# The Person in Christian Mission

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## I Persons over Things

This time last year, the British news cycle was dominated by a neonatal nurse called Lucy Letby, who was accused of murdering seven babies and attempting to murder a further eight. Letby has since received multiple life sentences. According to some onlookers, the horror of what transpired at the Countess of Chester Hospital's neonatal unit was increased by how very avoidable it all seemed, had only (the reasoning goes) doctors been allowed to penetrate the National Health Service's apparently labyrinthine bureaucracy. One journalist, writing in the ***Telegraph***, expressed this perspective in the following terms:

> A nurse who sets out to kill babies is mercifully rare. A self-serving health system which acts to cover up the deaths of babies, prolonging the anguish of parents, is not. Make no mistake, the mendacious and corrupt NHS has blood on its hands. It must now put a national signalling system in place which will pick up the slightest fluctuation in deaths on maternity and neonatal units to catch any future killers or, more likely, identify negligence.[1]

It is true that Americans often seem to relish needling Brits about the struggles and strains of the NHS. I would not want this introduction to lend to that impression. So it is worth emphasizing as I begin that my object lies elsewhere. Let us assume that the view expressed by the journalist above is warranted. (Whether or not that is the case is immaterial to my argument.) The point that I wish to make is that the moral sentiment expressed in ***The Telegraph*** is tenable

> *It is worth asking whether the bureaucrat is not, in the final analysis, a covert personalist, who simply relocates, rather than jettisons, personal value.*

[1] Allison Pearson, "Lucy Letby's cruelty is unfathomable, but make no mistake the NHS has blood on its hands," *The Telegraph* (18 Aug 2023), online at https://www.telegraph.co.uk/columnists/2023/08/18/lucy-letby-trial-guilty-nhs-betrayal-of-trust/.

only on personalist grounds. I shall offer a definition of ***personalism*** momentarily, but let us start more colloquially, with the simple comment that the personalist is someone who values persons over things. Presumably, by that definition, someone who wished ***not*** to be considered a personalist would tip his scales in the direction, not of persons, but of ***things***—choices, preferences, functions, exchanges.

Suppose we are ***not*** personalists, that we do value things over people. But now I find that I have little obvious reason to share the ***Telegraph***'s outrage over the NHS's apparently Byzantine bureaucracy. For if things like choices, preferences, functions, and exchanges outweigh ***persons***, then it isn't any surprise that bureaucracy — in the technical sense of the practical implementation of rational-juridical authority — should rise to the position of dominant concern. The non-personalist may object that to do otherwise is to introduce relational considerations that don't belong in technical decision-making, and may insist that the personalist thereby seeks to establish a problematic system of valuation where one's worth is determined not by his technical ability but by his loyalty.

Such a view, as Max Weber famously argued, characterized the originating impulse in early modern capitalism. But it is worth asking whether the bureaucrat is not, in the final analysis, really only a covert personalist, who has simply relocated, rather than actually jettisoned, personal value, by ascribing to capital "the legal status of a fictional 'person,'" with absolute private property, and even some "human," rights.[2] From a non-personalist standpoint, from which the scales of value appear to tip in the direction of ***things*** over ***persons***, could we say that those deaths were awful? Certainly. That they were undesirable? Of course. That they were philosophically objectionable? Probably not.

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## II The Mystery of the Person

What do we mean by ***personalist***? Now is the time to offer a definition. Let us say that a personalist is one who affirms, in the phrase of the historian and metaphysician Antoine Arjakovsky of the Collèges des Bernardins, "***a symbolic and non-objectifiable representation of the person***."[3]

What this phrase means is that the personalist is one who regards every person, as such, as a unique and irreplaceable end-in-herself, a subject inherently possessed of dignity and worth, a "face" never to be reduced to utility, never instrumentalized, never objectified. The personalist sees the person as macrocosm and microcosm of a liturgical cosmos. She believes her vocation to be the imaging of her Creator in mirroring, in a way befitting her creatureliness, God's own self-giving relation. She recognizes that the deeper one plumbs the mystery of creaturely dignity, the more mind-boggling its depth is. She thus concurs with Marcel when he writes, "the more you love someone, the more unknown he is."[4] She smiles upon Clément, when he reflects, "the more I know God, and my neighbor in the light of God, the more God is revealed, and my neighbour also, as gloriously unknown."[5] And she feels the force of Lewis's dictum, "You have never talked to a mere mortal."[6]

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[2] David J. Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context: Towards the Conversion of the West—Theological Bearings for Mission and Spirituality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 308 09.

