

A Theology of Acceptance, Part 1

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A piece of promotional mail occasionally pops up in my university mail box with the title MAKING OURSELVES ACCEPTABLE. The content – as I remember – varies, but the point in the title remains. Although the pamphlet is not directed to the concerns of this conference – as I recall it is always addressed to salesmen advising them how to make themselves and their product acceptable to potential customers – the underlying idea of MAKING OURSELVES ACCEPTABLE does have theological implications, especially when we are thinking about A THEOLOGY OF ACCEPTANCE.

When you come right down to it, the endeavor of the pamphlet in my mail box is doomed to failure. MAKING OURSELVES ACCEPTABLE implies that I am in charge of my own acceptability. In more cases – at least in the most important ones – that is simply not true. And here I do not simply mean to call to mind that, theologically, man cannot make himself acceptable before God (at least not before that God whose criterion for acceptance is that we do not strive to make ourselves acceptable), but the same applies for many if not most of our normal relationships with other people. Whether in intra-human relations I am acceptable or not depends ultimately not on my beauty or personality, humor or talent, or any other quality I have, or act I can perform. On

the contrary, it depends solely on an act of judgment from some person outside me. I am not per se (lit., through my self) acceptable, but I become acceptable finally when someone accepts me. Perhaps my talent, humor, personality play into the picture, but the acceptable quality does not reside there. Acceptability – my being accepted – is something I cannot ultimately control. As every recipient of a “Dear John” letter knows (and every jilted bride too), my acceptability is finally entirely in someone else’s hands. Only when the other person accepts me do I have acceptance; only then have I become acceptable. So the title for that pamphlet would have to be reversed to be more nearly true. Rather than MAKING OURSELVES ACCEPTABLE, OTHERS MAKE ME ACCEPTABLE, or, if I am to go to work actively in the realm of acceptance it can only be in MAKING OTHER SELVES ACCEPTABLE.

ACCEPTANCE SEEKER

What lies behind these opening comments is the truth of human existence, that value judgments about our own human selves do not depend on what we are (or even what we would like to think we are), but they depend on what others say we are. We may try to make ourselves acceptable or beautiful or beloved, but even then we do so in the hope that somehow this will convince some person outside us (or perhaps even trick him into it) to tell us how handsome, or intelligent, or lovely, or strong, or good we are. The wicked queen in “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” is a classic illustration of this reality in mankind. Not yet convinced by her own self-evaluation, she needed the evaluating voice from the outside – in this case the “mirror, mirror on the wall” – to tell her that she really was the “fairest of them all.”

My point here is not whether the mirror was statistically true in its assertion; just as the point of statistical truth is

irrelevant when a child tells his mother that she is the most beautiful mommy in the whole wide world. My point is that for judgments of value (acceptance included) which, as we say, "make life worth while," we depend on the value judgments of someone else. Making life worth while means giving worth to life. We cannot give worth to our own life. If we have it, it is because someone else bestowed it upon us. For our own acceptance, which means someone else's value judgment about us, we are at the mercy of other people.

We cannot force anyone to ascribe value to us – twist their arm and make them say they love us, or think highly of us, or admire us. Value cannot be coerced, it can only be bestowed. If we do occasionally coerce it with Chanel #5 or new clothes or a fat wallet, it leads to such tragic or ludicrous situations wherein the "mirror, mirror on the wall," this time as a human being says: o.k., I told you that I loved you; now get out! If there is not at least a small amount of freely bestowed, personally given (not bought) ascription of value and worth, then we know it to be true that we are not the most wonderful sugar daddy or most beautiful mommy in the world after all.

We live by the ascription of value that others bestow upon us or else we have no value at all. This is a properly secularized form of a biblical statement: Man does not live by bread alone, but by the words that proceed from the mouth of his fellowman: "I love you, you're great; you're hired; you're fired; you've had it; I forgive you, darling." Even without getting explicitly theological, the truth is that in human life with fellow humans we do not make ourselves acceptable. We cannot. Others must do it for us, or it does not happen at all and we are unacceptable.

But now it is high time to get more explicitly theological – and subversively we have already been doing so. For this

characteristic of human life that we have been discussing –being dependent on other persons for the acceptance and value judgments that make life worth while – is itself a theological fact. (Theological fact = real reality, not imagined or hypothetical, but actual, factual. Biblical stance: What God says, that is reality. Quantitatively: Let there be...and Qualitatively: And it was good. Depart from me, ye accursed. Damned sinner. Forgiven sinner. Whatever God says about me that is what I really am.)

