

MISAPPLYING THE CHRISTIAN SYSTEM (IP)

Virgil Warren, PhD

If interpersonalism characterizes the Christian worldview, it follows that any deviation in its formulation is likely some departure from personal relationship as its most basic, central, decisive feature. It is instructive to survey the history of the church to see how it has departed. The departures have been into one of the other major categories or some combination of them, a prioritizing of something else over interpersonalism, or a reduction from the full set of factors in interpersonalism.

The four basic categories are law, nature, ideas, interpersonalism, each process driven by different mechanisms. Law is driven by authority; what happens takes place because the law has the right to say so. Nature is driven by forces. Idea as metaphysics is driven by form. Interpersonalism is driven by influence. Below are examples of “de-interpersonalizing” the Christian worldview and its message. They become examples of how interpretation gets impacted by the failure to keep the interpersonal category as primary.

LAW

1. Legalizing

Included here are all things moved forward by authority. The clergy concept has a set of usages like the confessional, which lifts James 5:16 and other passages out of their interpersonal setting and recasts them in a legal framework. The absolution of personal guilt passes from the omniscient God to fallible people. More to the point, a sin is against the friend harmed and against “Heaven,” where the definition of “harm” originated (Luke 15:18, 21). People can forgive sins done against them personally, and “Heaven” can forgive a breach of divine expectancy between people; but no basis exists for third parties to forgive; the law of the harvest disallows it. Cause and consequence must have the same kind: grapes cannot come from thorns nor figs from thistles (Matthew 7:16). Only by the authority of law would such a possibility become plausible, but we deny that there is any reason to believe that God has given such authority to an official representative—Matthew 16:18-20; 18:18 to the contrary notwithstanding.

The Twelve were probably thinking in legal terms when they forbade the unknown miracle worker because he was not traveling along with them. They supposed he had no right to do them because he was not part of their appointed group.

The doctrine of eternal security (as distinct from perseverance of the saints) treats salvation as a legal status by making it like a high school diploma—once granted, ever had.

Though graduates may forget most everything they learned getting it, they have “*the rights and privileges that pertain thereunto.*” It becomes salvation gone awry when people claim salvation status without salvation commitments.

The doctrine of original guilt means that all people, by virtue of legal inclusion under Adam, share the guilt his category (humankind) possesses—federal man as Augustine conceived of it.

Because baptism is a formal act, it has picked up several legal concepts. In a longstanding tradition, baptism for the forgiveness of original sin becomes a legal act by which racial sin is removed. The baptism is efficacious because of the legitimacy of its administrator. A special administrator of the sacraments, duly ordained, must perform them to guarantee efficacy.

The doctrine of apostolic succession means that the validity of official administration derives from receiving the office from someone duly authorized all the way back to the official apostles themselves, particularly Peter.

Baptism as a sign of an external covenant is another legal conceptualization of the ordinance. It regards baptism as bringing the candidates into the church in an institutional sense. Baptism identifies people with the visible church and stands aside from a direct salvation connection.

Basing salvation on physical descent applies legal—along with physical connections. The legal comes in by stipulating that children of the presumptively elect have ecclesiastical privilege—as in the right to baptism even if only one parent has church membership (half-way covenant). John the Baptist warned against such thinking among his Jewish contemporaries (Matthew 3:9); there is no people of God—Israel or church—aside from spiritual factors alone; spiritual means interpersonal.

Selling indulgences scandalized Martin Luther and helped prod him to lead a reformation characterized by returning to a more interpersonal understanding of the Christian faith as by faith alone (*vs.* faith plus works). The idea of selling the right to commit sin contradicts the very nature and purpose of the gospel: restoring people’s relationship to God broken by such sins.

By legal authority, treasury of the saints unnaturally transfers actions and their effects from one person to another. Supposedly, ancient saints like the apostles did more than necessary for their own salvation, and their “extras” (supererogation) became a repository from which others could draw who have fewer works than they need. That perversion combines legal process with a quantifying mentality. (It also makes a fuzzy connection with degrees of heavenly reward. How could there be leftovers from the saints’ highest status from living perfectly?)

