

A Theology of Acceptance – Part 2 Edward H. Schroeder Proceedings of the 1964 Valparaiso University Workshop and Institute on Human Relations

THE FACT OF ACCEPTANCE IN JESUS CHRIST

The New Testament sees the word acceptance written large over the New Testament era. The New Testament is a new deal from God, the new age, and acceptance is one title for the age. In Jesus' first recorded sermon in Luke's gospel, following immediately after his baptism and testing in the wilderness, He is in his hometown synagogue. His text is the lection for the day from the prophet Isaiah: THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME BECAUSE HE HAS ANOINTED ME TO PREACH GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERING OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET AT LIBERTY THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, TO PROCLAIM THE ACCEPTABLE YEAR OF THE LORD. Luke catches the drama of this debut as he further relates, "And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down (the traditional pose for the teacher) and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." In short, He says: WHERE I AM SPEAKING, ACCEPTANCE IS HAPPENING. What Isaiah hoped for has arrived. Just what this all means is by no means self-evident, for this sermon debut which opened with such expectant drama closes with an equally dramatic attempted lynching. Jesus

indicates that as the one who brings the fulfillment of this long-awaited era of acceptance, He Himself is the prophet who will not be acceptable in his own country. And His explication of that brings a quick close to the sermon as the listeners move to prove how unacceptable this particular prophet is. Luke records: "When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and put him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong." At this point in Jesus' career they do not succeed, but the direction is given for the eventual climax of the prophet who fulfills. Nevertheless He is the Fulfillment of the acceptable year of the Lord.

In his correspondence with the Christians in Corinth, St. Paul also picks up this note of the new era of acceptance which now exists by virtue of Christ. Because the Corinthian Christians are themselves residents in this new era, Paul entreats them not to waste it: "We entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain, for God says" AT THE ACCEPTABLE TIME I HAVE LISTENED TO YOU AND HELPED YOU ON THE DAY OF SALVATION." Paul's own comment on this Old Testament assertion (also from Isaiah) is, "BEHOLD NOW IS THE ACCEPTABLE TIME: BEHOLD NOW IS THE DAY OF SALVATION." In the actual Greek text Paul uses a different word for "Acceptable" in his own comment on the word from Isaiah. Isaiah's quotation uses the normal adjective from the verb "accept." It is the acceptable time. Paul uses a term which might be translated in the superlative: Behold, now is the super-duper-acceptable time. Now that we stand already on this side of Christ's resurrection, we have received more than Isaiah imagined.

Just what is it about the life and work of Christ that makes the time (history itself) one of acceptance and super-duper at that? We could fairly easily envision that such a perfect man might

himself be acceptable, and therefore his own personal history and biography would be a piece of acceptable history, but what about that one small piece of human history that ushers in to history the age of acceptance? HOW DOES HE MAKE THE WHOLE AGE ONE OF ACCEPTANCE? JUST WHAT WAS ACCEPTABLE ABOUT HIM IN THE FIRST PLACE?

“BUT EMPTIED HIMSELF”

We might first be prompted to answer the question of Christ's acceptability, by simply saying, Why, He was the sinless Son of God. Obviously, He is acceptable. Although the New Testament never denies that Christ was the sinless Son of God, it never (to my knowledge) fastens on this divine heredity as the grounds for God's approving and accepting Him. In fact, most often He is accepted by God for almost exactly the opposite grounds – namely, that He got mixed up with sinners, with those who were more sons of the devil rather than sons of God. Not because He hung on to His divine heredity while He was incarnate, but because He sacrificed it in order that others might attain it. This is St. Paul's perspective in the classic Christological passage in Philippians on the mind of Christ: “who though he was on the form of God (had the divine heredity by divine right) did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped (exploited for oneself), but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men (and for Paul that does not mean just having arms and legs, it means being a man “after the fall”). And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient until death (that is the situation of life after the fall), even death on a cross. (And now comes the evaluation and acceptance.) THEREFORE GOD HAS HIGHLY EXALTED HIM AND GIVEN HIM A NAME THAT IS ABOVE EVERY NAME IN HEAVEN AND EARTH, (namely) JESUS CHRIST IS LORD” – that is what God Himself ascribes to him. And when men ascribe Lordship to Jesus (1964, A.D., e.g.,) they are not competing with the Lordship of God the

Father, but they are glorifying God the Father.