Man is an acceptance-seeker. He craves value. Even if he does not know or could not care less about God, he wants someone outside himself to say: Behold it (you) is good. There are two theological facts (realities) in this concern of man to make himself acceptable. One is that his life is not complete without the ascriptions of value and worth and acceptance by someone from the outside. Or, expressed in other words, man is a dialogical creature (if not, why does he have language?) and in speaking and responding with someone outside himself, value and worth (whether pro or con) are added to the reality of his life. Secondly, in the very fact of our craving acceptance, we testify that we do not have it, or at least that something is out of order in the over-all design. Theologically, this can be expressed in the words of Augustine: "Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee." Even the secularist acknowledges that man is a social animal, structured for fellowship with other men, and the human being who is completely a lone wolf, is no human at all. Perhaps that is why we call him the lone wolf.

THE PLACE OF ACCEPTANCE IN CREATION

The qualitative judgment which we call acceptance is built right into the created order of the universe, according to biblical theology. This is very clearly the case with reference to man

himself—and we have noticed this reality in our opening observations about the “normal” relations between humans. To the man of the Old Testament this is also true for non-human creation as well. In the creation account in Genesis 1 God makes value judgments of the non-human creation in the repeated phrase: AND GOD SAW THE LIGHT AND IT WAS GOOD. The Hebrew man did not view this sentence as though God was the foreman or inspector in the construction of the component elements of the world. For the seeing is not that of the neutral by-stander. God is not the spectator in His creation, not even after He has brought it into existence. But He is also the evaluator of the existing creation, now that it is in existence. And to be looked at by God is surely not neutral. Because God looks at it, because He turns His face toward, therefore it becomes valuable, is GOOD.

This is the common motif throughout the entire Old Testament: that when God turns His face toward someone, acceptance occurs. When God turns His face away – or, as we still say in our own language idiom, when God turns His back on someone – then that man is rejected. Those Old Testament heroes of the faith who “knew God face to face” were not necessarily more intimate with God from the viewpoint of their penetration into His secrets, but they were the very valued and valuable accepted men of God because God kept His face turned toward them. For them the Aaronic benediction was their way of life: THE LORD BLESSED THEM AND KEPT THEM (in that He) MADE HIS FACE TO SHINE UPON THEM AND WAS GRACIOUS TO THEM. LIFTED UP HIS COUNTENANCE UPON THEM AND GAVE THEM PEACE. PEACE, GRACE, BLESSING, these are not three separate items incorporated in the benediction, but they are the terms of acceptance that refer to God’s turning His face toward His creation and establishing relationships to it.

Before the light-wave theory was formulated to explain human vision, the eye was considered the active agent in establishing

contact with the observed object. We think of the eye as a receiving organ of the light waves bouncing off all reality around us. For biblical man the eye is more active and one can turn his vision off or no at will. We still have something of this notion present in our use of the term when we say: He walked right past me and did not even see me. He did not see me because he did not want to see me, even though in terms of our understanding of vision the light waves were bouncing off me into his eyes all the time.

AND GOD LOOKED AT CREATION AND IT WAS GOOD. Not intrinsically is it good, even by virtue of His having created it. It becomes good when God deigns to look at it, to remain in contact with it, to will on His own freely to be related to it, and from this it gets its value. There is no eliciting of god's approval on the basis of some already possessed or achieves value or goodness. The posture of creation is one of pure receptivity.

In the Genesis creation stories the same perspective is retained and expanded. When man is involved, god not only looks at His human creatures, but He also talks with them. The nature of man's acceptance is most easily viewed in the negative mode in which it appears in Genesis 3, namely, then, after it has been forfeited. Instead of living on the receiving end "by every word that preceedeth from the mouth of God" and thereby having everything that makes life worth while, man is tempted to seek self-achieved worth and acceptance. "To be like God" is the teaser. To be on an equal basis with God – that, to be sure, is really a valuable status – to be accepted by rights on the divine level itself – but to be so on the base of an act of his own and/or manipulation of the creation that is at his disposal. One might say that the eating of the fruit in the garden is the Chanel #5 of antiquity whereby men have always striven to MAKE THEMSELVES ACCEPTABLE. Even such a Chanel #5 treatment with other human beings or with God Himself can seem so sensible and

so true; the truth is that it is a lie. Like all lies, it is not an obvious falsehood, but it is a near-truth, so near that it can pass for truth if there is just the least bit of desire in the hearer to have the near-truth be the whole truth.

