

# A Christian Theory of the Person

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The Bible seems to give us three groups of references that direct us to an understanding of the person. One group deals with man's creation, another with the term "heart," and a third points to a varied use of concepts to designate the person.

## Creation

The first group, dealing with man's creation, includes the following:

And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he them; male and female he created them (Gen. 1:26-27, RSV).

... then the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being (Gen. 2:7, RSV).

For similar passages, see also: Job 33:4; Job 27:3; Psalm 104:29a; Psalm 8:4-8; Hebrews 2:7; and I Corinthians 15:27.

Five truths about man as a person are revealed in these passages:

1. God fashioned man from the substance of creation that preceded him.
2. Man's life-giving essence is the breath of God, or spirit.
3. He became a living being, an organic unity.
4. He is made in God's likeness.
5. He was made lord of creation.

Let us take a closer look at each of these important truths about man.

- (1) God took of the materials of the natural world of creation that preceded man and shaped or formed him. These materials need not have been only the things we call matter, though the Bible uses the expression "dust of the ground." Vegetative life and animal life, structure and function, preceded man. There is soul life in the animal world. But even if materials must refer to matter, the very nature of matter is under scientific scrutiny today. And we are told that ninety percent of the human body consists of oxygen, carbon, nitrogen, and hydrogen.
- (2) We learn further that God took the human form so constructed by his hand and breathed into him the breath of life. God, not himself being a human form, cannot exhale carbon dioxide or even oxygen and breathe it into man. No, we recognize that we have here an anthropomorphic expression (a truth set forth in language perceptible to man). God's "breathing into" has reference to his creative act of making the human form a living being in whom the spirit (breath of God) is the life-giving essence, the life principle. Human life is the living spirit. Man is of vertical origin, from God. He is spirit. Horizontally he is linked to creation in the form he takes from creation about him. God infuses spirit in man's earthly form so that he becomes an organic whole.

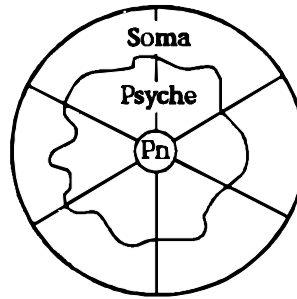
- (3) Because man is an organic whole, it is incorrect to teach that soul and body, or spirit, soul, and body are separate parts of man. The Bible uses all these terms, but in such away that they are distinguished (not separated) as different functioning structures in the organic unity we call a person. The Bible clearly indicates the unity of man<sup>1</sup>.

Let us develop this concept of organic unity a bit further. We have said that, on the basis of Scripture, we must think of the person as an organic unity in whom the ego, self, or I is the life principle. Every function, both mental and physical -- to use a common distinction among functions -- is an activity of the self. The light waves upon the retina, the sound waves upon the ear drum, etc. set up a physiological activity in the nervous system. These are experienced by the person as a part of himself and are translated into personal experience. In the activity of seeing, I identify a house as my residence. As a person I call it my home. All that home stands for, love, security, rest, good food, etc. enters into the total activity of the person. The whole person is involved in the process from the first stimuli to the final self-conscious act of identification and acceptance.

We have become accustomed to grouping the functions of a person as mental and physical. The distinction is helpful as long as we do not sharply differentiate the two. We do not know where the one ends and the other begins. The morning grapefruit has a bitter taste about it which one has come to like. Because of the taste, the grapefruit has acquired personal value as a breakfast food. When the season for good grapefruit is past, mother inspects the grapefruit at the market carefully, knowing that at this time they can be nearly tasteless. Mother's act of selecting grapefruit with careful discrimination is based upon the experience of tasting and valuing grapefruit according to the symptoms that suggest their taste. Psychic functions and body functions interact, flow into one another, but one cannot point out the point of transition. What common factor have they to give rise to the unity of experience as mother selects her grapefruit? It is very evident that mental function is based on physiological structure and function. Without the sense of taste no such selective experience could take place. A blind person must find suitable sensory substitutes to function meaningfully in his mental life. Cerebral activity is necessary for thinking. But the cerebrum is not the thinker. *I* think. William James said thoughts are our thinkers. No, thoughts are mental, psychic functions. The person is the thinker. The center of activity, whether it be tasting or thinking, is the I or self. The very spirit, breath of God, is the explanation of all function, psychic and physiological. The life of man is the life of the spirit.