[3] Antoine Arjakovsky, *Towards an Ecumenical Metaphysics, Volume I: The Principles and Methods of Ecumenical Science* (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2022), 73.

[4] Quoted in Arjakovsky, *Principles and Methods*, 87.

[5] Olivier Clément, *On Human Being: A Spiritual Anthropology* (London: New City, 2000), 52.

[6] C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 15.

*The Christian is a personalist already, by virtue of faith in the Trinitarian God Whom she images, worships, and serves.*

The Christian needn't become a card-carrying personalist (or any other kind of "-ist," for that matter). What I wish to claim is that the Christian, simply as a Christian, is a personalist *already*, by virtue of faith in the Trinitarian God Whom she images, worships, and serves, and into Whose name she has been baptized. "Consistent Christianity," says Van Til, "stands for an ultimate personalism."[7]

We began by suggesting personalism comprises the basis for any indignation one might wish to express over catastrophically inhumane bureaucracy, wherever choices, preferences, functions, and exchanges — the practical implementation of rational-juridical authority — might be found to outweigh the person. The present section has added a second layer, suggesting that personalism is something more than merely an ethical position. Indeed, I have here gone so far as to suggest that personalism, or something very like it, is what results whenever the trinitarian anthropology rooted in the apostolic writings, and nurtured by traditions of Christian theological reaching back to Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine of Hippo, are lived out in the exigencies of modern life. To weave this thread still further, one would need consider what personalism means for Christian mission today, if indeed it represents more than merely an "ethic" for Christians to embody. In the next section, we shall do just this, introducing three dimensions of life — ethical, epistemological, and evangelistic (or martyrological) — which are transformed as Christian disciples assume their personal office as signs in the firmament of a liturgical cosmos. The next will be the last section of "legwork," before moving to practical implications for ordinary congregational life.

## III The "Sign" in Divine Self-Disclosure

Should one wish to amplify a personalist emphasis on mission in a congregation's common life, a good place to start would be to engage the work of late Anglican theologian David Kettle (1948–2011), formerly coordinator of the British "Gospel and Our Culture Network." Kettle's magnum opus, *Western Culture in Gospel Context* (2011), drew chiefly on earlier work by Lesslie Newbigin, Ian Ramsey, and Michael Polanyi, to unfold an exhilarating account of what *conversion* means in modern western culture. The unfinished sequel to *Western Culture*—available under the working title, *In the Deep Context of God*—elaborated the philosophical foundations of the earlier work, and may be found on Kettle's website (now operated by his son). As Esther Meek remarked to me during a personal conversation, there is insight enough in Kettle's work to serve as a local church's philosophy of ministry for a decade. Let us see why.

Kettle's key insight was that the gospel does not so much challenge as *break open* our context. He explains what this means, beginning with the great missionary bishop, Lesslie Newbigin. In his own life and work, Newbigin cut to the heart of the evangelist's dilemma: "How do you begin to explain that which must in the end be accepted as the beginning of all explanation?"[8] This was the punctiliar question around which ideas like *contextualization*, *indigenization*, and *inculturation* all originated and with reference to which they still must be understood. For the gospel to be made intelligible to a culture, it must be framed in terms of that culture's core beliefs and practices. It must become apprenhensible, lest it become reprehensible.

Kettle affirmed this insight. But he insisted that this point inevitably becomes distorted when unyoked from a vital corollary. That corresponding insight is that the gospel does more than *address* a context; it

[7] Quoted in Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), 199.
[8] Quoted in Kettle, *Western Culture*, 48.

