

Acceptance

By Walter A. Henrichsen

“Acceptance” is a popular word today, but it is not a new topic. In his message to the Romans, Paul mentioned three relationships related to “acceptance” in Romans 14:1-15:1-7. These three relationships were not only relevant when Romans was written, but they are equally relevant today.

The relationships in these three kinds of "acceptance" are:

- (1) My acceptance of myself: the most difficult thing.
- (2) God’s acceptance of me: something beyond comprehension and imagination.
- (3) My acceptance of others: This is a matter of the will.

These three are closely related.

Paul uses the following themes to talk about these three relationships:

- 1. Conviction (Romans 14:1-12)
- 2. Consideration (Romans 14:13-23)
- 3. Concern (Romans 15:1-7)

Conviction

Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not to have quarrels over opinions. One person has faith that he may eat all things, but the one who is weak eats only vegetables. The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person values one day over another, another values every day the same. Each person may be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and the one who eats, does so with regard to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and the one who does not eat, it is for the Lord that he does not eat, and he gives thanks to God.

For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. But as for you,

why do you judge your brother or sister? Or you as well, why do you regard your brother or sister with contempt? For we will all appear before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, to me every knee will bow, and every tongue will give praise to God." So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God. (Romans 14:1-12)

There are two major categories of things in God's eyes -- essential and non-essential. The former is absolute and the latter is relative. God's moral law is absolute, and there can be only one Christian response to this absolute -- obedience to God's command. There can be no doubt or argument. God commands humans to obey Him.

As for other aspects, the Bible mentions that everyone should decide according to his own heart. In Romans 14 the apostle Paul talks about this relative matter, saying, "I know and am convinced through the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but whatever a person considers to be unclean, to him it is unclean."

Individuals have the absolute right to have their own convictions about non-essential matters. I can have my own strong convictions about things that are non-essential in God's eyes. The apostle Paul mentions something about this. Some people say you cannot eat meat, only vegetables. Others say you can eat anything. Paul says both convictions are correct.

Another example Paul mentions concerns day-keeping. Some say that every day is the same. Some people say that certain days are special. Drinking is another example. Some people advocate absolute abstinence from alcohol, while others believe that a little alcohol is good for the sake of health. Therefore Paul urges them to make the decision according to their own heart.

One of the fruits of acceptance is the right to have one's own convictions about these non-essential matters. However, Paul warns Christians to be careful not to make these non-essentials into moral commands for others to obey. Christians should avoid turning our convictions into moral laws and insisting on others to follow us.

This issue is of great importance in the Body of Christ. This is also a very important issue in my life. I often confuse essential and non-essential things. For example, I do not drink, and have a certain conviction about drinking. But I must be careful not to let my views hinder the Lord Jesus Christ from entering His own Church. The Lord Jesus turned water into wine and most likely drank wine

during His earthly ministry. The Bible does not say that my view on drinking is wrong, but we must be very careful not to make moral commands based on my convictions.

Another example is baptism, and I have my own personal views on infant baptism. But I must be careful not to insist that you should also have the same view, and not to make baptism a condition of Christian fellowship. Although we differ in these non-essential matters, God wants me to accept you.

The apostle Paul asks, “Who are you to judge another’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. ... You, man, why do you judge your brother? And why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ... So then, each of us must give an account of himself to God” (Rom. 14:4, 10, 12). It is okay to have opinions or convictions on non-essential matters, but Christians should not use them as a criterion for accepting one another.

Consideration

Therefore let’s not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this: not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s or sister’s way. I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to the one who thinks something is unclean, to that person it is unclean. For if because of food your brother or sister is hurt, you are no longer walking in accordance with love. Do not destroy with your choice of food that person for whom Christ died. Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For the one who serves Christ in this way is acceptable to God and approved by other people. So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. Do you tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the person who eats and causes offense. It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother or sister stumbles. The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is the one who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But the one who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin. (Romans 14:13-23)

In this passage apostle Paul points out that our convictions have to be regulated by the

consideration of others. If there is a brother who is weak in faith (newly believing in the Lord) and has doubts about what I am doing, according to the Bible, I should still abstain from doing it. This is what Paul points out in verse 21: "It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything else that causes your brother to stumble." If my brother is stumbled because of my eating meat, then Paul says I should stop eating meat. Or, if your brother stumbles because of the wine on your table, then you must stop drinking because you have to be considerate to your brother.

