

## 2120 Week 16a: Acceptance and Discipleship in the Church

Background: the English word “acceptance” comes from a Latin term meaning, “to receive willingly”. To accept a person is to receive them willingly.

A: A Theological Foundation

- a. the image of God in us means that a natural state of affairs is to know oneself as perfectly loved, by God and others (Matt 23:37- 40)
- b. however, because of sin, no human being has had the experience/awareness of being perfectly loved by God or others
- c. therefore, all human beings crave acceptance or belonging
- d. modern consumer societies are based upon conditional acceptance e.g. the myth that people will think well of you if you own...look like..dress...act...go to...
- e. since God is love (1 John 4:8), his acceptance of persons is invariable, where this is not known, it is faith that is lacking
- f. in the Old Testament, faith is a response to the revelation of God’s covenant love, this involves the gracious and unconditional election of Israel e.g. Exod 19:4- 6; Deut 7:6- 9; Hos 11:1
- g. the law of Moses was given in the context of an already existing covenantal relationship, but constantly broken
- h. God therefore promised to initiate a new covenant that would not be broken, because internalised in the heart through unconditional forgiveness (Jer 31:31- 34; Ezek 36:26 – 27)
- i. Christ is the content of this covenant, the assurance of God’s love and acceptance is conveyed in the death of Jesus for sinners e.g. “but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8 cf. v.10), “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”(1 John 4:10- 11)
- j. it is the effort of God in bringing those “far off” to himself through the blood of Christ (Luke 15:20; Eph 2:13; 17) that convinces the conscience of his loving acceptance
- k. to be sons in the Beloved Son (adoption)is to be accepted by the Father in his acceptance of Jesus (Eph 1:3ff); this is a revelation of the gospel

1. in the letters of the New Testament, mutual acceptance is understood as a fruit of being accepted by God in Christ e.g. “As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. 2 One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. 3 Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, *for God has welcomed him*. 4 Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.” (Rom 14:1- 4); “Therefore welcome one another *as Christ has welcomed you*, for the glory of God.” (Rom 15:7); “Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” (1 John 4:10- 11)

#### B: Acceptance in the Church

- a. Jesus and the apostles commanded believers to love one another as he/God loves us (John 13:33- 34; 15:12, 17; Rom 12:10; 13:9- 10; Gal 5:14; 1 Thess 3:12; 4:9; James 2:8; 1 Pet 1:44; 4:8; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:12; 2 John 1:5)
- b. this means unconditional acceptance i.e. relationships are not determined by race, gender, age, wealth, education, citizenship etc. “you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:26- 28)
- c. in practice, there is a constant tension between two ways of relating in the church
  - the way of the Pharisee – “repent, then God (we will) accept you”
  - the way of Jesus “You are accepted, repent, and let’s work on your spiritual growth process together.”(See the earlier notes on repentance for the priority of grace.)
- d. the first way trains believers to draw their sense of divine acceptance by key spiritual performance indicators e.g. prayer, attendance, Bible reading, tithing, evangelism, repentance, intensity of devotion, self –improvement etc.
- e. necessarily, this keeps people in a constant state of fearing human and divine rejection, it results in denial, repression, drivenness, super – spirituality etc.
- f. the second way is not to be confused with lawlessness (antinomianism), the motto, “Accept that you are accepted.” (Paul Tillich), denies any personal responsibility in terms of life transformation
- g. one of the greatest sources of distress amongst Christians is that they expect the church to provide the unconditional love only God can

#### B: What Is Discipleship?

- a. the word “disciple” appears 269x in the New Testament, “Christian” is found 3x, referring to disciples