*engages* it. When the gospel *addresses* a context, God will be found challenging its underlying worldview assumptions, exposing them to the demands of His judging, transformative, and renewing presence.

These two insights will sound familiar to anyone who has reflected for a moment on Christ and culture, for they echo the creative tension between the principles of *indigenization* and *pilgrimage* that can, rightly used, produce that gospel-tutored improvisation that has been nicely described as "traditioned innovation."[9] *Can* — but does not necessarily. Tension *can* be creative; a loose violin string, after all, cannot be played. But tension only does not music make. One must know what to do with it.

Here is where Kettle's insight enters in: the gospel engages a context by "breaking it open." By "breaking open," Kettle means that God does not only reveal Himself *in* our context, but reveals Himself and His Kingdom *as* our ultimate context. How this plays out in mission takes us back to our earlier definition of the personalist as one who affirms "a symbolic and non-objectifiable representation of the person," and it advances my argument by indicating how it is that a personalist theology of Christian mission (a tautology, I suppose) transforms not only the realm of morals, but also of knowledge and witness.

*This "breaking open" brings a moment of judgment and a new question of faithfulness.*

To see how it does so, let us mark that the way God breaks open a culture to its ultimate context in Himself is by that most Johannine thing, the *sign*.

> The "sign" character of divine self-disclosure is not limited to Christ's miracles and teaching, but is integral to all such disclosure. The sacraments of the Christian church are signs, in turn, embodying the action of God, although their formal nature may rather conceal from immediate view the sovereign freedom in which God approaches creation in signs. More widely, and more apparently in freedom, God also reveals himself through the ordinary, familiar things of our world, making them come alive at once for what they are and as vehicles or occasions of divine self-disclosure… When God speaks to us through signs in this way, this does not leave our world intact; rather, it opens up a new context in which to see this world itself.[10]

This "breaking open" brings a moment of judgment and a new question of faithfulness.

Several months ago, one Saturday morning, still reeling from the fumes of Kierkegaard's *Three Godly Discourses*, I strolled in a grove of live oaks with my family. The previous evenings, I had been lingering over a section where the Danish ambler describes the simplicity, obedience, and joy of the Christian, observing how creation itself obeys its Lord:

> The sighing of the wind, the echo of the forest, the murmuring of the brook, the hum of summer, the whispering of the leaves, the hiss of the grass, every sound, every sound you hear, it is all compliance, unconditional obedience, so that in it you can hear God as you can hear him in the music of the obedient movement of the heavenly bodies. For in nature… at the same instant that it is not unconditionally God's will, it has ceased to exist.[11]

As we walked , I felt that these oaks, with their outstretched limbs and sun-gilded Spanish moss, became "signs" to me. To be clear, this was not a case of "finding God in nature." It was more akin to a scene from the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, where a brother cracks open a door to stumble upon a sort of Sinaitic theophany, to witness the Abba praying "as it were, all on fire."[12]

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[9] L. Gregory Jones and Andrew P. Hogue, *Navigating the Future: Traditioned Innovation for Wilder Seas* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2021

[10] Kettle, *Western Culture*, 49–50.

[11] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air: Three Godly Discourses*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 49.

[12] *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Arsenius 27), Migne PG 65.96.

That day, a familiar oak grove had become "a sign," breaking open my Saturday and quotidian amble to the judgment of God. Would I embrace His demands, forfeiting my attachment to the world as I had assumed it to be? Or, as the trees of the field very nearly literally seemed to be clapping their hands (Isa. 55:12), would I "evade" the Lord's approach?

Many of us narrate our own conversions or "turning points" around such mundane moments, and their inundation with the glory of the presence of God.

The point I am making is not a saccharine one about "finding God in nature." I am illustrating a demanding point that Kettle calls the paradox of grace: "that the activity of God towards us does not demand or entail our corresponding passivity" but "awakens in us a corresponding lively act, a demanding self-offering and openness in which we receive the gift of God."[13] And I am emphasizing that this invites us into the realization that Christians only "get God right" (know the *truth*) to the extent that we walk in His *way* and share in His *life*.