When Paul wrote to Rome, the city was full of pagan temples. Believers met in small groups at homes. Some people in these churches had always been monotheists before and after they believed in the Lord, but some were polytheists before they believed in the Lord, and only now had they established a correct relationship with the one true God.

Imagine a monotheist and a relatively mature believer in the Lord who goes to the market to buy meat and finds that beef in the meat market is two dollars a pound, while beef offered to idols in the temple is only one dollar a pound. He goes to the temple and buys a piece of beef at half the price. But when he walks out of the temple, a Christian who has just abandoned idols and converted to the Lord would be frightened -- believers older than him in the church are still eating meat offered to idols, and he would have all kinds of problems.

Paul says, "Concerning eating things sacrificed to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one."

However, those believers who have only believed in the Lord for a short time do not have such faith. They may not understand that there is only one God in the universe. At their level of belief, they may only think that Jesus is the best God and should only serve Him. Eating things sacrificed to idols would offend this brother. So Paul says, "Don't do it. Don't offend your brother. Don't destroy God's work for a piece of meat." Verse 15 says, "If you cause your brother to be distressed because of food, you are not walking in love."

In verse 14 Paul says that nothing is unclean in itself. There is no good or bad inanimate matters. A glass of wine is neither good nor bad, it has nothing to do with morality; the same goes for a piece of meat. It is all about how you use it. Here is someone advising me to think about others before doing these things.

However, the apostle Paul goes on to say, As a mature apostle, I cannot be offended by another believer walking out of the temple gate with a piece of beef. If this behavior would offend others, I would not do it, but if I see others doing it, I cannot be offended by it. Like a double-edged sword, I have a double responsibility. This sword cuts both ways -- if I am offending someone, I must stop, but I cannot be offended by their behavior in some non-essential matters. In God's eyes, I am responsible for both.

Concern

"We who are strong should bear the weaknesses of the weak and not seek our own pleasure. Each of us must please his neighbor, for his good and edification. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.' For whatever was written in former times was written for our learning, that through patience and the comfort of the Scriptures we might have hope. Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be of the same mind toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and one mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore accept one another, just as Christ accepted you, to the glory of God. ' (Rom 15:1-7)

One of the goals of a Christian is to seek the good of his brothers. The apostle Paul exhorts the Romans to see things from other people's perspectives -- to consider what is good for them. He uses the Lord Jesus Christ as an example: "For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me' (Psalm 69:9). Jesus says, "I am your shield. I stand between you and all the attacks on you, so that they do not harm you." Paul says these things are written in the Scriptures so that we can understand: "Therefore accept one another, just as Christ also accepted you, to the glory of God." (Verse 7) Paul says that unless the brother violates something fundamental, we have no reason not to accept him. If that is the case, he could be dealt with in the manner recorded in Matthew 18. But in those non-essential matters, there is no reason for Christians not to accept others and treat them as brothers in the Lord. I want to receive them as God receives us, bringing us into a right relationship with Him.

It was hard for me to imagine how I could ever be accepted by God. When I first came to the cross of Jesus Christ, that was my greatest obstacle. I once argued with the person who led me to believe in the Lord for four or five hours about this issue. Charles Wesley wrote, "How could this be, that a sinner like me should be redeemed by the blood of Christ? For my sins He suffered, for my sins He

died. Amazing love! How could this be, that my Lord and God should die for me?" When you meditate on this fact, you will find it incredible. But please notice how God accomplished this.

