

## *Cultivating the Character Quality of Acceptance*

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I read the following statement several years ago from the late United States military leader, General Norman Schwarzkopf: “Leadership is a potent combination of character and strategy. But if you must be without one, be without strategy” (Schwarzkopf, 2012).

Character counts. Really counts! Because it is so basic to Christian leaders, I want to discuss with you the vitally important character-shaping biblical value of ‘acceptance’ in leadership development.

The question to be addressed is this: What is the role of education in shaping the Christian character value of acceptance in the leader and the led? I welcome your responses.

At the Madrid, Spain, 2006 Ibero-American conference for Latino leaders in the Church of the Nazarene, I spoke to leaders on “The Joy and Pain of Leadership.”

I discussed the “pain” we experience when leaders hold tightly to a vision of the future while accepting the realities of the present, especially good and godly people who do not embrace the vision we have for our ministry assignment. This leadership position often produces pain for the leaders.

Seven anchors were discussed (see Chapter Four) to hold us steady in these times of conflict or collusion:

speak gracefully; live gratefully; listen intently;  
forgive freely; lead decisively; care deeply; and pray earnestly.

These anchors were suggested for leaders to hold us steady in the midst of pain (or storms) while leading others within the faith community for which we are responsible. I now see more clearly that some basic attitudes are required in order for the leader to use the anchors referenced above.

In this session, I want to focus on one distinctively Christian attitude that leaders must

cultivate if we are to be worthy of our identity as Christ-like leaders. I speak of a core conviction of ACCEPTANCE.

The author of the book, *Cross Cultural Connections* (Elmer, 2002), stated that “**what John 3:16 is to the unbeliever, Romans 15:7 is to the believer.**” Romans 15:7 reads: “*Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.*” Increasingly, this transforming and embracing of acceptance must identify and define us as biblical servant leaders. It is the heart of all we are.

Acceptance is the ability to communicate value, regard, worth and respect to others. It is the ability to make people feel significant, honored and esteemed (Elmer, 2002). This is leading “*with the mind of Christ*” (I Corinthians 2:16b). To intentionally accept and serve others is to love them.

Acceptance of others, as defined, does not imply acceptance of their ideas or behavior. We may differ with gusto on theological issues, for instance. However, if we desire to witness the miracle of dialogue, then listening attentively to them and accepting them as persons created by God and thus worthy of our regard and respect are critical first steps toward a transformative encounter.

Acceptance is a profound biblical principle for Christian leaders, especially when good and godly people collide over vision and values in a community of faith.

What is the opposite of acceptance? Is it not rejection? How does the rejection by others make **you** feel? How do you think the rejection of **others** makes them feel? How does the rejection of others within a community of faith affect your relationship with God?

I believe this grace-filled acceptance of others is a core Christian leadership quality that must be cultivated. And I am convinced that an ATTITUDE OF ACCEPTANCE is shaped and nurtured by three compelling convictions about:

**who we are as the People of God;**

**what we are to do in the work of God; and**

**how we live together as the family of God.**

These convictions become driving forces within us as we live and lead with an *acceptance* of those with whom we live and work. Let’s explore these three convictions.

## **Conviction #1: An Acceptance of Others is rooted in A VISION FOR MINISTRY.**

A vision is a consuming, fervent and compelling inner picture. It is seeing what others do not see. At the very heart of servant leadership is a theological vision of our identity within the Christian fellowship. Notice the biblical imagery that defines our relationship with other Christians. We are

“Brothers and sisters in Christ” (See Colossians 1:2. NTL);

“Members together of Christ’s body” (See Ephesians 3:6.);

“A fellowship of God’s people” (See Acts 2:42.);

“A microcosm of the Kingdom of God on earth” (See Revelation 1:6-9.);

“A community of faith” (See Galatians 6:10.);

“A sacramental community in and through which the grace of God flows” (See 2 Corinthians 9:8.). (See also Fairbanks, 2008.)

Never lose the vision that we are the graced, blessed, called and gifted People of God!

