

HERMENEUTICS AS INTERPERSONAL (How to Interpret to Bible)

Virgil Warren, PhD

Interpersonalism establishes a theological method. Interpersonalism impacts hermeneutics by establishing a programmatic for interpreting the Bible. What does not deduce from interpersonalism must be firmly established by primary proof. Primary proof is the kind of proof that requires one conclusion, while secondary evidence confirms what comes from primary. Primary proof that does not arise from the nature of the case (interpersonalism ultimately) must rest on positive commandment rather than moral law, because moral law refers to what comes from the nature of the case. Interpersonalism establishes what is to be regarded *a priori* as central. It becomes a way of shouldering appropriately the positive burden of proof on many issues. Interpersonalism calls for doing theology in the interpersonal mode because it goes on in an interpersonal context.

This claim does not mean that matters not derived from interpersonalism are negotiable. Rather, the reasons for them must be quite clear; they must rest on unambiguous facts, that is, on primary evidence. Viewpoints that do derive from interpersonal implication are thereby established even when the wording of relevant texts could be taken in a different way. The resurrection, virgin birth, deity of Christ, inerrancy rest on clear evidence even though they may not be inherently necessary parts of the Christianity. Interpersonalism says something significant about most issues in faith and practice, but most basically it sets the category for the nature of truth, the character of Christian faith, the central *vs.* less central position of various items. Interpersonalism is a common thread through most topics of Christian thought. In conformity with this observation, interpersonalism sets the theological method for thinking about the Christian faith.

Interpersonalism determines what is false and foreign. Interpersonalism provides a tool for setting aside exegetical options foreign or contradictory to interpersonalism. Even though the wording of a text could convey a certain idea, that idea is dismissed if it does not conform to the requirements of person-on-person interaction. Interpersonalism establishes the arena where theology operates—what kind of game it is.

Interpersonalism determines what is central. It locates an item's relative centrality in the Christian system. It helps sort the true from the irrelevant and the false, but sorts among the true to determine how intensely we promote and defend each subject. Conversely, interpersonalism helps sort among erroneous understandings and evaluates the seriousness of the error in various misconceptions. The practical value here lies in giving Christians a criterion for determining how

urgently we deal with another person's error, how much attention to give to correcting it, and whether to risk dividing the fellowship over it.

Interpersonalism determines what is literal. Interpersonalism serves as a tool for distinguishing analogy from reality. It helps with deciding the point of illustrations and comparisons by predicting what exists in a comparison (figure of speech) that corresponds with the topic at hand. It helps separate the relevant from irrelevant ("scenery") in illustrations, parables, metaphors, similes, and the like; and so it determines how much transfers from the illustration to the illustrated. If interpersonalism is the "nature of the case" in Christianity, it keeps an interpreter from "allegorizing the comparison" in biblical exegesis. Examples where this point seems to apply include the "rewards" of the Christian life, eternal "punishment," various imageries for the atonement. The consequence of the Christian life as "inheritance" is another case: it would allegorize the comparison to suppose the effect was something lost by one person and transferred to another.

People read scripture through the lens of their own personalities. A critical, judgmental personality may "fix" on divine wrath. A perfectionist reads the Bible in stricter fashion. Such a mind assumes that scripture speaks legalistically because the legal feels natural. In effect legalistic, perfectionist, relational, *laissez-faire* readers each one end up hermeneutically creating God in their own image. Remembering that scriptural revelation is dealing with a person should moderate such tendencies. Personality can impact hermeneutics through a pendulum effect. To dissociate themselves from one another, people may look for ways to read a passage that counters that other person's position more than seek the author's mind.

In New Testament teaching, two contemporary issues contrasted with interpersonalism. One was (1) the nature of the Messianic kingdom as spiritual/interpersonal vs. the political/material/geographical/legal kingdom current Judaism expected. The Great Commission highlights that difference. Another issue was (2) the nature of salvation as reconciliation through grace-faith as distinguished from the Gnostic concept of salvation as hypostatic via knowledge. The first came from the Jewish arena; the second from the Gentile area. Christ's death, e.g., was a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks (1 Corinthians 1:23).

