

## REVELATION AS INTERPERSONAL

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I. Revelation is interpersonal in that it is from one Person to another.

That point applies both to general and revelation. Not abstracting general revelation from the One that speaks in it amounts to the same thing as not abstracting creation from the creator. Personalizing general revelation equals personalizing creation. Nature has the character of revelation inasmuch as it is secondary, derivative, dependent reality. From the characteristics of nature, we can “read” something of the nature of its origin and originator.

Revelation is never to be abstracted from the One that speaks in it; that is, it is not to be depersonalized. The difference between personal and propositional truth is that propositionalizing truth can depersonalize it, and so decontextualize it. As a result, (1) revelation loses the flexibility that persons can incorporate into values involved in situations not envisioned in a statement. (2) Propositional truth unqualified by the higher personal frame of reference removes the positive basis for using motive to help judge whether an act is sinful. (3) Propositional concept does not satisfactorily address the nature of the reality under view. Without the hearer’s judgment and without the nature of the case, there would be no difference between moral law and positive commandment. The Law is good only to those who use it lawfully, that is, use it qualified by this personal context.

Written revelation is also interpersonal according to four of the five models involved. Dictation would not stress interpersonalism; but in places where God gave only the ideas, abilities, experiences, or offices, there would be an increasing degree of human input. The decreasing positive role of the Spirit in these models stands in inverse proportion to that increasing protective activity, and the human author has increased input. Inscripturation does not have be mechanistic.

II. Revelation is not something completely expressible in propositions.

Misperception about the approximate character of word revelation, especially law revelation, caused first-century Pharisees to pervert truthful statements into untruthful practices. Jesus may well have had in mind the need to personalize revelation when he said, “*You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is they that bear witness of me; yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life*” (John 5:39-40).

Language, hence, revelation in language, is supplemented by demonstration, kinesics, and other practical elements. In the New Testament, there is incarnation, and through scripture there is epiphany and manifestation. Biblical revelation is not mystical as if it were beyond

propositional expression or contradictory to it. Propositional revelation is simply inadequate to some extent. Full revelation is spirit to spirit; it is the contact of person to person (cp. 1 Corinthians 2 and Romans 8). “*The Spirit bears witness with our spirit*” may mean “*bears witness to God with our spirit*,” but it may mean there is a sense of personal, invisible presence and acceptance that helps get our message through in prayer.

III. Revelation is interpersonal in that its propositions must be taken in the context of persons in relationship.

Interpersonalism fills in what propositional statements may not express. Truth is personal, so revelation must be personalized. Otherwise, a person is always learning without coming to a knowledge of the truth. Paul’s point in 2 Timothy 3:7 must be that so much learning does not result in a correct picture of the whole and of the ultimate. Even pagans know many things as individual items, but they do not know the truth even about these items because they do not have a correct picture of their context. Truth is ultimately personal because everything is ultimately derived via creation from personal reality. Jesus reflected that by saying, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life.*” Jesus is not just true, which would be partial truth; but he is truth, a characterization of the real whole. Doctrine is not an academic pursuit of accuracy as an end in itself, but something to act right about because of who speaks in it.

Not abstracting scripture from him who speaks in it means that understanding its doctrines is not precisely the point. For one thing, understanding some things does not necessarily impact behavior that affects relationships. For another thing, misunderstanding some things does not invalidate the relationship we have with the One who speaks to us there. Misunderstanding the real nature of someone does not destroy relating to the person. Not understanding how an internal combustion engine works does not mean a person cannot drive a car; not understanding the precise nature of deity does not mean we cannot relate to God.

The reason progressive revelation can occur is that knowing matters formerly unrevealed was not crucial to having divine-human relationship then.

Revelation, especially in Christ, is not just word but event, and not just event but personal event. The incarnation involved manifesting God in personal action and interaction in the human realm. It has not been merely propositional or epiphany religion but personal revelation. It was not a metaphysical idea historicized, but real truth personalized. Ultimate revelation has been incarnational.

Incarnational revelation integrates with incarnational missions together with the church as the ongoing functional equivalent of the “body” of Christ in the world.

The interpersonal character of Christianity may explain why the Bible does not provide precise, formulaic answers to issues like giving, divorce, and some difficult matters.

Interpersonalism is a less rigid milieu than law, nature, or idea. For another thing, people are in process; they have capacity for growth. What is right is not “one size fits all.” What they can realistically be called on to do depends on the level of their faith: “*according to the proportion of our faith*” (Romans 12:6), “*but you cannot bear them now*” (John 16:12; 1 Corinthians 3:2; note also Matthew 19:7-12), “*according to his ability*” (Acts 11:29; cp. 2 Corinthians 8:11-12; 8:3; 1 Corinthians 16:2). If we call on people to do more than they are prepared to do, we create greater adverse effects than a lesser level of living would have produced. We wait for readiness or motivate readiness before we call for behavior.

The subjective principle in canonicity integrates with interpersonalism because it addresses “the ring of truth.” In logical sequence the historical principle positively establishes the original body of authoritative literature. It does so by determining provenance, which means who wrote it. The persons who wrote had authentication through miraculous manifestation. The right to speak for God is indicated by authenticating marks. The doctrinal principle adds consistency with previously authenticated scripture. Then comes the subjective principle, because the incarnate logos speaks to the distinctive needs of persons: drive for innocence, desire for meaningfulness, need for love, concern for security.

In keeping with our observation that Christ and Spirit may essentially refer to the interpersonal system of things, Luther may have had interpersonalism in mind when he enunciated the canonical principle: “what preaches Christ.”

IV. Revelation is interpersonal in that it does not give detailed directions for every conceivable circumstance.

The New Testament is rather brief in comparison to the vast areas and long ages over which it directs human affairs and divine service. God deals with us interpersonally—and as mature persons at that—by not telling us every move to make. So to speak, God has given us “*the keys of the kingdom of heaven*,” and whatever we bind on earth he honors in heaven (Matthew 16:19; 18:18-19). The keys, we may say, are the fundamental principles of divine-human and human-human interaction. They are the interpersonal values that God wants true religion to have (cp. James 1:27). The keys are also the revealed principles of how relationships work. Having given us the fundamental principles, he lets us work out those values in particular situations. What was first (a) bound in heaven (future perfect passive literally) was the interpersonal category and its principles. People are then free to creatively (b) apply them on earth in appropriate ways of their own choosing (“binding and loosing”); and when people under God’s guidelines do so, God (c) ratifies them in heaven (idiomatic future perfect passive). We are conceiving of this point in self-reference; that is a different thing from trying to dictate for others what we have inferred that people should do and how they should do it.

That approach to the New Testament stands in contrast to primitivism or restorationism misconceived to mean that we do only what we have authorization to do. Such a theological method cannot work because biblical revelation is both too limited and too general; it is representative, not exhaustive, regarding matters that need to be handled. Handling appropriately means handling interpersonally. For example, then, silence cannot equal prohibition (except in certain matters by the nature of the case). We do not have to have a “*thus saith the Lord*” for every move we make. We operate within divine revelation as a broad arrow, not by divine revelation as an exact line.

V. As a medium of revelation, the Bible is more than a book for historical information, a book of concepts, or even a manual for living; it is you-to-me communication.

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