Effective Christlike leadership is grounded in these biblical perspectives of the Christian community and not just in organizational skills. Of course, skills are needed. However, **sharp skills without Christian motives easily lead to manipulation.** The primary orientation and motivation of our actions as servant leaders must be deeply theological.

The People of God are called and Spirit-empowered to incarnate His healing, guiding, sustaining and reconciling work in the lives of those with whom we work and live. All Christians are called to this ministry of serving others in Jesus’ name!

You and I may be specifically called and gifted as a pastor, teacher, evangelist, musician, or missionary, but we are on a leadership journey to use our gifts and graces in developing the equally specific gifts of others – The People of God whom we lead.

This leadership call and command to accept, serve, and equip the People of God must increasingly define and shape our vision for ministry. What a vision! We accept and embrace **all** who profess Jesus as Lord because they are the graced, blessed, called, and gifted People of God with a ministry to each other and mission to the world! What a vision!

## **Conviction #2: An Acceptance of Others is rooted in A PASSION FOR FORMATION.**

Christian leadership begins with humble service to others to enable them, through teaching and example, to live their lives under the Lordship of Christ, and to understand, accept, and fulfill their ministry to each other and their mission to the world.

According to the late Dr. Harold Reed (1982), leadership “is known by the personalities it enriches, not by those it dominates or captivates.”

This perspective on leadership will force some probing questions: How can my ministry of servant leadership enable others to fulfill their ministry to each other and their mission in the world? Are the people being served growing as Christians? Are they themselves becoming servants?

These are crucial concerns for leadership in the community of faith. All Christians – even those who sometimes make life so difficult – are called and gifted for the ministry of Christ. Tempting as it may be, Christian leaders will not ignore even the most challenging people. They remain our responsibility – demanding keen insight, deep caring and Spirit-empowered understanding. Are we up to the challenge?

Paul is not so much talking about administrative techniques but Christian attitudes and values underlying our actions and activities. We passionately desire our faith community to mature in their faith and participate with God in the reconciling of a lost world to Himself! With the Apostle Paul, we remain intense and focused on equipping our people to walk worthy of their calling.

Ephesians 4:1b challenges us to *walk worthy* of our calling as Christians. The characteristics of the person walking worthy follow the challenge. We are instructed to be “*gentle, humble, patient, and supportive of each other*” (v2) through “*speaking the truth in love*” (4:15).

Ephesians 4:25-32 provides more specific direction on how Christians are to speak the truth in love” even when others do not forgive us. Words and deeds done by others to us must never be permitted to create bitterness and resentment within us.

When we ignore our family relationship with Christ and treat those with whom we

work as a means to an end, persons to be manipulated for our purposes, Satan maneuvers into the Christian community. The enemy of our soul laughs at unresolved conflict, which divides the fellowship of the faithful. Dialogue, for Paul, is for grace-giving and grace-receiving! Our words are to be channels of God's grace to others (Ephesians 4:30). God's forgiveness frees us to take the initiative in forgiving those who hurt us.

When we do not live together by these guidelines as a Christian community, God's Spirit is *grieved* (Ephesians 4:30a). In reviewing Ephesians 4:25-32, we as leaders see more clearly how to "maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace," and, in so doing, walk (and lead) worthy of our calling. (See Ephesians 4:1-3.)

This, I believe, is what it means in practical terms to relate our holiness testimony to a holiness lifestyle of leading. The opening verses of the following chapter (Ephesians 5:1-2 NIV) challenge us: *"Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."*

How we can live and lead with *"a life of love, just as Christ loved us"* is identified a few verses later (Ephesians 5:18b-21 NIV). *"...be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."*

**What are we to do in the work of God?** We are passionate about shaping and forming Christ-like disciples and leaders for **their** ministry to each other and **their** mission in the world.

Again, An Attitude of Acceptance is rooted in a PASSION FOR FORMATION.

