

Acceptance, Receive People As They Are

By Victor Beshir

One of the important aspects of evangelism is 'acceptance'. Acceptance of others, however, is a long journey that needs grace and hard work to reach its final destination.

I Do Accept People:

The above words spell out the first thought that comes to mind when we talk about accepting others. To validate the above statement, however, let me ask some questions:

1. If I am a doctor, an engineer or a professional in any other career path, do I accept to be acquainted with people who are not highly educated? Can I accept them as friends?
2. If I am a rich person, will I befriend a poor person? Will I invite him/her to my home? Can I comfortably introduce this person to my rich friends and ask him/her to join us?
3. How do I feel when I approach a needy person, or a person who looks filthy?
4. Can I touch or carry a poor child soiled and covered in rags?
5. Shall I be glad to see a person of different color in my church?
6. Shall I feel comfortable when a Muslim woman, covering her face with an Islamic veil, attend the prayers?
7. How would I feel if I have to sit among sinners? If I was to attend a party full of sinners, will I accept the invitation? How would I act there? Will I accept them or look down on them?
8. How do I feel about those who are rejected? There are many who are rejected for different reasons in schools, at work, or even at the church. Do I feel their hurt? Am I willing to talk to them? Can they find a comforting heart in me?
9. If I visit a prisoner, can I offer myself as a brother or as a sister?
10. **Who are my friends?** Are any of them **different from me in:** age, color, race, religion, social background, economic level, educational level, ethical level, faith? This question acts as a thermometer that indicates the level of my acceptance. The more friends you have who are different from you based on the above criteria, the more accepting of others you are.

Children naturally sense others' acceptance of them. They run to a person and hug him/her while they may hide from someone else. They have high sensitivity towards acceptance that makes them know the person who accepts them, and get attracted to that person. Some adults have this sensitivity too.

In your church, have you seen a person to whom people go when they experience problems? This person usually is not one of the richest,

the most sophisticated, or the most successful, but rather, he/she is usually a person with a big heart that people feel comfortable to go to and to share their problems with. The reason is that they feel accepted by that person.

A youth told me once, that upon returning to church after a period of being astray in sin, He waited at the end of the Divine Liturgy for people to come and talk to him, but people avoided even looking at him. When finally someone came and hugged him, warmly welcoming him, and telling him how much he missed him. The youth felt great relief. He will never forget this person.

Characteristics of those who accept others:

1. They embrace **Love** as the starting generator of acceptance
2. They have a deep understanding and a genuine feeling that **we are all equal no matter how** different in color, age, race, religion, social status, economic level, education, ethics, intelligence, health, beauty, ... etc.
3. Their behavior is based on the belief that **we are all human beings with dignity and deserve respect and acceptance**

Christian Characteristics of those who accept others:

1. Christ does not only accept all others but **He died for them, for each one of them**. He died for the sinners and the rejected, for all races, and all ages, for the rich and the poor, the educated and illiterate, the sick and the prisoners, the homeless and the prosperous, the handicapped and the persecuted, and the intelligent and the unintelligent. Therefore, following His example, the least we need to do is to love all and accept all.
2. He invites all to His kingdom, and my duty is to extend this invitation to others no matter how different. **I need to accept them first as Christ accepted me**, a sinner.
3. Acceptance of others is based on Christian love, and not on political correctness, or for gaining any benefits.
4. Acceptance is the result of a burning desire in the heart **to show the love of Christ to all**, to let them all drink of the Living Water, and to help them all see the True Light of the world.
5. **We need to see Christ in everyone**. Listen to what Jesus says, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Matt 25:35, 36). In other words, accepting others is actually accepting Christ.
6. The love of Christ in our hearts motivates us to **accept others with open hearts, open arms, and open minds, without judgment or criticism**.
7. When we see Christ in everyone, we **accept others with joy**, even those who are atheists. We see Christ saying, 'Here I am! I

stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me' (Rev 3:20).

8. **Accept others as they are ... Do not try to change them yourself.** Your work is to introduce them to Christ, Who in turn will change them dramatically.