Hebrews 4:3 refers to Moses' experience in the wilderness, which led him out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. Kadesh Barnea was the first gateway into the Promised Land. After the spies explored the land, they brought back bad news - it was indeed a land flowing with milk and honey, but the descendants of Anak were all giants of great height and strength. All the Israelites complained and said, "If only we had died in Egypt or in the wilderness. But what about our children?" God said, "Let your wish be fulfilled. You will die in the wilderness, and I will take care of your children." So they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. Moses buried all the people of his generation one by one. In Hebrews 3, Paul says that they were not allowed to enter the Promised Land because of their unbelief. Then he wrote, "Therefore, since a promise is left to us of entering his rest, let us fear lest any of us should seem to come short of it." (Heb. 4:1)

The emphasis at Kadesh-Barnea was not on salvation but on fellowship. This is what the Bible calls "God's rest." Fellowship -- ongoing fellowship with God every day. God said they had been cut off from Him for one reason -- they did not believe His Word.

The Bible says that one of the reasons they really offended God was their lack of faith -- their disbelief. He can be long-suffering, but when He encounters people who harden their hearts and reject His words, He becomes truly angry. When Jesus Christ was with His disciples, His disciples' unbelief often troubled Him. "Where is your faith?" In Hebrews 4:9-11 Paul says that God's people have "rest" today. Christians in the twentieth century still have a "sabbath" -- a daily, uninterrupted communion with God.

In Hebrews 4:10-11 the author encourages Christians to do two things. The first is: "For he who enters his rest has also rested from his works..." This is the first thing a Christian should do when entering rest. They have to stop their own work, which is relying on their own strength to enter the kingdom of heaven. The second thing he says seems to be the opposite of the first: "Therefore we must make every effort to enter his rest. ..." In the first verse he says to rest from our works, but in the second verse he says to make every effort to enter. I think the striving mentioned in verse 11 is striving to believe, which is the work of faith. For me, believing in God is not easy. I do not know why this is happening, but I am still striving for faith. These are the two prerequisites for entering into His rest: I have to stop working with my own strength, and I have to strive to live by faith.

He then says, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow. It is a discernor of the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And nothing created is hidden from his sight, but all things are naked and laid open to the sight of him with whom we have to do." (Hebrews 4:12-13) For quite a long time, I did not quite understand what these two verses had to do with the rest.

But slowly I finally understood. Suppose I could know every thought in your mind. When I look at you in the eyes, you know that I know what is in your heart: every motive, every intention and every purpose. How would you feel about me? Well, on the other hand, if you can see through me in this way, how would I feel? I will pack my bags and leave right away. I will try my best to avoid you.

The Bible says that God is like this: "Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened to the eyes of him with whom we have to do." God sees through you. You are naked and open, with nowhere to hide. Do you have any thoughts, motives, or happenings that God is unaware of? Why are you not running away from God now? If you will run from me because I see through you, why do you not run from God? The author of Hebrews gives three reasons.

First, the reason you do need not to be ashamed and hide from God is because you have Jesus Christ as your High Priest. "Since we have a great priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession." Perhaps the best example of the role of a high priest in today's society is the one who stands in court to defend the accused. Jesus is your defending lawyer in front of God.

The second reason is because Jesus understands and has compassion on us. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." (Hebrews 4:15) Any temptation you may face, Jesus has experienced it. People also understand your situation.

The third reason is that you are completely accepted by God. "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need." In ancient times, there were only two kinds of privileged people in the royal palace. They could go directly before

the king without being summoned. They were the jesters and the heirs to the throne. The heir to the throne was the eldest son, the one who would take over the throne after the king died. You are accepted before God just as the heir to the throne was accepted by the king in ancient times. You can freely go to God at any time, and God has completely accepted you. Although God is aware of your current situation, you do not need to feel embarrassed. He knows everything you are going through. You are fully accepted in His sight.

Summary

God accepts me as I am now. God also accepts you according to your current situation. Do you believe it? God accepts you as you are now. He does not accept the ideal you in your heart, or the you that you think He likes, but the you at present. That is a very difficult fact to understand.