**Conviction #3: An Acceptance of Others is rooted in AN OBSESSION FOR COMMUNITY.**

Let me probe more deeply. As you think of your leadership environment—home, community, district, church, region, or denomination, whom do you have the most difficulty accepting? As you view yourself as a leader of leaders,

what kind of person is the hardest for you to accept?

Why do you think this is so?

How do you think this makes God feel?

How do you think God sees that person – or those persons?

How does your response affect your own relationship to God?

The overarching question is this: How can we increasingly reflect a **conviction of acceptance of others** within the community of faith we serve? Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1954) in *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community* lists seven expressions of ministry by which a Christian community must be judged and characterized.

### **1. The Ministry of Holding One's Tongue**

*"If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless,"* James 1:26 tells us. *"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth..."* is an admonishment from Ephesians 4:29. When this passage characterizes us, we will be able to cease from constantly criticizing the other person, judging him and condemning him, putting her or him in his particular place. We can allow the other to exist as a completely free person.

### **2. The Ministry of Meekness**

This means caring more for others than for self. *"Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought,"* Paul tells us in Romans 12:3. He who serves must learn to think first of others.

### **3. The Ministry of Listening**

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists of listening. Listening can be a greater service to people than speaking.

### **4. The Ministry of Active Helpfulness**

Simply assist others within the Christian community in external matters, big and small.

### **5. The Ministry of Bearing (Supporting)**

"*Carry each other's burden*" is the challenge of Galatians 6:2. Bearing means forbearing and sustaining one another in love. Ephesians 4:2 commands us to "*be humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.*"

## **6. The Ministry of Proclaiming**

This is the ministry of the word of God. Bonhoeffer does not mean the Scripture's message proclaimed in a formal setting such as in the worship service. He is referring to the free communication of the word of God from person to person. He is referring to that unique situation in which one person becomes a witness in human words to another, with Christian consolation.

## **7. The Ministry of Authority (Leadership)**

Jesus states in Mark 10:43, "*Whosoever wants to be great among you must be first your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.*" This is the paradox of ministry. Jesus made authority in the fellowship dependent upon brotherly service.

For Bonhoeffer, these practical expressions of Christian ministry provide the context that our specific ministries must function within. This is particularly true as it relates to the specific ministry of leadership.

Three **practical lessons on accepting others** within and outside our community of faith guide us as you and I work with the tension of holding to our vision for the future while holding just as firmly to the realities of the present.

1. Acceptance of our brothers and sisters in Christ who differ with us is to love, respect and honor them as God loves them.
2. Acceptance of others implies that we can learn from them.
3. We must find ways to communicate acceptance to those who have not yet bowed to the Lordship of Christ.

A community compulsion is a must for the servant leader; an imperative, even in the throes of conflict. Because relationships are so important, we care enough to confront others with a Christlike spirit. Caring too much about the relationship to ignore destructive behavior, we speak the truth in love. It also means allowing others to speak truthfully to us.

Again, an attitude of acceptance is rooted in an obsession for community where expressions of “I love you, I accept you, I respect you, I need you, I trust you, I serve you, and I forgive you” are increasingly given and received. Paul’s instructions are not psychological in nature. They are deeply theological. They are the foundations for servant-leaders who are serious about leading in a Christian manner.

### **The Role of Teaching...**

Learning to communicate and teach a lifestyle within the community that is distinctly Christian – and self-giving at the core – is a daunting challenge! We affirm wholeheartedly the four “C’s” of Content, Character, Competency and Context in the teaching-learning encounter (Church of the Nazarene Ministerial Course of Study, 2020). However, teaching for transformation the biblical imperatives, theological foundations, faith community priorities, core Christian values and spiritual disciplines, depends to a significant degree on how well you and I live that lifestyle and lead from essential scriptural principles.

Jesus challenges in Luke 6:40, “*When a student is fully trained, he will become like his teacher.*” Ministry is always incarnated, is always lived out in mission and ministry to others! What do you want your community – parishioners – to catch? It should be a servant spirit, committed to motivating, equipping and enabling others to also serve in Jesus’ name.

