

# A Theology of Acceptance

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The human personality reveals a core hunger for acceptance, thus making a theology of acceptance like Tillich's important. Yet, while craving acceptance, human beings are forced outside themselves to acquire acceptance through dialogue with others because of "man's" inherent ability and obligation to respond to others ("responsibility"). Biblical theology reinforces how the need for acceptance is built into the created order as the Creator sees and accepts what God has made as "good." However, "man," disdaining faith's posture of receptivity of such acceptance, instead seeks to become the source of his own self-acceptance through self-deification (becoming "like God"). The result is not divine acceptance but judgment, turning "the man" into a fugitive from God, on the run, driven by shame into hiding. Part of the life of hiding is "man's" pretense of self-acceptance through the law which can also be called "the Pharisee Heresy."*

*Rescue for adamic humanity can only come outside itself and does in fact come ironically in a Christ who, although outside the human condition, willingly becomes one in complete solidarity with the human condition, including assuming the law's curse upon all sinners as sinner. Condemning Christ, the sinner for all sinners, it is the law which ultimately stands condemned for putting to death its own God and Lord. With the*

*law's curse upon sinners defeated in Christ, Christ-trusters become now ambassadors for eternal divine acceptance through Christ's new and surprising ministry of ultimate reconciliation. (Stephen C. Krueger)*

A piece of promotional mail occasionally pops up in my university mail box with the title MAKING OURSELVES ACCEPTABLE. The content – as I remember it – 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 most 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 myself) 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 worthwhile," we depend on the value judgments of someone else. Making life worthwhile means giving worth to life. We cannot give worth to our own life. If we have 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 situation 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 overall 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 it, 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 on 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 achieved 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 proceedeth 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 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 wrong 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 mighty 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.” And the great temptation “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 Tilllch. 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 acceptance 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 tries 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 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. Into **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 the actual and factual that appear in our thought, word and deeds. Because this **opinio legis** 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 the 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 analagously 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 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 persons, 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 unloveable 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**.

## **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 into 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 in 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 unto 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 [redemptive, restoring] 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 to do greater 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 20, 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 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 caste 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 eye-blinking, 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.”

Edward H. Schroeder

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