In the Genesis creation the whole truth is that man is in God's image. The near-truth of the tempter's lie is equality with God. The whole truth is that man is structured to be a God-reflector, and as such a reflector he functions only when he lets the light source outside of himself shine upon him so that it can be reflected to the creatures and creation round about. Man, the God-reflector, is designed to be the key component in God's communicating and relating to His entire creation. The lunge toward equality with God is like a mirror striving to be a light. It is ludicrous and ridiculous for a reflector to strive to be a source. The near-truth is that the mirror can function as sub-source when it is aligned with the genuine source. Light can only come from a mirror when light shines on the mirror. By itself the mirror has no brilliance. In a pitch-black room with no external light a mirror on the wall is indistinguishable from black tile on the floor.

HIDING FROM GOD

The truth about man's acceptability is that on his own terms he is unacceptable. That is the eye-opener experienced by man, referred to in Genesis 3:7, "Then the eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons." Setting aside for the moment the implications for sexuality, this verse is the main assertion of what happened as a result of the fall. It must be viewed in connection with the assertion that stands at the outset of the temptation narrative, viz., "And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed." Claus Westermann in his Facet Books publication on Genesis makes much of the point

that it is shame and not sin which is the central item in the fall. The emphatic word for man's paradisaal state is shame-less and not the word sinless. For our purposes, too, shame is more closely connected with acceptable and unacceptable than the word "sin" initially is in our language. "The phenomenon of shame...always refers to a defect, since it is a reaction to being unmasked or to the knowledge that one has been unmasked...therefore always has reference to something like sins, failures, or wrongs doings." "Such unmasking is possible only when the relationship between man and God is ruptured." We might say man is ashamed when he is unmasked, but he is unmasked only when he no longer has God "covering" him. The phenomenon of being ashamed is a pointer to "this riddle of man who was made by God and yet in his own existence invariably exemplifies a telltale defect." Because of the centrality of shame in the narrative, Westermann sees the gift of clothing by God to the man as a meager "yet might sign of God's forgiveness. Life which has been freely given to humans who then forfeited it, is a life which is made possible only by God's forgiveness. This is purposely not stated here, but only hinted at through the sign. Thus verse 21 is a modest and restrained indication of the goal of the story which began with man's creation."

THE TRUTH ABOUT MAN, EVERYMAN (and that's what the Hebrew word Adam means) IS THAT ON HIS OWN TERMS HE IS UNACCEPTABLE. Besides the shame which he feels, Genesis refers to fear and the desire to hide. Not only does the man seek to hide himself physically from God (also somewhat ludicrous, as though the creation itself could insulate one of its own from the Creator who brought all of them into existence), but he seeks to hide morally by refusing to acknowledge his unacceptability – which he personally does acknowledge, else he would not be hiding. He passes the buck for his unacceptability to the woman, and the woman passes it on to the serpent, and both of them imply who

they really hold responsible for the whole business. In passing the blame to the woman, the man implies, "And you know, God, who put this woman into my life." And not to be outdone, the woman passes it on to the serpent, implying, "And you know, God, who put serpents into the Garden."

Besides being unacceptable, life after the fall is complicated by the unwillingness to admit unacceptability. The fall shows that man refuses to live solely from the posture of receptivity, on the receiving end of "every creative and evaluative word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." The fear which drives him to hide is the fear that, granted his current unacceptability, he cannot any longer survive on the receiving end; that if he admits he is unacceptable, God will not accept him. But this too is a lie and perhaps the more significant one in the creation story – at least for us, more important than the lie about trying to move up from the imago dei to being like God. For we are no longer in such a paradisaal situation to even be able to fall prey to such an option. But we all now live "after the fall" is that "God will not be merciful to me if I am a sinner," and that therefore I will have to demonstrate to God, as the Pharisee in the parable with the tax-collector, that I am not really as unacceptable as all that after all. The temptation after the fall for man is much less his disrespect for God's law as it is distrust in God's gospel. And yet the truth of existence after the fall is not that you have to become guiltless and then God accepts you, but that "God is merciful to sinners." It was the tax collector who trusted this gospel, who went down to his house "Justified" (i.e., accepted), rather than the Pharisee with his honest report of self-achieved acceptance. Even an unacceptable man can live on the receiving end of God's hand and not be destroyed, but survive. Even and especially unacceptable man is accepted by God. That is the genius of biblical faith. That is the reason for the writing of the entire

Scriptures. Unacceptable man becomes acceptable when God accepts him. The man of faith then, as Paul Tillich phrases it, is the man who “courageously accepts himself as accepted in spite of his being unacceptable.”