The doctrine of penance envisions the substitution of later prescribed excess works for earlier deficiencies, or some unrelated effort to make up for significant sin.

Legalizing the Christian system includes other items like the following:

(a) The legal mind tends to treat all matters as equally important. Items do not get arranged in a central-to-less-central format, primary-secondary, preliminary-ultimate. The thinking becomes binary: true or not; stated in the Bible or not. The only differentiation lies in the severity of the punishment or in a distinction between venial (forgivable) and moral sin (unforgivable).

(b) Legality fosters inflexibility and rigidity that disregards the complexity in living situations due to intent and motive, repentance or hardened attitude.

(c) Legality operates more in terms of measurable and therefore overt acts. Qualitative matters like motive and attitude get eclipsed by quantification.

(d) Law does not correct the consequences of a breach of the law without exacting penalty—even if a person is repentant and even if the penalty has to be done somehow by someone else, thus the penal substitution theory of the atonement. Interpersonal process can simply forgive without exacting recompense.

(e) Law cannot in theory allow for, or affirm, alternatives not specified in the legislation, which interpreters tend to read restrictively rather than non-restrictively. Silence therefore more easily becomes prohibition—not just by the nature of the case, but by its absence from the law: there has to be positive “justification” for alternatives.

(f) Law does not have to reflect the nature of the situation. Unlike interpersonalism, law can be artificial, contrived, approximate, even contrary to the nature of reality, but still be valid, authoritative, and in effect.

(g) Law stresses the relatively small percent of lack in perfection instead of appreciating the large percent of achievement, development, and progress. It fosters frustration and a negative feeling about what we have not done.

(h) Law tends to deal with quantitative factors rather than qualitative ones.

(i) All the issues that have arisen over the distinction between the Mosaic Law and Christian gospel belong under this legalizing heading. In the New Testament itself, we find controversy over circumcision because Jewish Christians conceived of as permanence the Mosaic Law and the Jewish Nation as a political entity.

In the history of the church, another disorienting factor was uniting church and state from the time of Constantine up through the Majesterial Churches of the Reformation period in Europe and beyond. The Crusades offer another manifestation of the notion that there is a political dimension of the church.

Sabbatarianism continues into the present because some Christians the Jewish Sabbath a memorial of the creation rather than the exodus. The Sabbath was not observed before, outside,

or after the Jewish nation because God instituted it as a sign between himself and Israel (Exodus 31:12-17; Deuteronomy 5:12-15). See that point elaborated in the document “A Rationale for the Structure of Genesis 1.”

In the previous strictures on legalism, we have in mind matters where the whole is characterized by legal procedure with perhaps other add-ons. We agree that in other settings “legal” can be employed to refer to an objective “standard” for human behavior.

2. Institutionalizing

Institutionalization attempts to imbed the Christian faith in an organizational system and to conceive of its operations as occurring through the authority flow in that system.

3. Quantifying

The practice of penance fosters the quantifying mentality by specifying a special endeavor to offset a previous sin.

4. Misinterpreting

In interpretation we must not (1) abstract scripture from the person who speaks in it as a primary element of context, (2) forget that written expression is still the expression of the Person behind it, (3) fail to remember that the author’s intention sets the content in proper interpretation, and (4) tend to read statements restrictively and literally without allowing non-restriction and figurative as something to consider.

NATURE

5. Ontologizing

Nature is “unforgiving” when someone acts contrary to it. It cannot change from be to become. Augustine of Hippo provided Western Christianity with a thoroughgoing attempt to base Christian theology in the ontic category. In so doing, he reflected a pattern already prominent in Christian thought, which issued in many practices and leading to several major controversies as witnessed below.

The ontologizing tendency in historical theology appears in the doctrine of the real presence (impanation, metousiosis, transubstantiation, consubstantiation) in the Eucharist. The biblical point is not to eat actual flesh and blood of God’s Son, but to intimately associate with him, committed to him, and live like him whose flesh and blood the emblems represent and whose character is expressed in full obedience to God’s will for a person’s life. Ingesting these symbols pictures internalizing his values.

