

THE CHURCH AS INTERPERSONAL

Virgil Warren, PhD

I. Theologically the church is an interpersonal system.

The church as the kingdom of heaven now does not share identity with any political entity. Civil religion and state church, while characteristic of Mosaism, are foreign to Christ's kingdom. In the Messiah there is neither Jew nor Gentile. It is comparable to spiritual Israel, being a Jew inwardly. The kingdom of "heaven" is transpolitical, transnational, transcultural, interpersonal. The kingdom of God "suffers violence" when people try to turn it into something political-militaristic-geographical (Luke 16:16-17).

Jesus told the woman at Sychar that the central place of worship no longer mattered, whether Gerizim or Jerusalem or elsewhere. Worship was a matter of spirit (non-material, interpersonal) and truth (John 4:24; cp. Emil Bruner's book *The Misunderstanding of the Church*).

Paul's confrontation with Judaizers dealt with this question. Becoming a Christian did not include becoming a Jew via circumcision, which brought a person under Jewish citizenship as well as under legal righteousness—the principle of personal perfection.

Inasmuch as the church is not a kingdom of this world (John 18:36), it does not have geographical identity ("neither here nor in Jerusalem," John 4:21). Instead, the kingdom of God is interpersonal, in you, among you, rather than here or there (Luke 17:21). Perhaps Jesus had this point in mind when he used a child to demonstrate the temperament people in his kingdom are to have. Children simply relate; there is no formal organization among them. In his flesh, Jesus abolished the Law—the enmity between Jew and Gentile—to create a new united mankind (Ephesians 2:15). The Law included national identity; so impersonal political force came in with it. In fully expending himself for us, Jesus established an interpersonal alternative to a legal identity.

II. The church accomplishes its purpose by interpersonal means.

The kingdom is not promoted or protected by political fiat. "*My kingdom is not of this world; otherwise, my servants would be fighting to keep me from being delivered into your hands*" (John 18:36). It does not come or grow by military might but by proclamation—by interpersonal means, by influence, not force. The parable about leaven pictures the permeating manner of spreading Christ's influence in the world.

Consequently, the church does not seek to accomplish its role in the world through legislative means. We cannot legislate Christian morality; so we cannot depend on "the laws of

the lands” to re-enforce the high ethical standards we espouse. Christians themselves live by a higher code than cultural mandates.

It is just at this point that liberation theology fails to appreciate the genius of the Messianic kingdom. Liberation theology wants to accomplish by military and legislative means—force and authority—what supposedly cannot come Christ’s way.

III. The church is a witness to grace rather than a channel of it.

The Great Commission indicates that the church witnesses to grace, not dispenses grace. Disciples are made by teaching. The “flow of grace” comes directly from God to the sinner as we would expect an interpersonal system to operate. So, many traditional practices are theologically foreign to the nature of the church: tying the validity of ministry to “apostolic succession,” requiring official administrators for ordinances, presuming to claim priestly absolution of other people’s sin. These concepts assume a clergy-laity distinction antithetical to the priesthood of all believers. Official priesthood rings foreign to the interpersonal character of the kingdom. Intermediaries create indirectness between saver and sinner, but personal relationship by nature cannot be other than direct.

IV. The church is primarily people and service more than order and form.

Personal relationship trumps organizational pattern in getting things done. Clerical power and hierarchical organization should be at least minimized, because “red tape” stifles creativity, initiative, motivation, and spontaneity, which belong to persons in touch with each other. Trust and trustworthiness replace force and authority as the manner and means of operation.

Some fellowships regard church organization a matter of indifference—one of the “adiaphora.” Organization can exist for practical (*vs.* theological) purposes as long as it enhances the purpose and orderly operation of the body. Such organization would be instituted by positive commandment since it does not derive from first principles.

The church is people before it is pattern. It is people in divine relationship more than structure based on authority flow. The church is life quality before it is position. Theologically it is persons more than pattern.

V. The interpersonal character of the kingdom correlates with the kind of benefits it promises.

“My peace I leave with you, not like the world offers” (John 14:27). Personal-interpersonal peace is different from political peace. It is inner peace; but more than that, it is a peace with God.

This concept fits with the soteriological observation that the only necessary and uniform benefit of Christianity in this life is a quality of social relations. This uniformity fosters

derivative benefits like psychological strength, strength to cope with suffering, and a heightened sense of self-worth. Christianity does not, for example, promise a health and wealth life or a name-it-claim-it attitude toward prayer.

Interpersonal understanding of the church answers the paedobaptist question: if there is no salvation outside the church, are not unbaptized infants therefore lost? But church membership means simply the company of those saved through the gospel of Christ. The church results from aggregating those who believe, repent, and identify with Christ. The kingdom centers on a Person with whom human persons identify. The church has no existence aside from acts by which one would enter it. It takes legal enactment to create a class before anyone fills it as a null category. The “class” is not a legal, natural, or logical category, but the body of Jesus Christ perpetuated in the world. Instead, it is people organized for mission. Therefore, irrespective of the church, theory accommodates unlost children, the “safe” as well as the saved.

The church is charismatic rather than institutional. It is more akin to the judgeship period than the monarchy in the Old Testament. A general pattern occurs over time when movements become isms. That is a difference between John Wesley and later Methodism, Alexander Campbell and modern Campbellianism, Karl Marx and Russian Marxism (cp. *Verdict*, Essay 29, 1987). The process of crystallization is a process of perversion. It degenerates an organism into an organization. In the history of Christianity, that degeneration went from people to pattern when the bishop became the essence of the church.