Once we see the limitations of talking about "parts" of an organic unity, we should also recognize that because man is a **complex** unity we cannot begin to understand him without **some** sort of analysis or "breaking-up." The following diagram is an attempt to reveal both the complexity and the unity of the person (see *figure 1*). Recalling our previous discussion (Chapter 1) of the self and the person, we proceed to signify the self or ego with the Greek term *pneuma* meaning breath, standing for the self-conscious center of all experience. The mental processes and functions, such as thinking, feeling, willing, and perceiving, we designate by the Greek term *psyche*, meaning soul. The Greek word *soma* is conveniently used for body structure and function. All of these words are also used in Scripture with approximately these meanings.

The center circle represents the *pneuma*. The line extending from it to the periphery indicate the life-giving and directing activity, the infusion of the *pneuma* into the *psyche* and *soma*. It penetrates the entire organism as the life-giving spirit. Human life is the life of the spirit. The *psyche* or soul life is represented by a very irregular line indicating the difficulty with which we distinguish between mental and physical activity in human behavior. Where does the conscious feeling of a toothache begin and nerve action leave off? I feel, not the nerves. Feeling is the soul action of the person. The *soma*, or physiological structure and function, is represented by the outer area. These are three facets of the unity of a person. The actual unity in the spirit eludes our grasp. We cannot describe the interrelationship of these three facets other than to say that they constitute an organic unity.

**PERSON AND PERSONALITY**

***Organic Unity of the Person***  
**Figure I**

- (4) Man is made in God's likeness. In a sense this is true of the whole creation, because it displays the power and wisdom of God. But man is uniquely the image of God because he is a spirit. Only of man is it said that God's breathing into him made him a living being.

What, precisely, does it mean to have the image of God? From their classes in Christian doctrine students learn that there are at least two answers to this question. One is principally Roman Catholic, though some Protestants also hold it; the other is Protestant, or more specifically, Reformed. Because this theological disagreement has implications for psychology and education as well, we will discuss it here.

According to the Roman Catholic view, the image of God is something added to human nature. Man is a unity composed of an immortal soul and a mortal body which together constitute the whole of his humanity. By nature man has mental and physical powers by which he lives harmoniously with himself and the world, but which by themselves do not make him religious. The image of God on the other hand, is an added gift (*donum superadditum*) given to man over and above his natural gifts; this is a gift of grace by which man becomes godlike and hence religious. Having the image of God, therefore, is not essential to being a human being; according to the Roman Catholic, man is not intrinsically a religious being.

The Reformed view, in contrast, holds that the image of God is essential to man's humanity. Man is a religious being in very essence. He is of God, a son of God. He can never cease to be a son of God. But as son of God he can turn from God. In the fellowship of God he has knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. Apart from God, he is still image of God, he is still a religious being, but without knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. Man is either a worshipper of the true god or an idolater. And this is because man is a religious being. This conception of the person as religious being will keep recurring in our study.

The disagreement between Roman Catholic and Reformed theology at this point is relevant to our study in at least two ways: in the first place, according to the Roman Catholic view it is possible to describe human nature and its processes apart from any reference to man's religious nature, so long as we restrict ourselves to the "natural level." This thesis is contrary to the approach we have adopted in this book. In the second place our Scripture passages, our immediate self-consciousness, and the best insights of modern psychology alike testify that there is a basic unity in human experience which is hard to reconcile with the Roman Catholic scheme of body-soul-*donum superadditum*.