The principle of imitation is both demanded and demanding. In his book, *Pastoral Care, Its Roots and Renewal* (1979), Herbert Mayer reminds us that this principle was a key in Christian leadership for eighteen centuries. It is the Christian leader’s responsibility to recapture it. Paul humbly instructed church leaders under his care to imitate him as he imitated Christ. The principle of imitation is the only way to effectively transfer vision, passion and obsession within the Christian fellowship. It must possess our thinking.

Again, Paul’s instructions are not psychological in nature. They are deeply theological. They are the foundations for servant leaders who are serious about leading in a Christian manner. You will ask yourself: “What does it mean to be a servant to those I must direct in the role of authority?” In other words, “What does it mean to be a servant in the midst of leadership expectations and functions?”

Is not an obsession with community risky? Yes! Will there be misunderstandings, abuses, betrayals or pain? Absolutely! Is it worth it? The answer: Of course. You and I



really don't have any choice! If we are to model the leadership model of Christ, we must accept the risks – and serve people with humility, gentleness, patience and encouragement.

You and I will be challenged. People will not see us as finished products. Instead, they will discover that you and I are in the center of an ongoing process of transformation into Christlikeness (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Our challenge is to lead from a reconciled and transformed heart. Captured by a vision for ministry, motivated by a passion for ministry formation, and characterized by an obsession for a Christ-like leadership lifestyle within the community, the faith community for which we are responsible – regardless of its size – will be life-giving, growth-producing, and distinctly Christian. Increasingly, this will empower our responsibility groups to reach out and serve others in Jesus' name.

How can leaders increasingly and consistently cultivate a Christlike attitude of ACCEPTANCE even in the conflict situations wherein we are called to lead? By nurturing three compelling convictions within the faith community about:

**who we are as the People of God** (we are the graced, blessed, called and gifted children of God with a ministry to each other and a mission to the world);

**what we are called to do in the work of God** (we are to “walk worthy” of our calling to participate with God in the reconciling of the world to Himself); and

**how we are to live together as the family of God** (we are to live together as a community of faith nurturing and supporting each other in ministry and mission).

These convictions cultivate and shape an attitude of acceptance within us deeply and powerfully through

**A VISION...FOR MINISTRY;**

**A PASSION...FOR FORMATION; and**

**AN OBSESSION... FOR COMMUNITY!**

The late Dr. Edwin Friedman (2007) stated in his book, *Leadership in the Age of the Quick*

*Fix: A Failure of Nerves,*

**The most important attribute of a leader is not knowledge or technique  
but what the leader brings in his/her presence.**

**And, the presence he/she needs is a NON-ANXIOUS PRESENCE.**

This is leadership character. It is both caught and taught – modeled and mentored! The biblical servant leader who brings a non-anxious presence is nurtured by a grace-given acceptance of others with whom we live and work.

Do we always live by the values we embrace and affirm? Unfortunately, not always. They will characterize us at our best and convict us at our worst. Yet, for the Spirit-filled Christian, these values flowing from a life wholly committed to living a holy life, by the grace of God, will increasingly shape us. We are being transformed to the image of Christ by the Spirit of Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:18).

The mandate and invitation to live a holy life is summed up in the scriptural commands to *“love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself”* (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:37-40; Mark 12:30-31). The one thing Spirit-filled Christians **will** to do is summed up in the holistic command and commitment to love God and love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

Holiness is a way of life, a grace empowered lifestyle. Our words, actions and behavior will reflect the holiness testimony we profess. In reality, this means that throughout our ever growing and deepening relationship with Christ, we will continue to mature in the Christian faith and in our walk with the Lord.

A final question. In difficult situations, when you encounter the reality of good and godly people differing and colliding with you, where do you place yourself on the following scale?

ACCEPTANCE 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 REJECTION

**Remember, what John 3:16 is to the unbeliever, Romans 15:7 is to the believer.**

*“Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.”*

Let this biblical character quality of ACCEPTANCE increasingly identify you and me in our leadership assignments-on this campus, in your local congregations or ministry

assignments, near or far away!

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