## IV Persons as Effectual Signs

The time has come to trace out implications of the argument we have sketched. While it is up to each of us to ask what God is doing in our own contexts, some broad patterns are worth considering together. As I have suggested above, if we embrace what I describe as a personalist account of Christian mission, we will see that Christian mission concerns no less than three spheres of life: how we live in the world (ethics, "Way"), how we know (epistemology, "Truth"), and how we invite others into the communion of the Holy Ghost (evangelism, "Life").

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### *The Way*

If we aspire for our congregations to attain a degree of maturity at which persons are consistently valued above things, we must be cultivating contexts where congregants can learn to prioritize the nurture of persons in familial relationships. This is especially the case with youth and young adults. A painful recent trend in the western world has been a sharp decline in childbirth, quite apart from the issue of infertility. As R. John Aitken writes,

> We are seeing the emergence of an entire generation of young adults for whom neither procreation nor religious devotion constitute the meaning of life. Rather, the purpose of existence is a voyage towards the attainment of self-fulfillment with a strong element of self-gratification in the motivational mix.[14]

Children, youth, and young adults especially need contexts where they can see family life, including ecclesial life, done well. One reason that such contexts go underdeveloped is because they are so frequently inhibited by practices arising from one or another of a church's guiding values, whether cherished ones (those that inform outreach methods, service styles, and so forth) or more tacit ones (such as those that guide our granular systems for resocializing new believers into the familial setting of ecclesial life). It should be no surprise to find young adults who profess Christ, living for the attainment of self-fulfillment, where they are not encountering the beauty of family life, well lived. Such environments are precluded when leaders, often inadvertently, enshrine in their leadership culture a kind of ***shadow-personalism*** — a system of values and priorities where abstract objects like attendance, budget, influence, and so on, are treated (not unlike capital in modern

[13] David Kettle, *In the Deep Context of God*, ch. 4, heading "The Paradox of Grace," online at https://davidkettle.org.uk/inprogress.html.
[14] R. John Aitken, *The Infertility Trap* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 282.

capitalism) as "persons" with absolute rights that undermine the spiritual welfare of actual ***persons***.[15]

That is the more difficult application. But we can take humbler corrective measures beginning on liturgical and catechetical fronts. How many hymns or spiritual songs does your congregation sing with distinct parts for men and women to show forth the distinct glory of their sex's voice? If you belong to a preaching team, are you preaching the Old Testament scriptures sufficiently often that your people have occasion to set Jesus's correction of first-century idolatry of family life in a full biblical context, where personhood is corporate and communal rather than atomistic and autonomous?[16] Catechetically, what formational pathways are available to guide new believers into a new, ***familial*** way of existence? How are households trained to adapt the Daily Office to the needs and opportunities of children's various ages and stages? What in ***your*** context most threatens family life, and in what concrete ways might the church offset those threats, nurturing homes where career plays second-fiddle to family, where things give way to persons?

### *The Truth*

Knowing God is the act of giving oneself to God without reservation. It is just this that distinguishes knowledge of God from conceptual knowledge. Kettle quotes the Scottish preacher, George MacDonald: "Would you know God? Then do His will."[17]

When, however, "knowing God" becomes a matter of amassing conceptual data, we have assuredly retrofitted an Enlightenment model of theoretical knowledge for the pursuit of divine wisdom. And in this way, an epistemological error becomes an idolatrous one. The King has come to the cobbler, only to be fitted with whatever shoes the cobbler has on hand. Surely it would be better to hear what sort of shoe the ***King*** wishes to wear!