Throughout His ministry Jesus is consistently tempted to exploit the divine heredity:

- a. In the wilderness with the tempter who calls to His mind the discrepancy between His divine heredity and the starvation He faces;
- b. in conversation with His own disciples, for example, moments after Peter makes his confession to Jesus' heredity, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God," Christ says: Good enough, and now as such I must head for Jerusalem and good Friday. To which Peter, amazed, responds: "God forbid! This shall never happen to you. You're the Son of God, aren't you?" But Christ senses once more that this is the satanic use of divine heredity – to be used for self-preservation, and so He dismisses Peter with a shattering condemnation of unacceptance: Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance (scandal) to me; for you are not on God's side, but on men's side.
- c. Right down to the wire, as He is already elevated on the cross, the temptation comes to exploit the divine heredity: IF YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD, COME DOWN FROM THE CROSS AND THEN WE WILL BELIEVE YOU.

Christ's acceptability mysteriously inheres in the divine heredity sacrificed instead of exploited. It was just such a perspective that characterized the working Christology of Luther as he mulled over such assertions of the apostles that Christ became a curse for us, that, although sinless He was, He became a sinner, yes, He even became sin itself (II Cor. 5:21). In the Galatians commentary of 1531 Luther worked out this character of Christian Christology in detail in his exegesis of the Galatians passage 3:13: Christ BECAME A CURSE FOR US. Robert Bertram summarized this aspect of Luther's Christology in a paper

entitled HOW OUR SINS WERE CHRIST'S. Much of what I say below is drawn from Bertram's work.

FOR US

The acceptable year of the Lord comes into being with the predication to Christ of such key terms of unacceptability as sin and curse. Despite His divine heredity and without specific sinful acts in his biography to point to, sin and curse are predicated to Christ. However, in the two chief New Testament passages where these terms are predicated to Him, Paul adds the soteriological concern to the purely Christological one. He became a curse for us. He is made sin for us. Luther sees this "for us " as soteriological necessity. "Our sins," he says, "must be Christ's own sin, or we shall perish eternally." "If He is innocent and does not carry our sins, then we carry them and shall die and be damned in them." "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

As usual, Luther is developing this apparently pessimistic Christology in contrast to the scholastic tradition of his day with its emphasis on Christ's sinless character. Although at first the scholastic emphasis would appear too do great honor to Christ, Luther sees it as doing just the opposite (RWB, 2) "If the sophists had their way, if it were true that Christ is 'innocent and does not carry our sins,' then we carry them and shall die and be damned in them.' But, says Luther, 'this is to abolish Christ and make Him useless.' That is the 'shame and infamy' (and not praise and honor) of denying Christ's sinnerhood."

Therefore it must be said that "our sins 'are as much Christ's own as if He Himself had committed them.' We can state the matter another way: Our sins are Christ's not by means of some transcendent, super-historical transaction, in which God simply 'regards' our sins as his or simply 'imputes' our sins to Him,

but by means also of His own immanent, historical 'bearing' of these sins-' as much Christ's own as if He Himself had committed them." Although Christ did not of course commit them, He becomes a curse and sin, not by divine make-believe and pretending, but by the same concrete historical facts and situations that ordinarily cause our own sins to be predicated to us and therefore render us unacceptable.

First for example, Luther argues (with Paul, he thinks) that if Christ died, He must have been under the law. The law condemns only sinners to death. A non-sinner it cannot and will not kill. It did kill Christ. Therefore He was under the law, therefore He was sinner. For unless He had taken upon Himself (our) sins...the law would have had no right over Him.

Second, the point of Christ's biographical sinnerhood is His association with sinners. Fraternizing with us enemies of god, He joined himself to the company of the accursed. Therefore when the law found Him among thieves, it condemned and executed Him as a thief. At this point Luther uses a now familiar word in complaining that the sophists "deprive us when they segregate Christ from sins and from sinners."

Thirdly, the sins of the world which the Lamb of God took upon Himself as Luther understands it is no abstract universal, not just sin in general. It is exhaustive of every actual sinner and sin in history. Luther represents Christ as saying, "I have committed the sins that all men have committed," – "the sin of Paul, the former blasphemer, of Peter who denied Christ, of David...an adulterer and a murderer and who caused the Gentiles to blaspheme the name of the Lord." Here too Luther has a soteriological interest, for if Christ really bore the totality of factual sinfulness of real people of all the world, then He also bore away my own de facto sinfulness, since I am one of those real people who constitute the whole world.

Fourth, Luther notes that Paul does not use the adjectival form (Christ is sinful or is accursed) but in both places he uses the substantive form. Christ is sin itself, the curse itself. Which, says Luther, is the way a sinner reacts when he really comes to a knowledge of himself. He can no longer distinguish between his own self and the sinfulness, as though the two were separable. That is, he seems to himself to be not only miserable but misery itself; "not only a sinner and an accursed one, but sin and the curse itself."