- A. Such faith is based on no pre-conditions within the man.
- B. It is based on his participation in something that transcends him, says Tillich. We would say, on God’s turning His face toward the unacceptable man and letting it shine (i.e., smile) upon him, creating communion and value.
- C. This leads to the man of faith being able to use the power (value of the acceptable coming outside himself from God) to take the anxiety of his known guilt and condemnation into himself and live with it. Perhaps here the New Testament would suggest another perspective – not in the direction of taking guilt into myself and having the courage to live with it, but unloading the guilt by the strange alchemy of the atonement and now having the courage to live without it.

The playwright Arthur Miller, one of the most penetrating spokesmen in American letters for the theological realities of the biblical tradition, has written his most recent drama around this very theme of seeking to survive in the world by trying to hide my guilty unacceptability. The very title of the drama makes that plain: AFTER THE FALL. Every major character in the play is personally responsible for the fix he is in, but he convinces himself that he himself is innocent, the victim of others. In striving to live as though they were personally innocent, they destroy each other and the love that bound them to one another.

The central character, Quentin, pleads with his second wife, Maggie: DO THE HARDEST THING OF ALL...SEE YOUR OWN HATRED AND

LIVE. In a Life article (2/7/64) Miller himself says: "Maggie is a character in a play about the human animal's unwillingness or inability to discover in himself the seeds of his own destruction...She exemplifies the self-destructiveness which finally comes when one views oneself as pure victim. And she most perfectly exemplifies this view because she comes so close to being a pure victim – of parents, of a puritanical sexual code and of her exploitation as an entertainer."

"Indeed, it is one of the play's major points that there is not and cannot truly be a divestment of guilt. But there can be – and if life is to be lived there must be – a recognition of the individual's part in the evil he sees and abhors."

"It is always and forever the same struggle: to perceive somehow our own complicity with evil is a horror not to be borne. Much more reassuring to see the world in terms of totally innocent victims and totally evil instigators of the monstrous violence we see all about us. At all costs, never disturb our innocence.

"But what is the most innocent place in any country? Is it not the insane asylum? There people drift through life truly innocent, unable to see into themselves at all. The perfection of innocence, indeed, is madness. What Quentin in this play tried desperately to do is to open Maggie's eyes to her own complicity with her destruction; it is an act of love, for it requires that he open himself to his own complicity if his imprecations are to carry any weight; he must, in short, give up his own claim to innocence in order to win her back from self-destruction."

In his final soliloquy Quentin, seeing Holga, the war refugee, in the distance, says: "that woman hopes! Or is that exactly why she hopes, because she knows? What burning cities taught her and the death of love taught me – that we are very dangerous...Is the

knowing all? To know and even happily that we meet unblessed: not in some garden of wax fruit and painted trees, that lie of Eden, but after, after the fall, after many, many deaths. Is the knowing all?...and the wish to kill is never killed, but with some gift of courage one may look into its face when it appears, and with a stroke of love – as to an idiot in the house – forgive it; again and again...forever?”

What Miller labels the “lie of Eden” is the attempt to live as though it were not “after the fall” for everyman, myself included. It is a lie to try to hide as Adam and Eve did and act as though one is innocent. But it takes something big to overcome the fear of being guilty not only in fact, but in truth (i.e., not trying to pretend it is not there). Miller says it takes “Some gift of courage” to look one’s own guilt in the face.” And indeed it does. It takes “some gift” indeed. The Christian can say: “I’ll say it takes some gift of courage alright to live like that. It takes nothing less than the gift of Jesus Christ Himself for that kind of courageous living. That’s really some gift!”

