

SANCTIFICATION AS INTERPERSONAL

Virgil Warren, PhD

The possibility of spiritual growth (sanctification) comes from the nature of interpersonal process. Under the perfection demand of law, becoming perfect cannot occur after perfection is broken. But salvation before God deals with restoring a personal relationship, which means that development toward maturity can substitute for having already achieved it and always having to keep it. We can deal with each other directionally (growth) rather than positionally (perfection) because repentance-forgiveness can make up the difference between performance and perfection. That fact is part of Paul's contrast between faith *vs.* works.

We are willing to bear with people if they are making progress even though their level of success is less than what we want. We “cut them some slack” for proper attitude, genuine concern, and repentance in failure.

Interpersonal process occurs by influence, between persons, by degrees, over time, by reciprocation, in wholeness. So fellowship is the natural place for our development to take place. Sin has affected virtually every aspect of us and our relations; so development occurs by the interaction of each part of us in fellowship with other persons.

The interaction of inner and outer begins with the influences of other people on us. The interaction of need-answer-use begins with other people who in witnessing, missions, and teaching provide the answer by which the unevangelized benefit from using the gospel.

Putting personal development in social interaction avoids the extremes of our doing it all and God's doing it all. The former brings frustration when we fail or pride if we succeed. The latter causes waiting for success (quietism) or doubt if it does not come. Interpersonalism combines both factors into one process through reciprocation between persons—rather than God and us working in parallel to produce different parts of the result. Under the interpersonal model, God gets the credit if we succeed (because he is ultimate motivator), but we take the blame if we fail. He supplements the process with him by the same kind of back and forth operation we have with people. We might even say that he does his work largely by delegation through the horizontal process between his people.

The interpersonal context for sanctification fits with sin as ingrained habit rather than inborn depraved being. Under inheritable depravity (a hypostatic concept), sin comes from a flaw that a growing Christian needs God to remove by a miracle, “regeneration” in theological parlance. Instead, our reconstruction understands sin practice is habit broken by motivation supplied by influence.

Spiritual exercises raise the level of God-consciousness, which creates stronger desire for righteousness. The vertical spiritual exercises are Bible reading and prayer; the horizontal exercises are fellowship with the faithful and service to all mankind. Even the private exercises—fasting and meditation—distance us from the material, impersonal aspects of life and draw us nearer to the invisible God. Sanctification becomes a by-product of upward and outward interaction between persons.

For best results, spiritual exercises must be “interpersonalized.” Fellowship and service bring encouragement and fulfillment, which increase power in the horizontal direction. In the vertical direction, prayer gives that same kind of power. Devotional Bible reading has edification value, but it differs from Bible study, which has educational value. Interpersonal Bible reading has devotional purposes in mind, because it listens to God’s speaking to us. Fasting can also be interpersonalized. Fasting does more than abstain from food; it does so as a way of drawing near to God by drawing away from material existence for a time. It gives transcendence over material existence by ascending to divine association. Perhaps for this reason scripture usually combines fasting with prayer. Bodily exercise profits little (or a little) regarding spiritual things, but interpersonal activity strengthens us by drawing us nearer to the other Person.

Sanctification occurs in the context of persons through influence rather than miracle. It dynamically increases by degrees through reciprocal interaction between various sets of poles—between inner and outer actions and between one person and another. Sanctification is a continuous process over time rather than an instantaneous categorical change. Since interpersonal process is reciprocal and holistic, it allows for “becoming”; the “now” can become the “not-yet” (*What the Bible Says About Salvation*, 78 ¶2, 211 ¶3).

Paul compares the Law to a tutor that leads people to Christ. God used law as a steppingstone to grace-faith (interpersonalism). The method he used across the history of his people corresponds roughly to the stages of our development in life. Now that Christ has come, we no longer need the legal tutor. Principled love replaces legal regulations. Content-wise, legality does not contradict what post-conventional behavior does, but the psychology of it is different. Full-grown people in Christ live the way they do because of the way life really is rather than to maintain an abstract standard of rules and regulations.

Satan’s question about Job relates to the stages of human development. Satan accused the patriarch of serving God to curry favor: “*Does Job serve God for nothing?*” (Job 1:9). Additionally, he accused him of serving God in a conventional mode—fear, rather than in a post-conventional mode—love: “*Everything people have they will give for their life*” (Job 2:4). Job’s religious observance was immature according to Satan, but Job’s service to God was a principled one: “*What? Will we receive good from God and not evil?*” (2:10).

Interpersonalism calls us to the highest developmental level: love, which has no limits; it will not let us stay at law-and-order, rules-and-regulations, concrete-operational conventional stages.