Fifth, our sins are so much Christ's own that He bore them not only psychologically but also, as we do, bodily – "in His body." For Luther the usual ascription to Christ's bearing our sins in His body is that by His bodily dying, He put those sins in His body to death. In bodily death not only the body, but also the sinner and his sin, curse, and impending death, is exterminated.

Sixth, just as we with our sin, so Christ in assuming our sin is sinner by His own choice. "Because He attaches Himself to our sins 'willingly' (sponte), He has only Himself to thank for the fact that He is liable for them. Christ being in the company of sinners is not caught in some arbitrary guilt by association – in innocent ignorance or against His will, but 'Christ was not only found among sinners, but of His own free will...He wanted to be an associate of sinners....' Thus 'the law came and said: 'Christ, if you want to reply that you are guilty and that you bear the punishment, you must bear the sin and the curse as well.'"

Luther exposes Christ's sinnerhood in fullest measure, so that the law is at its strength when it puts Him to death as the sinner of sinners. For it is this same law at its holiest and best, which in the fantastic conflict (duel) that ensues, is eternally discredited. The other tyrants that render men unacceptable as well – sin, devil, curse, wrath, death – are

present not as caricatures but at the height of their power and authority. Since these are the real tyrants with which men must reckon in their acceptance or rejection before God, the fantastic duel of Good Friday and Easter Sunday becomes a most joyful one. The secret to the duel is that the "grace of God and the blessings of Christ" are locked in mortal combat with the full powers of the curse and other tyrants "in this one person." When the clash finally comes, the divine powers – life, righteousness, blessing – of course prevail over their lesser opposites, death, sin, curse. But the secret is that both sets of contraries are really Christ's. And when the law and curse do what they have to do to a sinner, attack him and kill him, they were in this one instance attacking the Prince of Life.

"Christ's intentional self-incrimination, His personal decision to attach Himself to the enemies of God – the very reason He was cursed, and rightfully – was the selfsame decision of the selfsame person (the merciful decision of the divine person) which to curse (or to seek to destroy) is sheer blasphemy. The curiosity is not how blessing conquered the curse, but why curse even tried to wrestle with blessing, why death tried to overcome life. That fantastic duel is reflected in the great Easter hymn: CHRIST LAG IN TODESBANDEN. "It was a strange and dreadful strife when life and death contended." Luther says that because God's blessing and our sins were so intimately joined in this one person (the incarnation is not just the union of God and man, it is the union of God and a sinner), law and curse, which had to exert themselves against sin, had no choice but to condemn and thereby condemned the divine blessing as well. The upshot of this strange and dreadful strife (as the Easter hymn continues) was that "victory remained with life, the reign of death was ended."

LOVE

When asked what makes the sinnerhood of Christ possible at all, Luther answers: Christ's love. And Christ's love is not confined to the second person of the Trinity, but it is the same loving will which He shares with the Father. (RWB, 11) "The indescribable and inestimable mercy and love of God," who saw "that we were being held under a curse and that we could not be liberated from it...heaped all the sins of all men upon Him." The culpable decision by which Christ attached himself to the enemies of God is simultaneously the decision of this very God. "Of His own free will and by the will of the Father He wanted to be an associate of sinners." Indeed, it is "Only by taking hold of Christ, who, by the will of the Father, has given Himself into death for our sins, that we are drawn and carried directly to the Father." Here is the exclusive claim: Divine acceptance by Christ alone. No one comes to the Father but by Him. Apart from Him the tyrants that really tyrannize men – sin, death, wrath, law, curse – that render them unacceptable to God and make it well nigh impossible for them even to accept themselves – apart from Christ these tyrants remain in force. Non-acceptance prevails.

If normal life after the fall is plagued by the mystery of guilt and shame that betrays our non-acceptance, the mystery of the acceptable era and the foundation of any theology of acceptance is equally a riddle. Luther remarks that "the human heart is too limited to comprehend, much less to describe, the great depths and burning passion of divine love toward us. Indeed, the very greatness of divine mercy produces not only difficulty in believing but incredulity. Not only do I hear that God Almighty, the Creator of all, is good and merciful; but I hear that the Supreme majesty cared so much for me...that He did not spare His own Son...in order that He might hang in the midst of thieves and become sin and a curse for me, the sinner and accursed one, and

in order that I might be made righteous, blessed, and a son and heir of God (those are the biblical synonyms for acceptance). Who can adequately explicate this goodness of God? Not even all the angels."