Semitic idiom tends to omit intermediate causes and therefore causal distinctions. Ultimate inspiring source and immediate cause can be worded alike, which may blur the connection. The point is not so much about the nature of the Semitic language itself, but about the manner of thinking that used it. Semites could distinguish between ultimate cause, immediate causation, and other causal modes. But the manner of using language came from a more personalized worldview. As noted earlier, personalization is not personification. In the former instance, the cosmos is not deity, a manifestation of deity, an emanation, aspect, or extension of deity. Instead, the universe is serves as an instrument of deity, distinct from God in identity and

kind. The universe is not a model, parable, or an analogy of the person of God, but it derives from him by creation from nothing as a separate reality.

Fluctuation and variability as to mode and immediacy of causation stems from the complexity of persons in comparison to other orders of being. When ultimate reality is personal—omniscient and omnipotent at that, all events have a personal connection, because they transpire within that setting.

The implications of these observations run deep both for hermeneutics and for Christian thought generally. In hermeneutics, not making allowance for Semitic linguistic distinctives leads to foreign ideas if taken in a more scientific, literal manner of speaking. It leads toward Calvinistic impersonalism and other forms of determinism. In Christian thought, all events do occur under the watchful eye of omnipotent, omniscient, loving deity—just not deterministically so.

Whereas immediacy of causation deals with direct *vs.* indirect, modes of causation deal with things like prescriptive *vs.* permissive (appointed *vs.* allowed, preferred *vs.* accepted, restrictive *vs.* non-restrictive) and primary *vs.* confirmatory evidence.

Perhaps another way to deal with the linguistic and hermeneutical issue is to say that ancient scripture speaks more in phenomenological language than modern English does. The way an event looks is how an observer talks about it. What makes an event “look” a certain way is the position, mindset, cosmology of the beholder. Consequently, the “God talk” of scripture did not have the same force for a Semite as it does for a Western speaker accustomed to more straightforward expression. So we should not interpret such language as we would mean it when speaking in our customary way.

Interpersonalism shows how there can be hermeneutical restraint even as there should be judicial restraint in jurisprudence. In interpretation people have settled ontological and eschatological questions “close enough” if the theoretical view they take can allow for the practical and relational results that scripture clearly promises.

Summary of the hermeneutical programmatic

1. Interpersonalism becomes a principle/truth for evaluating the relative centrality of specifics in Christianity.
2. Interpersonalism becomes a principle for showing what ideas are in fact part of the faith and which are not. If an item of doctrine is not systematically required, a positive biblical foundation must bear the whole weight of establishing that idea. This point about interpretation requires special emphasis on the principle that the burden of exegetical proof falls on the affirmative. If other sensible interpretations are possible, then at best a particular interpretation must be held as an opinion.

3. Interpersonalism qualifies the way we perceive the intended nature of some matter as well as the relevance of various concerns (opinion/liberty).

4. Interpersonalism provides a way of “solving” problems that in other ultimate frameworks would be insoluble—as in logical, natural, and legal paradigms.

5. Interpersonalism removes the legitimacy of falling back on philosophical or other-than-interpersonal presuppositions in undergirding certain doctrinal points.

What interpersonalism in hermeneutics does not mean.

1. We are not speaking of the social gospel. Social needs may serve as a point of contact through which we can demonstrate caring. Christianity analyzes the human predicament primarily in terms of faulty interpersonal relationships and behavior. We don’t quit, for instance, just because the gospel is not yet accepted, lest we do to others “in order that.”

2. Interpersonalism does not mean that there can be no ontic, logical, or legal considerations involved in Christianity (as overlays, *etc.*), but that substantive, metaphysical, and legal aspects do not derive from the systematic starting point, or nature of the case; they must arise positively from scripture as the voice of God to us. Virtually all biblical teachings about the nature of things in heaven and on earth are brought up in scripture in connection with their implications for human behavior and functionality.

3. Interpersonalism does not deprecate the importance of scripture as if this starting point could generate on its own everything important in Christianity.