*Because the joining of God's willing and my willing is not a zero-sum game, this is not a caveat to the doctrine of grace, but is in fact its most profound expression.*

If not as an Enlightenment "knower," immutably scanning God like an all-seeing lighthouse,[18] how then ***are*** we to know God? Classic Christianity holds that the knowledge of God is only given to those who are willing to be brought into alignment with God's willing. Because the joining of God's willing and my willing is not a zero-sum game, this is not a caveat to the doctrine of grace, but is in fact its most profound expression. And this invites the recognition that, if we desire our people to know God, we must help them live with the right understanding of ***what it is to know***. Two encouragements may be in order to that end.

First, focus on ***perspective***.

One of the key advantages of the theo-dramatic model of doctrine espoused by Kevin Vanhoozer is its focus on ***sapientia***, divine wisdom. Vanzhoozer praises what he calls the "sapiential virtues," among which he numbers ***perspective*** — the way in which I learn to view any particular situation in the broader context of God's dramatic story.[19]

One of the three roles of the rule of faith in ante-Nicene catechesis was tutoring infant Christians in the story of salvation history.[20] Partly for that reason, my own personal aspiration is that those I pastor might come to reflect on their own lives instinctively in terms of our corporate place in the biblical drama.

This is why Christopher J.H. Wright's recent book, ***The Great Story and the Great Commission***, now occupies a special place on my shelf. Wright's model of

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[15] Every staff leadership team and vestry (or board) would do well to study Wendell Berry's essay, "Horse Drawn Tools and the Doctrine of Labor Saving," in *The World Ending Fire*, ed. Paul Kingsnorth (London: Penguin, 2017), 152–59.

[16] See Joseph C. Atkinson, *Biblical and Theological Foundations of the Family* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Univerrsity of America Press, 2014), ch. 6.

[17] Kettle, *Western Culture*, 65.

[18] An image I borrow from Rowan Williams's fantastic brief book, *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdman's, 2018).

[19] Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 332–35.

[20] Stephen O. Presley, *Cultural Sanctification: Engaging the World like the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdman's, 2024), 35–40.

articulating the seven-act biblical drama is set out in Chapter 2, complete with seven easily recalled symbols — chiastically arranged, no less! Wright's overview of the biblical narrative is the best thing to scribble on a napkin at Chipotle since the invention of the Bridge illustration. I have found this approach consistently helpful in moving people — from non-Christians, to infant believers, to maturing disciples — towards increasing understanding of and personal engagement with the presence and power of Jesus Christ.

The second encouragement is to frame faith less as a cognitive feat than as *skill*. Where Vanhoozer's *perspective* widens our lens, the notion of faithful knowing as skill takes us correspondingly deep.

The idea leads us from the virtue of perspective to the virtue Kettle calls *radical attentiveness*. We are not talking here about a technique like "mindfulness." Radical attentiveness has rather to do with how one masters a skill. As Kettle writes in *Deep Context*, skill acquisition begins with a twofold process comprised of receptivity and critical discernment. As one grows in one's ability to execute a skillful act, the negative way of critical discernment, so formative in the initial stages of learning, yields to the positive way of receptivity, which compounds skillful learnings as action wears on. Just so, as we grow in knowledge of God, we find ourselves ever less inclined to sit in judgment on the claims of God, parsing whether this is a fair way of "doing things," and increasingly inclined to ask, "Can I see the world this way? Let's see what happens if…"

Further, as the reader may know from experience — rock climbing, cooking, playing the piano, and so on — as we grow in skill, these ways *coincide*. Say I am learning to cut a dovetail. I can only say that "I know how to cut a dovetail" when I am no longer solely focused with reminding myself of the rules for marking width, setting my tite gauge, measuring tails, finagling my chisel to achieve a proper cutting angle, and so on. It is not when I act *toward* these subsidiary skills that I act skillfully, but when I act *from* them— then I act skillfully! Only then, when I act *from* rather than *to* the integrated act of cutting dovetails, have I acted skilfully. For now, I am attending to the world in a particular way — a "dovetailing" kind of way. I am attending to the world, radically and immediately, *from* the embodied act of "dovetail cutting."[21]