For Christian theology, that is the big mystery about acceptance. That it is totally and exclusively wrapped up "in his body" and "in His person." The communication and extension of this acceptance is relatively less of a mystery. If the Christ of Easter morning is the completion of the acceptance of unacceptable men by God, then affiliation with Him is the simple mode for having the acceptance oneself. "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," says the Apostle in Romans 8. He is arisen, tangible evidence that God accepts Him and accepts His work. "If any man is in Christ, he too is a new creation, the acceptable era, the old has passed away – at least the inevitable necessity of life under the curse of non-acceptance after the fall □ behold the new has come," St. Paul says in 2 Cor. 5, and it is only a few verses later that he entreats his readers, "Behold, now is the acceptable time."

MINISTRY

But the apostolic interest in the communication of this acceptance goes further than just to say: somehow get in touch with Christ and then you have it. That could become a subtle kind of Pharisee heresy itself. Instead, the transmission of Christ's acceptance is no less the result of divine initiative than was the foundation work of Christ himself. The closing paragraph of 2 Cor. 5 ties this communication of acceptance to the great act of Christ's accepting ministry. After the assertion about the new creation in Christ, Paul continues: All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled (that is a term of acceptance) us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. (God Himself has now passed on to us this

ministry of acceptance) John 29, Matt. 28, Matt. 9. That is, God was in Christ reconciling (accepting) the world unto Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. (The message, the kerygma, of this completed acceptance is the divine heritage entrusted to Paul and his fellow Christians. Thus he can continue: SO WE ARE AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST, GOD MAKING HIS APPEAL THROUGH US –that same appeal which a generation previously He had made through the lips of His first acceptable Son in whom He was well pleased) WE BESEECH YOU ON BEHALF OF CHRIST, BE RECONCILED TO GOD (and then Paul unloads the message of acceptance – condensed in one verse) FOR OUR SAKE HE MADE HIM TO BE SIN WHO KNEW NO SIN, SO THAT IN HIM WE MIGHT BECOME THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD. “Righteousness of God” means to be as righteous as God Himself is righteous. That is perfect acceptance. That is what Adam and Eve apparently thought they were striving for, to be qualitatively as God Himself. But this quality of the righteousness of God comes to you; you do not work your way up to it.

Even if Paul should be speaking in the editorial plural in 2 Cor. 5 and referring only to his own commission as an apostle, the ministry which he has in mind here is by no means limited to the clergy. The promulgation, promotion and propagation of the ministry of acceptance is not the exclusive job of the churchly professionals, although they surely ought to be doing it, if they are worth their paychecks. It is a quirk of the history of the English language that minister and ministry have come to be associated with the professional clergyman. In the New Testament era anyone who had responded to the “come unto Me” of Christ became Christ’s minister. He also received the “go ye into the whole world” not into foreign countries, but into your own home, village, family, neighborhood, into your own little world which is still foreign territory as far as the kingdom of God is

concerned, and therefore unacceptable until the message of acceptance is planted into that soil. Minister is not a cast designation – workman. One of the classic New Testament references to this is the statement in Ephesians 4:11 ff.: AND CHRIST'S GIFTS WERE THAT SOME SHOULD BE APOSTLES, SOME PROPHETS, SOME EVANGELISTS, SOME PASTORS AND TEACHERS, TO EQUIP THE SAINTS FOR THE WORK OF THE MINISTRY, WHICH IS BUILDING UP THE BODY OF CHRIST. There are the pros, all right, and they are Christ's gifts to the church, but here the work of the pros is not even called ministry. Their job is to give the common saints, the laity, the necessary equipment so that they, the laity, can do the work of the ministry in all the corners of the world and nooks and crannies of human existence where they live. And that is the way the Body of Christ grows. That is the way the acceptable age expands in time and space. Earlier in the letter the Apostle has referred to the mystery, which in our terms we can define as the eyeblinking, head-shaking surprise that in Christ every unacceptable man is accepted to God. Then he goes on to call it an integral part of the "plan of the mystery" "that through the church (i.e., accepted unacceptable people) this manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers," those dueling opponents of Christ which seek to keep men unaccepted and in bondage.

LHRAA has for years been isolating the changing but ever recurring shape of the principalities and powers to whom and before whom God's accepted people must announce and show forth the new era of acceptance. The church is people, but the church is people entrusted with the kerygma of reconciliation and acceptance. This is the power which is turned loose in the world to proclaim and thus actually to create the acceptable time of the Lord in the world of men after the fall. This is the ministry of acceptance. On sober reflection such a ministry sounds incredible and out of this world, but it is no more

incredible than that first recorded Christian sermon – and that was incredible – when that young Jewish man stood in the synagogue in Nazareth – not out of, but out in this world – and said: “The acceptable year of the Lord? This day that phrase has come true in your lives. Don’t waste it.”