We should say more about the image of God in man since it is foundational to our thinking in psychology and education. The following may prove helpful to see the relationship of this truth to our study.

a. In the primary sense, man is the image of God **collectively**. That is, the whole human race with all its potentials and expressions manifests the personal being of God, just as creation as a whole manifests the wisdom and power of God.

b. How, then, can we say that a single individual is the image of God? Because he partakes of the qualities of the human race. The human race is an organic unity, hence each man has the image of God, and hence, too each man has Adam's sin imputed to him.

c. Because the individual partakes of the image of God, he has certain native capabilities and tendencies which express his godlikeness. In particular, every man has an urge toward **unity** and **freedom** -- two important concepts in psychology and education. Unity and freedom, to the degree that they are achieved by the individual or the race, are possible because God has made them possible. They are not merely products of development, but are progressively realized in learning and development.

d. Man is free, not to be something else than man, but as man to give expression to God's likeness or not to do so. Man cannot change his being. Metaphysically, as we say in philosophy, he is man. This is his created being. But in his humanity he can choose to give expression to the image of God which he is in essence or can choose not to do so. He is given dominion over all creation beneath him, but he can neglect or violate his created right and become a victim to and slave of the forces he was destined to control.

e. As a free being man is responsible to God as his Creator to realize the purpose for which God created him. As a religious being made in the image of God, he is obliged to fulfill, express, and realize this being. In this setting the modern concepts of self-realization, self-expression, and self-fulfillment state the goal of all education.

- (5) Man was made lord of creation. He was created to have dominion, to be viceroy of God's handiwork. He is appointed to be nature's master, under God, to order and develop it to God's glory. What a task! Notice, not adjustment, the term of modern psychology and education, but dominion is the charge given man by his Creator. No praise is returned to God by a mute creation. Only a person can bring God genuine praise, for he can do so consciously and voluntarily. Man was created to be the mediator of nature's praise to God. And he was created to mediate the work of God in nature. As the acme of God's creation he is called upon to mediate between God and nature as the one who is given dominion over all things.

## The Heart.

A second group of Scripture passages, this time dealing with the "heart," gives us another clue to the nature of the person. Among the many possible instances we cite the following:<sup>2</sup>

Heart as center of feeling: Ex. 4:14; Lev. 26:36; Ps. 4:7; Ps. 119:11; Luke 24:32; John 14:1; Rom. 9:2.

Heart as seat of willing: Ex. 25:2, Ex. 35:5; Jos. 24:23; 11 Cron. 19:3; Is. 29:13; Luke 21:14; Acts 11:23.

Heart as the seat of thinking or memory: Gen. 6:5; Deut. 29:4; Ps. 19:14; Prov. 2:2; Is. 6:10; Matt. 9:4; Matt. 15:19; Luke 2:19; Rom. 10:6; Heb. 4:12.

Heart as the seat of sin: Gen. 6:5; Ps. 95:10; Luke 6:45; Deut. 15:7; Prov. 28:14; Eph. 4:17,18.

Heart as the seat of the regenerated life: Deut. 30:6; Ps. 51:10; Ezek. 11:19-20; Acts 16:14; Rom. 2:28, 29.

Heart as the seat of processes that involve man's spiritual renewal faith, and the practice of Christian virtues: Ps. 28:7; Luke 8:12; Acts 15:9; Eph. 3:17; II Thess. 3:5; I Peter 1:22; Matt. 18:35; Jas. 4:8.

What do all these passages indicate to us? They help us to answer the question, what, according to Scripture, is the primary or directing center in man. The Greeks thought it to be the intellect. Medieval and early modern philosophy and psychology thought it to be mind or soul, some non-physical entity or force. The Bible says the heart. But what can the Bible mean by heart? Surely, we should relate all these and similar passages to the passages we quoted from Genesis which tell us that man is an organic unity in whom the spirit is the life principle and that in the organic unity of the race man individually and collectively is the image of God.

## Variety of Biblical Concepts.

Not only does the Bible ascribe properties of soul life to the heart, but to other parts of the body as well:

Attributes of soul life are ascribed to the blood: Ps.94:21; Is. 59:7; Luke 22:20; Rom. 3:25; Ps. 20:9.

We read of "eyes of the heart": Eph. 1:18.

In I Cor. 3:17 we read, "Ye are the temple of God"; and in I Cor. 6:19, "...your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit."

Body is used to represent all the faculties of man in Romans 12:1.

We are to love God with heart, soul, and mind. Matt. 22:7; Deut. 6:5.

From these Bible passages we may, it seems, infer some important truths concerning the human person.

1. Every man has something of the miraculous in him.<sup>3</sup> The Scriptures recognize that we inherit certain aptitudes, powers, potentialities, and dispositions from our ancestors, but over and above these, they point to a kernel or essence that is new in each person.

