, there came a “time” when opportunity was cut off individually—and in this case nationally at A.D. 70.

Ontologizing Soteriology

The doctrine of entire sanctification claims that moral perfection in this life can happen. This Wesleyan concept rests on a second definite work of grace by the Holy Spirit. As Calvinistic regeneration consists of a supernatural operation of the Holy Spirit in initial justification, so entire sanctification consists of a second supernatural operation of the Holy Spirit in eradicating the last vestiges of inbred sin. As a result, a person has been fully restored to the pristine condition of unfallen Adam. Moral perfection becomes possible again.

This all sounds so different from the admonition to take up Christ’s yoke because it is easy and his burden is light (Matthew 11:30). Peter tells the Jews that the Law was a yoke that neither they nor their fathers could bear (Acts 15:10). Paul warns the Galatians against beginning in grace and then reverting to the yoke of bondage that the Law is (Galatians 5:1). The contrast to all that is grace (Acts 15:9-11) and a learning of me (Matthew 11:29-30). If perfection were the case, there would be objection to Galatianism and 1 John 1:7-10 would have no reason to speak about “*the blood of Jesus cleansing us from all sin,*” a comment directed to Christians. Rather than return to a prospect of perfectionism, we continue by faith and grace.

Eastern Monism

Christianity affirms the validity and goodness of the individual in contrast to the Eastern notion of the Ultimate One. The goal of salvation is not absorption into the Ultimate One to remove individual identity. Goodness is not monolithic oneness but interpersonal unity.

Gnosticism

Christianity affirms the goodness of the created material realm in contrast to the notion in Gnosticism that spirit is good and material is evil. The goal of salvation in Christ is not to escape from the material realm, but to subsume the material under the spiritual—in keeping with the chronological priority of spirit over substance. The concern is proper behavior between persons, not secret knowledge about how to get through the aeons of the Gnostic pleroma, the succession of realms graduated upward in decreasing proportions of matter with spirit until a person reaches the realm of pure spirit.

Augustinian Privation

Christianity affirms the goodness of being and the goodness of form-in-being in contrast to Augustine's notion of evil as privation of form relative to its pristine condition. Natural depravity refers to disorder, malformation, loss of form relative to the original human condition; so salvation would have to involve hypostatic regeneration to restore the ability to do good.

Calvinistic Legalism

Legal operations provided the mechanisms of salvation in Calvin's thinking—in keeping with the fact that he first trained as a lawyer before he became a theologian. Legal inclusion in Adam who sinned causes God to regard all people as sinners likewise. The atonement consists of penal substitution. Selection of whom to save occurs without reference to anything in the persons saved.

Augustine, Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and others have conceptualized the conversion process in terms of nature, law, and idea, which are different kinds of processes from interpersonal process. At best, those other three processes are only analogous to salvation. According to theologians like these, lostness is legally determined by all people's inclusion in Adam who sinned. Atonement is legally accomplished by substituting Christ for Adam. The fallen nature all people biologically inherited from Adam is regenerated miraculously so the proclamation about that salvation through Christ can be applied to the individual.

But being lost is a social condition, so being saved must be a social process. Lostness is alienation; salvation is reconciliation. The nature of the solution must correspond to the nature of

the problem. These thinkers are right that from a practical standpoint something happens parallel to, and in addition to, the proclamation before it our accepting it. The problem is that they supernaturalize that added something and invoke legal process to determine who would benefit from it. Instead of supernatural miracle (hypostatic action) and legal process, interpersonal influence issues from persons parallel to proclamation and helps create readiness to accept the proclaimed message.

In Romans 9:15 Paul does cite Exodus 19:11, “*I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy.*” Paul cited it to remind his readers that God is not a genie in a lamp who automatically fulfills people’s desires. Their requests pass through his sovereign will. It is a principled, interpersonal process that takes place between them, and God is the leading person in that process. Rather than saying that people have no will or that they have no will in salvation, the passage say that God has one, an overriding one. Proposals of someone like Moses do not manipulate God. As a result, the Jews should not suppose they have a right to think that God’s promises to them eliminate broadening his promises to Gentiles or that God has no right to determine what he meant when he made those promises to Israel. His promises to Israel were positive, not restrictive