The doctrine of natural depravity (original sin as distinguished from original guilt) had far-reaching implications for Christian thought as that doctrine attempted to explain natural evil as well as moral evil in terms of fallen ontic substance in humankind. “Total depravity” posited that the sins of our first parents led to a depravitizing consequence biologically

inheritable in a way that all spiritual aspects—though not in complete degree—of each human person is weakened to the point that no one can respond to the gospel without supernatural enablement.

A corresponding doctrine that corrects natural depravity is supernatural regeneration—for some or all people, depending on the formulation. That divine act enables a person to respond—or necessarily respond—to the salvation message. Added to that, the doctrine of the second definite work of grace enables the regenerate convert to live the sinless life of love. Baptismal regeneration connects with “water regeneration,” which may go beyond removal of guilt to removal of inability—even from infants and even prenatally.

From a different direction, Albert Schweitzer represented the ontologizing tendency in philosophical ethics when he tried to put the essence of good in the notion of reverence for life.

The doctrine of perseverance of the saints (as distinct from eternal security) assumes the irresistibility of grace. Guaranteeing success at remaining faithful to the end would suppose such things as stimulus-response, miraculous regeneration of ontic being. In the process free will would have to be denied. As long as free will is present, a person can choose to refuse even though all requisite conditions are present for the proper moving of the will. If all else fails, God can take a person’s life to prevent backsliding far enough to enter apostasy.

The Christological controversy over the two natures culminated in the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) and pitted Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox constituency against Coptic and Syriac constituencies. The argument was whether Christ—especially during the incarnation—has one nature (divine, monophysitism) or two natures (divine and human, dyophysitism).

Such a distinction assumes that divine and human are both hypostatic (substantive, ontic, ontological). We do not know from revelation or experience the hypostatic nature of spirit generally—except that “spirit” (or “a spirit”) does not have flesh and blood as the resurrected Christ had before his ascension (Luke 24:39), much less how or whether the spirits of just people made perfect (Hebrews 12:23) differ from angelic spirits (good or fallen) and divine Spirit in this sense. We do not even know how or whether the eternal state of the righteous after they have been “*clothed upon/dressed*” (2 Corinthians 5:1-4) differs from the intermediate state of the righteous “*saints under the altar*” (Revelation 6:9) or the intermediate and eternal states of the lost.

How can we know whether substantia-hypostasis-ousia even applies in the realm of spirit? Could distinctions exist, say, in rank or prerogative, a difference in the projection of divine consciousness? How do wave and particle differ as with light, which is said to have no “rest mass”? How does energy vs. matter (Einstein’s $e = mc^2$) relate to such questions? Is there

some way to imagine a distinction between mass, energy, wave, hypostasis, substantia, ousia that is applicable to the assumptions of that Christological controversy? Such speculation serves only to divide the disciples of Christ on matters that have no teleological value; they are irrelevant to Christ's reason for incarnating to become our "savior." Salvation pertains to reconciling relationships and godly living thereunto (action). It aims to overcome alienation between individuals, races, sexes, and social statuses (cp. 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 + Galatians 3:28-29). Of the three aspects of reality—being, action, and relationship—only action and relationship have any revealed connection with the concerns of special revelation.

Another Christological controversy was whether the Christ is of the same hypostatic nature as the Father (homoousia) or of similar nature to him (homoiousia). The question assumes again that with deity something is "there" to constitute the What of deity. Does that "something" have locational omnipresence or diffuse consciousness? Does "it" somehow have the character of thought or pattern of action—non-ontological references? We do not want to slip into the subtle error of reification, supposing there is a thing because there is a noun for it. If deity is supernatural, what can we say positively about it since we speak only of the kinds of "stuff" we can know by experience—and perceive as extended by instrumentation (1 Timothy 6:16, "*whom no one can see*")? Presumably being in the realm of created nature, we cannot experience the supernatural; we cannot experience even all the features of this creation—radio waves, and the like. The supernatural order(s) of being have to "manifest" themselves to our perceptions; that means doing something to make connection. If our understanding of the supernatural cannot be (1) by perception, it must be (2) by imagination so the understanding of, and speech about, the supernatural must come by analogy with what we do know. Approximate understanding can come (a) by taking what we do know and pushing it to the absolute—knowledge to omniscience, power to omnipotence, location to omnipresence, temporary to eternal, goodness to perfection. Understanding can come (b) by negating the known—as in aseity and sovereignty for dependence ("*I am because I am.*"), immutability for flux, holiness for inconsistency, spirituality for materiality, immortality for mortality, infinite for finite. It is difficult to see how speculation about ontological Christology affects human "faithfulness" to personal deity.