This kernel or essence is the life principle in man, the directive center of his total being. It infuses the whole. It gives the whole organic unity. According to Kuypers, it is this center (in psychological terms, the self or ego) that the Scriptures speak of as breath of God, spirit, and heart. It is this center, moreover, that is said to live, die, and put on immortality.<sup>4</sup>

2. The Bible clearly indicates the unity of the person. He is a living being of whom the Bible speaks as heart, soul, mind, body, blood, and the like. In each concept the whole is represented. These are not technical terms to label parts in an analytic fashion, as we do in science. Each points to the whole in its functional relationship. The organic unity of the person is clearly established in Scriptures. The Bible does not confront us with man in his component parts, nor with a comparison of human existence over against that of animals. Rather, it gives us the compelling aspect of man's existence in his relationship to God.
3. The Scriptures clearly distinguish between the essence of man which lives, dies, and put on immortality and the functions in man as represented in his soul life and body life. In the language of A. Kuypers it is the distinction between the moral and the functional, man in the essence of being and his mental and physical activities. Since modern psychology regards the totality of man's functions to exhaust this being, this distinction Scripture is especially significant for us as we face our study.
4. The Bible clearly teaches a functional neutrality.<sup>5</sup> Functional neutrality means two things: (a) there is no hierarchy of function in man, and (b) no function is the seat of evil. One function cannot be thought to be superior to another. Under Greek influence human reason on the intellect has for along time been regarded as supreme in man. We read much of the supremacy of the intellect, and, in the nineteenth century, as reaction to a one-sided emphasis, of the supremacy of desire or will. We have seen that the Bible points to the very core of man, the essence of his being of which intellect, desire, will, etc. are functions. Any optimism or supremacy of the intellect is excluded.

Neither is any function the seat of evil. Evil proceeds not from man's functions, according to the Scriptures, but from the center of his being, the I, the self. Functions are good in themselves. Every gift of God is good.

5. The Scriptures present man as a religious being. The image of God as we have been trying to understand it, is of the very essence of man. It is infused in the totality of man's person. The Scriptures do not present man as an organism who attains to religious values among other values of life. "Religious" describes his very being. This too is important in our approach to psychology and learning. Motivation in man is basically religious and all human seeking is to be interpreted accordingly. So is learning. So is teaching.

6. The Scriptures instructed us in the unconscious life of man long before psychology turned to it for scientific exploration. The psalmist, wearied of self-examination and feeling that the depths of his soul life have not been reached, opens himself to God in the words of Psalm 139:23,24, "Search me, O God, and know my heart, try me and know my thought, and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." Psalms 16 and 26 likewise point to a depth in the soul life which wields a mighty power in the behavior of a person. Nowhere, however, do the Scriptures assign indigenous motivation to the unconscious. It too is a manifestation of the self, the ego, the I. It is inherent in the organic unity of which the I is the essence or life principle.
7. The Bible also teaches us that man is adapted to the natural world about him. He needs interaction with the natural world for self-realization and self-fulfillment in body life and soul life. And the natural world is amenable to his powers. Man has dominion over a world whose resources he needs for the full realization of what he is, the image of God.

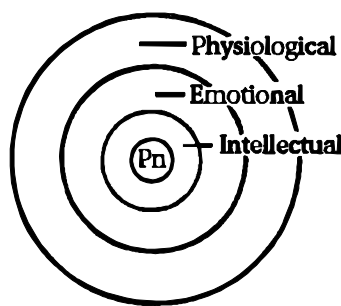
## Personality Theory

The student will recall from Chapter 1 that personality is that unique group of characteristics which describes the individual in relation to other people. Hence infants, for example, can hardly be said to have personality even though they are clearly persons. They are persons by creation; each is an organic unity of spirit, soul life, and body life. But they must **become** personalities: they must acquire and develop those traits which identify them as individuals in the social sense.

Obviously this distinction is tied very closely to the Christian view of the person. Hence we should not be surprised to discover that secular psychologies obliterate it. The three psychologies discussed earlier, for instance, view man as originally a biological (not a spiritual) entity who **becomes** a person (or personality). Everything distinctively human about a person is acquired, not innate. Hence these psychologies have no real basis for distinguishing person from personality.