- b. the key term, relates to learning, and the secular background is the relationship between a master and an apprentice. The disciple follows the teacher, receives their instruction and obeys their commands.
- c. various types of disciple appear in the New testament e.g. of John the Baptist (Matt 9:14; 11:1- 2; 17:13), the Pharisees (Mark 2:18), Saul (Acts 9:25)
- d. Jesus call to discipleship was categorical and absolute e.g. “if anyone would come after me...take up his cross...hate his father...” (Matt 16:24; Luke 14:26- 27)
- e. as such, the disciple has no rights, “When Jesus Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” (Bonhoeffer) Peter could say, “Look, we’ve left everything and followed you!” (Mark 10:28)
- f. this means that the scope of discipleship is total – it includes work, relationships, family, finances, spiritual disciplines, doctrine etc.
- g. Jesus commanded us to disciple all peoples (Matt 28:18 -20)
- h. Jesus is the model e.g. 1 Cor 11:1 and substance of discipleship, he himself “learned obedience” (Luke 2:52; Heb 5:8)
- i. as we are commanded to obey Jesus, he always obeyed the father (e.g. John 5:19,30)
- j. the pattern of discipleship must be conformity to the life of Christ as revealed in the Gospels e.g. my baptism is a participation in the meaning of the baptism of Jesus, witness to the coming kingdom of God
- k. Jesus is explicit about this e.g. “as the Father sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21)
- l. this is why ongoing discipleship, involving the means by which the Father disciplined the Son (prayer, fasting, Word, fellowship etc.), is essential to deeper conformity to Christ
- m. unlike the dominant contemporary school model approach, Jesus, the apostles and the early church undertook discipleship in the context of the whole of life
- n. this sort of discipleship is impossible outside of genuine Christian community
- o. where there is a low level of correspondence between the *method* of discipleship and the core values of the Christian faith, we should expect ineffectiveness e.g. if the method is individualistic and one way, whereas the church is to be communitarian and open
- p. to win people for Christ without providing a fellowship for nurture and discipline is to “breed children for the murderer” (Wesley)

## C: The Importance of Discipline

### 1. By God

- a. the subject of discipline is a controversial one in contemporary Western culture e.g. physical discipline of children
- b. generally speaking, self – discipline is accepted e.g. athletes, students, but external discipline is unpopular
- c. God’s discipline is often hard to accept, both because of general cultural influences and the distortions produced by sin
- d. what many Christians find difficult to accept is that the discipline of God is not a sign of disfavour but favour
- e. God’s love, unlike human love, is unconditional, so when he causes pain, this does not mean he has stopped loving us, the fundamental Father- son relationship is unchanged
- f. this all needs to be seen through the mediatorship of Christ (1 Tim 2:5), the Father’s discipline on us has the same meaning as that on Jesus, it is not a penalty for sin but a means of sanctification (2 Sam 7:12 -15; Heb 2:10; 5:9)
- g. the Father disciplines us, as his true children, because he can see his image in us (Prov 3:11- 12; Heb 12:5- 11; cf. Ps 119:67, 71, 75; Jer 31:18 -19; Hos 2:6- 7; 5:15; 6:1)
- h. he disciplines so that we might not be condemned with the world (1 Cor 11:30- 32)
- i. Jesus discipline is a mark of his love for the church (Rev 3:19)
- h. maturity consists in accepting and applying the wisdom of divine discipline, in the light of the cross it recognises that it is a good thing to have sin punished

### 2. In the Church

- a. this includes instruction, admonition, correction and excommunication/disfellowship
- b. usually, this will involve some form of verbal correction based on scripture (2 Tim 2:25; 3:16)
- c. in certain extreme cases it consists in handing people over to the influence of Satan (1 Tim 5:5; 1 Tim 1:20) so that they might reach repentance
- d. Jesus outlined a procedure to follow where there is sin in the church (Matt 18:15 -17)

- e. the first step is private rebuke- no gossip or back - biting!
- f. the second step is to take several reliable witnesses, mature believers or elders, to corroborate the discussion
- g. the final step is “tell it to the church”; the whole community takes responsibility for the ministry of discipline
- h. the final step, where there is no repentance, is to treat the believer as an outsider (Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:6- 7) i.e. they are to be removed from the assembly
- i. the aim of the whole procedure is restoration, no retribution (Matt 18:10- 14, 15, 1 Cor 5: 5)