From the standpoint of revelation, it is difficult enough to "put our finger on" what we mean by "person" except that somehow God created us in a way that puts us "*in his image*," that is, having the interpersonal capacity so that he is not "wholly other." We think of personhood as a complex of functions more than a set of genetic capacities that make those functions possible in the created realm (cp. the mind-brain controversy). So to speak, we enter on "the second floor" without knowing how the first floor (materiality) holds it up (operation). We need to understand and confess only matters commandable, understandable, believable, and obeyable unto proffered relationship and hope. We do not have to understand a calculator to use

one. All we have to confess about God is that “*he is*” (however that “is-ness” is grounded, if it is “grounded”) and “*that he rewards those who seek him*” (Hebrews 11:6) in fellowship because we and he are “friendable.” All these comments about hypostasis come from supposing that only those matters with clear behavioral correlates need be understood, carried out, agreed on, or in some cases made matters of fellowship. Christological speculations have led to unrevealed beliefs that have divided us. We affirm in principle what propositional revelation teaches even though with supernatural matters we cannot always distinguish the language of reality from the language of analogy.

Hypostatic speculations have added to and perverted revealed Christianity. Hypostatic speculation has led to perversions of sexuality and marriage. It exalted celibacy over marriage—even celibacy in marriage after conversion! Out of that same speculation arose the doctrine of the immaculate conception of Mary (to avoid the taint of depravity and guilt in the conception of her son), the perpetual virginity of Mary despite any reason to think such a thing from the biblical record. It serves in part to undergird clerical celibacy. Hypostatic philosophy has even produced a supposed reason for the virgin birth by claiming that the depravity defect is transmitted by the male (*The Chemical Analysis of the Blood*).

The ecclesiastical ban on contraceptives and tubal ligation are other departures from interpersonalism. If sex is fundamentally interpersonal within marriage, it not only goes beyond revelation, but perverts its range of intent to require that sexual relations always have procreational potential. Sacredness gets transferred from the act to the “material” in the act—the “reproductive materials.”

Prayer and meditation can deviate from being communication between persons and slide off into “the flight of the soul to God.” The experience is analyzed as the soul itself leaving the body to mingle with the essence of God’s spirit during an ecstatic state.

6. Supernaturalizing

The excesses in some modern Pentecostalism turn people’s minds toward miracle and the supernatural now. In keeping with that mindset, we get in the habit of supernaturalizing our experiences—conceptualizing them that way and verbalizing them that way. We interpret feelings and ideas as revelation planted in our minds and hearts by the Holy Spirit as in the interpretation of providence and in the “interpretation of tongues.” Participants interpret the experiences of glossolalia as a supernatural enablement to speak in unlearned languages, even as private prayer languages differ for each person even though linguistic analyses of the phenomenon finds no structure in it, structure being a necessary feature of communication.

Events that happen around us and to us shift from data to be considered to signs to be followed. The effect comes from a strong God-consciousness that reinforces itself, which in itself is good, but becomes false by leading to an exaggerated sense of dependency and

directedness. Other unhealthy inferences can spin off of that. If we conclude that our feelings and ideas do not correspond with the experiences of future outcomes, faith can dissipate. False expectancy can lead to doubt.

As noted earlier in other connections, the traditional doctrine of regeneration follows from original sin as natural depravity. It has a miraculous character and aims at correcting the biologically fallen nature inherited from our first parents.