### *The Dimensions of Personality.*

When we describe personality we describe how a person affects others. When we describe how a person affects others we characterize, so to speak, extensions of that person into his community. Assuming a posture or facial expression in public is, for instance, to "extend one's person into the community"; so is being irritable, or congenial, or uncomprehending.



**Dimensions of Reality**  
**Figure 2**

It is convenient to classify these extensions of oneself into four "dimensions" of personality. They are the physiological, the emotional, the social, and the intellectual. Of course these are not separate entities; as dimensions of a single personality they are always involved in one another. Take a hearty laugh for instance; this is physiological, but its concomitants are understanding the joke (intellectual), being pleased (emotional), and joining in the festivities of the party (social). The qualities that constitute one's personality are like a constellation or cluster that reflect a larger whole.

In Figure 2 the unity of personality as integrated in the pneuma or spirit is diagrammed analogously to the unity of the person in Figure 1. The student will notice that the social and emotional dimensions have been conjoined, for reasons which are intuitively evident

### ***The Whole-Person-In-Life.***

Personality is obviously the most **inclusive** concept that we can apply to an individual. Within its scope fall not only what we have called pneuma, psyche, and soma, but also the various dimensions of the person's social expression. Personality is also the most **concrete** concept we have used so far; it applies to the individual as we actually observe him living his life. Personality traits are not theoretical abstractions, but revelations of the person in action. Therefore it is useful at this point to introduce a term that suggests this concreteness and inclusiveness: the "whole-person-in-life."

There is a competitive term, the "whole-person-in-action," which is used by some psychologists operating within the secular perspective. These psychologists reason this way: We begin with an organism in an environment. Events occur in the environment, called stimuli; other events occur within the organism, called experience. The events within and outside the organism form patterns of response and action in the organism. The elements of these patterns we call personality traits, and their aggregate we call personality. The essence of personality, then, is to engage in **actions**.

The implications of this view of personality for education are not easily overstated. As a matter of fact they are among the determining factors in educational theories today. Our further studies should disclose to the student what this means for education. Just this much for the present. It is held that as a biological organism man is in constant tension with his environment. Events from within and events from without must find equilibrium, balance to relieve the tension. In the interaction the organism develops modes of adjustment in which conflicting events are brought into balance. The various patterns of adjustment constitute the acquired traits of behavior. It is the sum of these traits that constitute personality. When well-integrated for effective adjustment, they constitute a positive, wholesome, balanced personality. When poorly integrated, they constitute a maladjusted personality.

But this is unacceptable from the Christian point of view. The person is not the personality, and personality is not identical with actions. Activity is derived from **life** and that life is not merely biological but spiritual. Therefore when we contrast the term "whole-person-in-life" with "whole-person-in-action" we mean to point out that personality as a concrete unity has its ultimate genesis in the divinely-created life principle, the ego or spirit. The person is the ego operative in psychosomatic functioning. The person, in turn, expresses himself in life through his three dimensions of personality.

When a person communicates in the dimensions of life according to consciously accepted ends, he is a personality. When ends and the direction of communication of a person fail to constitute a field of related activity, he is without personality. An infant, comparatively speaking, is without personality. Likewise a person has lost contact with his in-life relationship when ends and relationship fail to constitute a field of meaning. The latter is true of extreme forms of abnormality in the mentally ill. Personality is strong when the in-life relationship is well established, weak when it lacks adequate field relationship. Personality is bad when the in-life relationship of the dimensions of life violate standards of righteousness, good when they are valued as right. A person communicates in the dimensions of life, and it is in the in-life relationship that these dimensions are formed according to consciously chosen direction of the person. We speak, therefore, of the whole-person-in-life.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Kuypers, *Inleiding in de Zielkunde* ("Introduction to Psychology") (Kampen, the Netherlands: J. H. Kok, 1953), p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> The word "heart" is in every instance a translation either of the Hebrew *lebh* or *lebhabh*, or of the Greek *kardia*. This fact, along with the scripture references here cited, derive from an (unpublished) study by the author's colleague, Dr. A. A. Hoekema, Professor of Systematic Theology at Calvin Seminary.

<sup>3</sup> Kuypers, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.