PHARISEE HERESY

It was one of the insights of the Lutheran Reformation that the biggest sin is to refuse to let God treat you as a sinner. What makes the Pharisee in the New Testament unacceptable is not that his record is besmirched while he thought it was quite clean. His unacceptable status does not lie in the absence of certain qualities which he still has to have if he is to be considered acceptable. But it lies in what the Lutheran reformers labeled the *opinio legis*, the opinion that I can legislate my acceptability if I just work hard enough on it. The *opinio legis* refuses to admit that I live “after the fall.” It is the chronically recurring unconscious, sub-conscious, automatic notion that I must make myself acceptable. Especially for those

of us who live “after the fall” it is the original sin, which originates all thought, word and deeds. Because this opinion is classically incarnate in the New Testament Pharisee, I call it “Pharisee heresy.”

There is a good deal of common sense behind this Pharisee heresy, which explains its durability and perennial nature. In normal everyday life we do ascribe value to people and objects because we see valued qualities in them. My children like ice cream cones not by virtue of something in the children that automatically loves inverted conical shapes with spheres on the top. But there is something in the cone itself – the texture, the flavor, the sweetness, the coolness – that makes them say that they just love ice cream cones. The same applies to our love of music, of art, of nature, and in many respects also of other human beings (although with this last reference I am somewhat coming in conflict with opening paragraphs at the beginning of this paper). There is something in the art, music, sunset, or baseball, a beautiful woman, a handsome man, that attracts us, we say. Something in it that draws us to it. The desirable quality in the object alerts us to it and because it is fun, or it is beautiful, we like it, enjoy it, get something out of it. The object has intrinsic qualities in itself, therefore I value it. The same applies in large measure to my appreciation of other human beings, although we indicated at the outset that in the realm of intimate personal relations that is not enough, or even that can be the end of the affair if that is all there is – if people just use each other for what value they already find in the other person for the something they get out of it. But in much of personal relations we do work this way.

Now because so much of normal life runs in this fashion it would make sense to conclude that God too operates by this pattern. He likes what is good and therefore likeable; what isn't good and likeable with intrinsic qualities of value in itself, He does

not like. Conclusion: if you want God to like you, approve of you, accept you, justify you, get busy and get some of these qualities, or, if you already have a few, develop them.

Such a sensible transfer from human relations to divine relations makes sense but it is false. This view was classically rejected by the Lutheran Reformation, if not already rejected even more classically by the preaching of St. Paul, and more classically still by the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. In the Heidelberg Theses of 1518 Luther said such a theologizing that saw God working analogously to man, albeit in infinitely greater quantity, was a theology of glory, finally man's glory, and was to be rejected. The last of the twenty-eight theological propositions summarizes this: GOD'S LOVE DOES NOT FIND THAT WHICH IS PLEASING TO IT, BUT CREATES IT. MAN'S LOVE COMES INTO BEING THROUGH THAT WHICH IS PLEASING TO IT. In commenting on this proposition, Luther notes that the second part makes clear sense to all people. Because the ice cream cone is pleasant, I just love it. But the first part is not clear unless we have recourse to the Scriptures and see exactly how God has operated in the history of Israel and the infant Christian church. Then it too becomes clear because "God's love (which can and does live in man, i.e., Christ's men) loves sinners, evil person, fools, and weaklings in order to make them righteous, good, wise, and strong." Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and BESTOWS good. Therefore sinners are attractive because they are the objects of God's love; they are not the objects of his love because they are attractive. For this reason man's love avoids sinners and evil persons. Thus Christ says: "For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." This is the love of the cross (Luther's contrast to a glory-theology is a cross-theology), born of the cross, which turns in the direction where it does not find good (already existing which it may enjoy), but where it may confer good upon

the bad and needy person. Man's mind is only attracted to the virtues that do already exist, that is, the true and good. "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35), says the apostle. Hence Psalm 41 states, "Blessed is he who considers the poor," for the human intellect is not naturally able to be attracted to an object which does not exist (e.g., the non-existent virtues) in a person who is only poor and needy (whose neediness only testifies to what he does not have). Man's mind judges according to appearances, is a respecter of persons, and judges according to that which can be seen, whereas God's love is no respecter of persons, not judging man on the basis of his past biography – what he had made of himself. God's love judges man in terms of his created destiny – what God wants to make out of him – and then goes to work to bring it about.

The focal point for this insight into the character of God's love, whereby unacceptable men are accepted and thereby become intrinsically acceptable, is, of course, Jesus Christ. This beloved son is God's love in action, loving the unlovable and unacceptable and making them attractive and acceptable. From the wealth of biblical metaphors and word pictures for this issue, I propose to confine myself to a couple of points with reference to Christ which seem pertinent to the fact of human acceptance in Jesus Christ.