> *"'In the Christian case, tradition already implies conversion.'"*

Recently, I took my three young sons with me to buy a new saw. To get to the hardware store, we had to cross a parking lot. As anyone knows, shuffling kids across traffic takes many thoughts processes operating simultaneously. Managing those thought processes is not parenting; parenting is what happens when those thought processes subside and one gets on with crossing traffic. As a young father, I experienced the twofold process described above; but, year by year, the negative way of critical discernment has yielded to (or taken its place within) the more positive one of receptivity. Hence, I rarely articulate my way through the process of tempering my pace or monitoring the force I am exerting as I gently but firmly shepherd the boys across. Instead, I walk with them, intuitively octopus-like in my motions, guiding each boy by hand, shoulder, or head, instantaneously negotiating the way I lead each based on the real-time direction, pace, and focus of the other two.

All knowing is a bit like this. Like sawing a plank or crossing traffic with children, the skillful knower "has a feel for what he is doing" and "can bring these several movements more or less into phase with one another, so that they resonate or are 'in tune.'"[22]

This deeply personal model of knowing is far riskier than the Cartesian model of thought, which sees all knowledge — including our knowledge of God — as something to be reasoned *to* rather than reasoned

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[21] Kettle, *Deep Context*, ch 5, heading "A theory of knowledge and context in general"; Esther Lightcap Meek, *Loving to Know: Covenant Epistemology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), ch. 4; idem, *Doorway to Artistry: Attuning Your Philosophy to Enhance Your Creativity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2023), ch. 2.
[22] Tim Ingold, "Walking the Plank: Meditations on a Process of Skill," in *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge, and Description* (London: Routledge, 2022), 63–77, at 74.

*from*. This model of knowing applies to theological knowledge, considered as *scientia* or *sapientia*, in the same way. The human being "is not the sort of thing that can think its way to the inside of the Christian tradition; it is the sort of thing that needs to be set free to learn to think about the God who set it free. In the Christian case, tradition already implies conversion."[23]

Speaking anecdotally, this is a tremendous gift to give a person on the boundary of Christian faith. It does not sideline propositional belief (doctrine is *scientia* as well as *sapientia*). But it does incline us to think in terms of moving lives through risky, skilfull, dramatic involvement in the story of God — what, in Ingold's terms, we might call "rhythmic" not "metronomic" living — rather than augmenting cognitive databases through the tweaking of ideas or the accumulation of experiences. This willingness to risk is crucial both for exiting the "godless" story of modern secular culture and for entering the "God story" to which we are invited (in this *from/to* way!) in 2 Corinthian 5:17, Matthew 25:31–46, and many other such places.

Perception and radical attentiveness are sapiential virtues intended to form us into skilled apprentices, who live not *to*, but *from*, unself-conscious humble service. That that does not in the slightest undercut the efficacy and incongruity of grace is precisely the glory of grace.

***The Life***

The first "red letter words" in John's Gospel are a question: "What are you looking for?" (1:38). The disciples answer with another question, "Where are you staying?" Here, gospel writer John tips his hat, alluding to a word freighted with significance in his gospel. "Staying" means "abiding," "remaining," "living," "continuing."

In that light, consider Jesus's response. "Come and see." It is an invitation to John's reader, to us. "Come and see" where Jesus abides, that you ("ye") may abide in him as he abides in his Father.

The Christian's fulfillment as a person does not mean, as for many of her peers, "recognizing her potential." Servants of Christ find fulfillment as persons in their office as *signs* in a liturgical cosmos, as points in frail human flesh at which the Lord has chosen to break open the world to His judging, transformative, and renewing presence.[24] Acting as such, the Church provides a radically distinct witness, demonstrating to a watching world that people matter more than things, that knowing anything worth knowing requires risk, and that personal fulfillment can only be realized in a transparency through which, as by many other signs, the Lord God breaks open a context to disclose Himself.

[23] C. Kavin Rowe, *One True Life: The Stoics and Early Christians as Rival Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 254.
[24] See Kettle, *Deep Context*, ch. 1.