

LAW AND INTERPERSONALISM IN CONTRAST

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Law and personal relationship do not have a (1) *part-to-whole* relationship. Legal process does not represent a secondary operation inside of interpersonal operation. Grace-faith does not function inside of law, and law does not provide mechanisms inside of interpersonalism. In Pauline terms, works are not part of the grace-faith-promise-spirit system. Likewise, legality and interpersonalism are not (2) *parts of a common larger operation*.¹ Legal works do not supplement or combine with interpersonal actions in bringing about the interpersonal consequences needed by estranged persons. Legal operations are foreign to interpersonal process. The two systems are parallel, alternative, and mutually exclusive.² If something is of law, it is no longer of faith (Galatians 2:12); if it is legal, it is not interpersonal. If it is of grace, it is no more of works (Romans 11:6). If inheritance is of law, faith is void and promise is of no effect (Romans 4:14). Grace, faith, and promise are aspects of interpersonal operation in contrast to works and debt, which belong to legal process (Romans 4:13-16; cp. Galatians 3:18). God has not established procedures for persons to go through to get salvation; he has given them a Person to identify with and commit to in order to receive it.

Legal and interpersonal differ significantly in their nature and operation. (a) Law operates in straight-line causal series, whereas inter-personalism involves reciprocation in addition sequence. Legal transaction calls for correct order because the validity of each step depends on the proper accomplishment of the preceding one. Interpersonal operations are not as highly patterned. Trust, repentance, confession, baptism, and so on, are inter-reinforcing aspects of an interpersonal process rather than discrete steps in a legal sequence. They form a gestalt whose parts interact. Forgiveness, gift of the Spirit, and church membership form a logical sequence but not a chronological one. They form parts of one whole event rather than a sequence spread out over time. The “plan of salvation” is not patternistic, formulaic, transactional; that would be too much like law or logic—or worse yet, magic. Baptism both expresses the others and reinforces them.

(b) Law is more rigid and static while persons are more fluid, flexible, and progressive. Christianity does not present a “cut and dried” formula for reconciliation, because fellowship cannot be cut and dried, and establishing it does not have to take one particular format.

(c) Law transactions are more quantitative, categorical, and time-referenced while personal processes are more qualitative, gradual, and less tied to exact times. In the interpersonal setting, however, sins are not cleansed on an item-for-item or time-period by time-period basis. When it comes to social processes especially, being more definite does not always mean being

more correct. Over time, dynamic religious movements tend to degenerate, because adherents tend to crystallize their thinking to make things more exact, especially as they attempt to articulate their viewpoints to popular audiences. Crystallization often takes place by legalizing (as well as rationalizing or ontologizing) what is by nature interpersonal.

(d) In law, authority connects antecedent and consequence; but in interpersonalism, choice connects them. Law produces automatic, uniform results because the operation does not pass through a person's will. Results come out of the law itself. A given case does not go above the law to the person(s) who originated the law. Persons *originate* a legal system, but once it is in place it operates on its own—at least it does so unless the originators take positive action to override its functioning. Persons *carry out* the law, but they are officers of the law. It is the law, not they, that brings about the results. Furthermore, psychologically those who come before the law tend not to focus on the person, but on the process. They may not, for example, consciously associate remission of sins with God's choice, but with the procedures involved. But in relationship matters, the other party chooses to give mercy (Romans 9:14-16). Christian ordinances, then, are not sacraments in the technical sense, because they do not involve automatic flow of grace. Christian ordinances do not have automatic results but volitional consequences.

(e) Law can have unnatural validity because valid consequences do not have to come from factors natural to the real circumstance; they can come from authority resident in the law. Of particular importance in legal functions is the fact, on the one hand, that intentionality—or the lack of it, for that matter—need not count for anything. On the other hand, externalism can be valid under law. In religious law, sacramental operation can have validity aside from the subjective attitude of the recipient or administrator and even aside from the candidate's conscious awareness. Moreover, each step in the procedure ends up, in a sense, having equal importance, because any one step can void the transaction since the steps form a strict series. Finally, law involves exclusive option because only those provisions identified in the law have validity. Other appropriate options can have no value by the sheer fact that they are not mentioned. Possibilities are restricted to what the constitution specifies, and silence alone eliminates other alternatives. The basis for validity rests in legal authority rather than in natural factors.

A final difficulty arises from confusing legal systems with interpersonal ones. Legal processes can involve (f) permanent results without continued qualification. Once people graduate from college, they are permanently college graduates with “all the rights and privileges that pertain thereunto”—even if they remember little of what they learned there. When that “feel” for the process gets transferred to baptism, for example, baptized people consider their salvation as finished business. Their completion does not, so to speak, become a

“commencement.” They presume on their baptism as “completed obedience,” much as some people presume on their wedding as the cause of a settled matter—and with the same disastrous results.

Christian baptism, however, identifies people with Jesus Christ for the very purpose of indicating their concern about the sin problem in personal relationships. Only as long as people desire appropriate action in relationship to God and other people does their past formal act of baptism have any present meaning (cp. Romans 2:25).

¹Law as the mechanism for interpersonalism would be Pharisaism; law as continuing what was begun by interpersonalism would be Galatianism.

²We do not suggest that legal authority can never be involved with interpersonal activity. Authority enhances practical operation for the sake of efficiency and orderliness, and it may be invoked to protect when necessary if persons continue to refuse interpersonal influence. We mean only that legal operation does not itself produce the consequences. The Mosaic law, added to the earlier Abrahamic promise, did not annul promise, but neither did it become the means of accomplishing what was by promise (Galatians 3:15-29). Even under law, salvation was not by law. Legal operation often accompanies interpersonal process in the practical situation to gain efficiency, not effectiveness.