7. Naturalizing

Overconcern about historical dates and times can impact living out the Christian faith. The Quartodecimanian Controversy, for example, arose in the second century over whether to observe Easter always on the first Sunday after Passover or to correlate it with the Jewish Passover on Nisan 14 regardless of the weekday. The question assumes that there even needed to be a specific annual day for commemorating Christ's resurrection much less that it had to occur relative to Passover to be valid. Apostolic practice commemorated Christ's resurrection weekly on the first day of the week. Anything more need not concern us, but if for practical reasons we wanted to observe it annually, it was not worth dividing the church over as to when.

8. Materializing Christianity.

A twentieth-century example is the health-and-wealth gospel, which appeals to a desire for material gain and physical well-being in this life. As such, it contravenes not coveting.

9. Emphasizing Positive Mental Attitude (PMA)

This set of motivation and success seminars sometimes draws on impersonal and non-interpersonal sources for success.

10. Politicizing (Culturalizing)

Civil religion, liberation theology, political theology, union of church and state represent attempts to place Christ's kingdom in a political framework. Although in theory, overlaying interpersonal with non-interpersonal can occur, it is not the character of Messiah's kingdom—at least now. If it ever does, it will be at his behest, not ours.

11. Demythologizing

Removing from scripture items perceived to be ancient misformulations about nature and history, including the historical Jesus and the real interpersonal message that grew from his incarnation.

12. Eschatologizing

When Christianity moves its center to “pie in the sky by and by,” it fails to remember that eternal life begins now. It also forgets that God created people to be creatures of this creation, which he pronounced “very good.” Sin has indeed come in to disorganize aspects of that creation, but God has not left himself without witness, he has not left the world to run on its

own, and he has not turned it over to Satan's full control. Revelation and providence both qualify the presence of evil in God's creation. Seeking escape may be little more than being "quitters."

METAPHYSICS

13. Intellectualizing (Cerebralizing, Idealizing, Rationalizing, Intellectualizing)

The prime example in the early centuries was Gnosticism. Greeks in general went to school on philosophy and wisdom (Acts 17:21; 1 Corinthians 1:18-20). Gnosticism tried to claim special knowledge about secret "passwords" to escape from evil material existence instead of escaping from the consequences of evil personal behavior.

Medieval scholasticism was highly rationalistic. The attempt at other times was to find some conceptual starting point from which somehow all the rest of worldview could be extracted: *"I doubt, therefore I am"; "I think, therefore I am."*

Some of us get our sense of spiritual superiority from knowing certain little "test" facts by which we rank ourselves above other Christians who do not know them.

The inclination is to intellectualize. It attempts to capture the essence of Christianity in propositions. At least psychologically, Christianity becomes a philosophy to be believed rather than a relationship to be lived. Another problem with ideas is that they may not be known or knowable.

14. Ritualizing (Akin to Metaphysical a la Form?)

Making worship and Christian life more replete with ritual easily leads to externalizing, where *"the heart is far from me."*

INTERPERSONAL

16. Emotionalizing

17. Horizontalizing

The social gospel and social action can get viewed as the whole picture of Christianity in the world. In this arrangement the horizontal dimension swallows up the vertical, overshadows it, and psychologically turns salvation into a humanistic endeavor among people. It does not recognize that human unification and betterment comes only as a byproduct of right alignment with the common center of existence in God through Christ. It likewise attempts to use the mechanisms of social and political process to correct the evils and inequities imbedded in the very structures of society themselves.

18. Existentializing

19. Privatizing (Individualizing)

Religion is sometimes conceived of as something private as if it were a matter of "me and my Jesus" or our contemplation of God vertically without simultaneous concern for the

horizontal dimension as part of the religious experience. In practice, it fosters an attempt to stifle the public expression of Christian faith. That procedure can lead to egocentrism that uses religious and supernatural agency to reinforce our own desires and to manipulate other people to our own ends. Such religion can come closer and closer to the Eastern tendency to make the religious experience mystical. Individualization also results in religious anarchy.