Therefore, I must accept myself as I am now. If I do not realize that God accepts me as I am, it will be difficult for me to accept myself. I do not know if you have ever had this problem, but I have. It is hard for me to accept myself because I know myself too well and I make myself sick. Of course I wish I were not like that, but that is exactly how I am. I would have been lying if I told you I was not. When I look closely at myself now, I feel like vomiting. I am capable of every vile sin mentioned in the Bible. My heart is full of evil. I often think about extremely evil things and have a tendency to commit crimes. The things I think about often make me blush. I really dare not imagine how the holy God would react.

But if God has accepted me according to my current state of light, I have to accept myself as I am now. How can I set a higher standard of acceptance than God? How dare I come before the living God and say, "Okay, God, your standard of acceptance can be this, but my standard is this." Who am I to stand before God and make such an offensive and foolish statement? If God has accepted me as I am, I must also accept myself as I am. Otherwise, I would be saying to the eternal God, "God, your standards for accepting people are far lower than mine." I have no right to behave like this.

I must accept others as they are, because God accepts them in this way. God accepts me as I am, and He also commands me to accept others as they are. That is the standard of Romans 15:7. "Therefore accept one another, just as Christ accepted you, to the glory of God."

Another conclusion is that others should also accept me as I am. What a liberation that is! You and I must hold to the same truth. How can you set a higher standard of acceptance than God? If God accepts me, how dare you not accept me? You have to accept me. It all depends on your concept of God and what He has done.

I have struggled with this in my life. When I was doing my first Navigator ministry in Keramah, Michigan, I was very frustrated. Nothing went as smoothly as I imagined. Everything seemed to be going wrong. I was often introspective and depressed. I was really going through a low point during that period. During those most frustrating days, I had misunderstandings with the leadership. I felt that others did not understand me and I felt that no one would accept me. This deepened my depression.

It was during this time that God taught me something. He said, "Walter, when I speak, you must obey. When others speak, listen carefully and measure it according to my words. When someone talks about you to others, don't pay attention to it! Because if others cannot accept you as you are now, it is their problem, not your problem."

My burden was lifted. It was really a turning point in my life. Because of this truth, I can live out my true self. Otherwise, I have to wear a mask or disguise myself. The only reason is that I dare not express my true self in front of you because I am afraid you will not accept me. For me, it is a spiritual issue.

You have to accept me as I am, but you do not have to think that everything I do is right. Just as God accepts me as I am now, but He does not think that all of the things I do are right.

Let me draw three conclusions from Romans 15:7. "Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ accepted you, to the glory of God."

First conclusion:

There is a difference between accepting a person and training him to become a disciple. Believers who wish to make disciples should be careful not to show resistance to those who are unwilling to meet the standards of training or who are not qualified or gifted enough. Many people leave because they feel they are not qualified and they feel that others cannot accept them. I think it is

the fault of those who train them. There are certain requirements that a person must meet if he is to receive training. But even if they want to give up on being trained or feel unqualified – every disciple-maker must have hands long enough and a heart big enough to receive them.

I firmly believe that my ability to accept others, and creating an atmosphere in which they feel being accepted, is directly proportional to my ability to accept myself. This is a horrible fact, but humans do reproduce in their own image. Let me ask you -- do you think you can be yourself? Do you think you can let down your defenses? If you cannot, the people around you would not be able to be themselves comfortably.

Second conclusion:

The goal of training is to bring him up to the standard he has received from God. If he is a person who pursues God and pleases God, and at the same time the disciple-making standards are fundamental (not non-essential), then there is no problem with the two. When a disciple trainer trains someone, he should focus on helping that person become the person he wants himself to be.

If you feel uncomfortable or if someone around you feels uncomfortable, there may be something wrong on one side or the other. It may be that you are asking others to meet non-essential standards -- things that the Bible leaves for each person to determine for themselves, or that person's standards for acceptance are higher than God's.

