

AN ATTITUDE OF ACCEPTANCE

*A Tribute to Dr. Jerry Lambert On his retirement from
Education Commissioner Church of the Nazarene*

E. LeBron Fairbanks

Introduction

“What John 3:16 is to the unbeliever, Romans 15:7 is to the believer,” affirms Duane Elmer in his book, *Cross Cultural Connections* (2002, p.) Many of us memorized John 3:16 in the formative years of our Christian lives. Not so, at least for me, with Romans 15:7. Yet the words are powerful. “Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” According to Elmer, this ATTITUDE of ACCEPTANCE must increasingly identify and define us as biblical servant leaders. It must be the heart of all we are.

This attitude characterizes the very core of Dr. Jerry Lambert, recently retired Education Commissioner of the Church of the Nazarene.

“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. This is leading “with the mind of Christ.” To intentionally accept and serve others is to love them. 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 us feel? How do you think rejection of others make them feel? How does rejection of others within a community of faith affect our own relationship to God?

This grace-filled Acceptance of Others, I am coming to see, 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.

And 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:

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. Christians within a faith community are brothers and sisters in Christ, a microcosm of the Kingdom of God on earth and a sacramental community in and through

which the grace of God flows. We are the GRACED, BLESSED, CALLED AND GIFTED People of God!

Effective Christ-like 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 to 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! Acceptance of Others is rooted in a Vision...for Ministry!

Conviction #2:

ACCEPTANCE OF OTHERS is rooted in A PASSION FOR FORMATION.

Christian leadership is humble service to others, in a community of faith whose head is Christ, for the purpose of enabling them, through spiritual formation, visioning, collaboration, and example, to live their lives under the Lordship of Christ, and to understand, accept, and fulfill their ministry to each other, their vocational calling and their mission to the world. Leadership, according to the late Dr. Harold Reed, “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 - even those who sometimes make life so difficult for the leader. On the basis of their testimony of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord of their lives, they 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.

Our passion is not so much focused on administrative *techniques* but Christian *attitudes and values* underlying our actions and activities. We intensely desire for our faith community to mature in their faith and to participate with God in the reconciling of a lost world to Himself! We single-mindedly focus on equipping *the* people we serve in their ministry and mission.

Ephesians begins with the challenge 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). We are co-laborers together in the body of Christ (v.25).

The people with whom we work are God’s own creation. Because of this fundamental Christian conviction, we can be *honest* with the believers, *immediate* in dealing with conflict; *up-building* with our words; and *forgiving*, 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 "means to an end,"--persons to be manipulated for our purposes--Satan gets a "foothold" into the Christian community. The enemy of our soul laughs at unresolved conflict, which divides the fellowship of the faithful.

Our words are to be channels of God's grace to others (Ephesians 4:30). Dialogue, for Paul, is a sacrament. And 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, the Spirit of God is grieved (Ephesians 4:30a). In reviewing Ephesians 4:25-32, we as leaders see more clearly the means by which to "maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace," and, in so doing, walk (lead) worthy of our calling as leaders.

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. AN ATTITUDE OF ACCEPTANCE is rooted in an intense passion for the formation of Christ-like disciples and leaders.

Conviction #3:

ACCEPTANCE OF OTHERS is rooted in AN OBSESSION FOR COMMUNITY.

As you think of your leadership environment—home, community, district, church, region, denomination—who do you have the most difficulty accepting? 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 an acceptance of others with the community of faith we serve? Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1978) 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. He discussed the ministry of holding one’s tongue, meekness, listening, active helpfulness, bearing (or supporting), and proclaiming. 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.

Within our community of faith 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 we must recognize that good and godly people often see things differently. Many issues over which we experience

conflict are culturally based and not a violation of scripture. Differences that divide us have the potential to alienate members of the body of Christ and to impact negatively the work of God in our communities.

Acceptance of our brothers and sisters in Christ who differ with us is to love, respect and honor them as God love them. Acceptance of others implies that we can learn from them. And, we must find ways to communicate acceptance to those who have not yet bowed to the Lordship of Christ. In times of conflict and collision within our faith community, we must find ways to increasingly speak gracefully, live gratefully, listen intently, forgive freely, lead decisively, and care deeply.

Learning to communicate a lifestyle within the community that is distinctly Christian—and self-giving at the core—is a daunting challenge. Communicating right living, teaching commitments, priorities, values and spiritual disciplines, depends on how well we live that lifestyle before those we lead. Incarnational ministry is always lived out in mission and ministry to others! What do we want our faith community to catch from us? 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. Herbert Mayer, in his book, *Pastoral Care, Its Roots and Renewal*, 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.

A “community compulsion” is a must for the servant leader; imperative, even in the throes of conflict. Because relationships are so important, we “care enough to confront” others with a Christ-like 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.

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 *Christianly*. You and I 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 follow 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. Rather, they will discover that we are in the center of an on-going process of transformation into Christ-likeness (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.

Conclusion

How can leaders increasingly and consistently cultivate a Christ-like ATTITUDE OF ACCEPTANCE even in the conflict situations wherein we are called to lead? One does by nurturing three compelling convictions within the faith community. Convictions 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 care 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!

Dr. Lee Woolery, district superintendent of the Northwest Indiana district in the United States, recently shared with me this quote: “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.” (Friedman 2007) A biblical servant leader brings a “non-anxious” presence to difficult situations in a fellowship of faith.

This presence is nurtured by a grace-given ACCEPTANCE of OTHERS with whom we live and work. *This* is leadership character. It is Christ-like Servant leadership to “Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (Romans 15:7). To *this* leadership ministry we are uniquely called!

This character quality of ACCEPTANCE identified Dr. Jerry Lambert in his relationships throughout the world. Everyone thought he or she was Dr. Lambert's best friend. What a gift and blessing. Friends around the world honor you, Dr. Lambert, for your outstanding service to God and the Church of the Nazarene worldwide in your 14 years of service as Education commissioner. We are grateful for your close friendship over the years and honored to be your “best friend.”

Works Consulted

Portions of this article are taken from the book, *Learning to be Last: Leadership for Congregational Transformation*, co-authored by E. LeBron Fairbanks and Stan Toler, to be published in 2008 by the Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City and used by permission.

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