Christian interpersonalism corrects hermitage, monasticism, cloistered living. These practices foster an unnatural bifurcation between vertical and horizontal relationships with other Christians. We do not get closer to God by getting farther from people or the natural world. That is a theology for escapism and neglect of the Great Commission and Christian love.

20. Dualizing

When a passage says, “*as a man is in his heart so is he*” (Proverbs 23:7), it denies any body-spirit dualism or austere asceticism (stoicism) or antinomianism (Epicureanism). In Gnosticism the latter acted as if the deeds of the body cannot taint the goodness of the soul since matter and spirit are mutually exclusive realities.

Scripture answers that outer behavior springs from inner motivation and outer behavior affects inward motivation. Not only are inner and out compatible; they reciprocate between each other.

Perhaps some reformers were looking for the interpersonal when they revolted against the legal, which especially characterized the degenerate state of theological method in the Medieval Ages, the “Dark Ages.” They correlated law with the outer, which suggested inner as the alternative. If works refer to overt action, then salvation by faith means salvation based on internal action. But the alternative to law is not inner (Jeremiah 31; “heart”) but “inter.” Externalism is not the only correlative for legalism.

When Jesus, Jeremiah, and Paul speak of people as they are on the inside *vs.* the way they are on the outside, they appear to be talking, not about the inner factors like motivation, intentionality, and concern *vs.* outer actions—which in fact express them. They mean interpersonal *vs.* legal operation. We could say that interpersonalism does “roughly correspond” to inner factors because there are no forms of compulsion involved.

The historical context of Jesus and Paul’s ministries depended heavily on legal and physical bases for divine relationship found in contemporary Judaism. The legal approach uses external compulsions in contrast to internal impulses. That is the contrast involved in legal right based on lineage. Legally only a certain lineage could be considered children of Abraham in the “flesh”; but any person can be a child of Abraham in “spirit.” Naturalization into National Israel is merely analogous to becoming “*a friend of* (someone like) God,” which is the real medium of divine relationship—interpersonalism. “*Kingdom of God*” is a metaphor for the realm of interpersonal relationship.

The “covenant” predicted in Jeremiah **31:30-31** would internalize principles and values. “*Written on the heart*” served as a picture for what contrasts with external matters. Paul says the former covenant wrote its principles and values “on stone,” which symbolically contrasts with the warm internal commitment of a caring person (“heart”) with the cold external demands of impersonal law. “A heart of stone” means a heart unmoved by compassion. The Law ends up getting psychologically abstracted from the One who gave it.

If Jesus, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Paul spoke of inner when they placed the positive alternative over against law, presumably what makes Christianity tick are not legal mechanisms. The appropriate alternatives are spirit (vs. flesh), faith (vs. law/merit/works), love (vs. fear), intent/attempt (vs. success/accomplishment/perfection/ righteousness), interpersonal (vs. various impersonal media like law, nature, and ideas).

The last three alternatives are not the essence, but they can be involved with it. Nature is used, but not as a means of solution. Idea is involved by being used to convey to another the referent to which it points. Law is involved in positive commandments regarding ritual and structure transcended by the will of God and his concern for us, for our well-being, and for our harmonious association with him as personal deity.

We warn against attempting to reduce salvation to quantifiable matters, mechanisms, and statements. Some evangelicals try to meet that requirement by talking about the inner factor as what faith is in its soteriological, Pauline usage. To those who argue that outward action is included as parts of the conditions for salvation, the typical query is posed of how many outward expressions are needed to meet the condition for salvation. The query automatically equates outward with quantifiable. We could also pose that question about internal matters: what has to be believed (what)? How strong does the faith have to be (degree)? Some attempt to avoid these questions by labeling all human responses—inner or outer—as soteriologically *post facto*.

For our own part, we have said that faith must be to the degree of producing outer action, and that the satisfactory degree of outer action is one that is growing. Interpersonalism brings that all into focus in establishing, improving, and regulating social relations. The growing degree in normal associations causes other people to exercise patience as long as they have hope based on that improvement. Attitude, caring, willingness to listen and repent are corrective because other persons are willing to forgive the diminishing distance between performance and perfection if the first person shows concern to minimize that distance.