Third conclusion:

Acceptance is related to grace. Any time I think that I am useful to God or that God blesses me because of something good I am or something I have done, I make the doctrine of grace seem worthless. The reason I can be used and accepted by God is entirely because of grace. If I try to add anything else to grace, I fall into the snare of the enemy.

Let me give you an example. I am a sinful person with an evil heart. I have bad motives, I cannot discipline myself, and I could write a longer list of sins than the one Paul listed in Romans. I know this is my situation, I wish I were not like this, and I am working hard to improve it. This is me. I have to accept myself as I am now because God has accepted me as I am now, but I still do not like

who I see myself as. Therefore, I must carefully examine myself to prevent these despicable, ugly, evil, and dirty things from being revealed. I have to take whatever steps I could to do what I know God wants me to do. For example, my family does not have a TV. It is not because our family is better than those with TVs, but because we are weaker. I know that if I had a TV at home, I would watch it a lot, and I am not a self-disciplined person. There are some TV shows I really enjoy, but I know I'm paying a greater price by watching them than if I did not. I know myself, and I hope I can be stronger than I am now. I wish I could say it does not matter if I have a TV or not, but I cannot -- so I give it up.

Bible study is another example. I invited six people to study the Bible with me at 6 a.m. on Sunday morning because that was the only way I could complete my Bible study assignment. I wish I could say I was a self-motivated person, but I am not, and when these people came on Sunday morning and found me unprepared, the embarrassment of the situation drove me to do my Bible study homework.

I take whatever actions will help me accomplish what I know God wants me to do. Running is another example. I run every day now. Do you know why I run? It is not because I like running, nor because I am an athlete or a self-disciplined person. I run because a doctor once kindly told me, "Walter, you may not live to be 50. You are not taking care of yourself. You are harming your body. It will not last long. Be prepared to die before you are 50!" I said, "Well, doctor, I think I still have other options?" So now I run.

That is not a very noble motivation for running. That is not a noble motivation for starting a Bible study. I admit that I am not a noble person. But I found that I have to make a decision, either do something right with these bad motives, or have these bad motives and accomplish nothing. So I thought, "At least I did something right. God, forgive my sins. I wish it wasn't like that, but at least doing something right is better than doing nothing. So, let's do our part."

I have the same problem with giving. God said to me, "I want you to give to support that person." "Yes, Lord!" Then I thought of those verses that talk about receiving more after giving. I would wonder, how much would God give me back for my giving? What a terrible motive that was! Maybe I should not give! I was in such a dilemma inside, and I cried about it. You may have this problem, too. The Bible says that the temptations we encounter are common to mankind. So I decided to do the right thing. In 1 John 3:20 it says, "If our heart condemns us, God is greater than

our heart and knows all things." This is very helpful.

I often struggle with why I am doing what I am doing. Many times, the things I do do not come from pure motives. For example, Ron Shanny, the presidents of the Navigation Club, are coming to my place. Oh my god! I have to clean the windows, bring the whole team in, cut the grass, the garage...? Ah! I remember when Shanny was preaching something about a clean garage -- get that garage clean. Ah! There is still a lot of garbage. What should I do? Keep it all in the closet. Then came Shanny. "Let me hang up your coat for you!" "Oh, I'll do it myself." Oh! No, no, heart attack.

So, when I was cleaning the windows, I knew I was saying in my heart, "Walter, you bad guy!" Then I asked myself, "Isn't this right? Shouldn't I clean the windows?" Clean the windows, and God will help me deal with my motives.

I am not saying that motivation is not important, motivation is very important. We should deal with them. I am trying my best. But when you are at the bottom of depression or morbid self-pity, this is not the best time to deal with motivation. That is when you should say, "God, forgive me," and then keep moving forward. As you become more stable and things start to go well, you can begin to slowly work on your motivations.

God does not accept me because my motives are pure, and Shanny does not accept me because my windows are clean. God accepts me because of grace. Shanny accepts me because God commanded him to accept me. I accept myself because God has accepted me. Finally, I realize that I have no right to set a higher standard than God has set. So, I have to learn to live in peace with myself and others.