Judgment, Rejection and Acceptance:

People tend to judge others, which is a great sin spread among all ages. Judgment is the trick the devil uses to let people concentrate on others instead of concentrating on their own sins and shortcomings. Therefore, they always stray away from repentance, and at the end, lose their salvation.

Those who are well trained in acceptance do not judge others.

They do not pass judgment on others. They also do not label them with bad names, give them terrible descriptions, or associate them with ominous groups. All people are pure in the eyes of Christian evangelists. Others are precious with dignity before them. People, who are repeatedly rejected or heavily judged and badly labeled by others, tend to flee from meeting others because of fear of another rejection or another cold shoulder.

The depth of the psychological scars of rejection is horrible. The sad fact is that rejection happens every day. Look at the boy who stands alone because nobody likes to play with him or the co-worker who is never invited to go to lunch with the group. Labeling is a similar painful problem. Bullying is an awful violent way of not acceptance and disrespect-among other things-that has been in the rise in our schools in the USA. Boys whose classmates call them by certain names that humiliate them or a girl who is constantly insulted by classmates because of her refusal to take part in their sinful deeds are surely suffering. Same thing happens to the poor young man who has deep scars because of his poverty; he feels rejected because he cannot afford to accompany the others in their outings. I can go on for pages to explain different situations of rejecting, labeling others, or feeling not accepted by others.

Sometimes the heart cries more loudly than tears. Rejection, labeling, and social or cultural stigmas create a dark cloud that hovers over the life of a person and take away every joy from it. They also add a heavy load that the person has to carry all his/her life. This is why **Christ commands us not to judge others, "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you" (Matt 7:1, 2).**

Those who are rejected, labeled, and judged by others need real love. They need a big heart, help, and a shoulder to cry on

until their scars are healed. Everywhere there are many who are waiting for that sweet person who will accept them without judging them by their appearance, the way they talk, walk, behave, think, or eat, a person who will befriend them without consideration of race, color, faith, ethics, poverty, or even cleanness. This person is an angel of mercy to them.

We cannot proclaim the gospel to them unless we accept them first. In other words, we need to be a mirror that reflects to them the love of our Lord, who accepts all with no condition. Therefore, our first lesson is to accept others, especially those who are labeled and rejected.

Before leaving this point, let me ask you, how many youth have you met, who told you that they are sick and tired of adults' judgment of their behaviors?

Can you see now that there is a better way, no judgment? **Let us accept all. Let the Holy Spirit do the judgment.** Let us accept them all, **love them all, and when we build them spiritually, using the positive attitude, all other behaviors will be corrected by the work of the Holy Spirit without our interference.**

A story about the famous Fr. Bishoy Kamel goes like this: A young woman came to a church in Alexandria, Egypt, wearing a very short skirt. People criticized her and looked down at her. They did not talk to her but their eyes and stares sent a bad message of rejection. Then Fr. Bishoy went to her, welcomed her in a warm fatherly love, and told her that he would love to visit her. Fr. Bishoy visited the family, talked to the girl about Christ, but never mentioned anything about her clothes. A few weeks later, she attended the church with well-respected attire.

The message here is clear. **Do not concentrate on the outside appearance or judge others based on it, but rather let the light of Christ get into the heart and He will change from inside out.**

Acceptance & criticism:

Criticism sends a bad signal to the person telling him; "you are not OK ... and you would not do what you are doing if you were OK." Little by little, you handicap the person. In many cases, criticism creates an un-rested person.

In addition, when we criticize a person, we could lower his/her self-esteem. In rare instances, continued criticism of certain people could lead them to lose all self-confidence.

In evangelism, we learn not to blame but to encourage. Everyone has shortcomings and we all work on our own shortcomings.

People flee from those who blame them and get closer to those who accept them without blaming. In the Prodigal Son parable, the father did not utter a word of blame despite what the younger son did. Instead of blaming, there were hugs, kisses, celebrations, ring, and new clothes.

Acceptance & Praise:

Not only we accept people, but also we learn to say something good to each person. Every person has something good, no matter how bad his/her other behavior is. It is your duty to find something worth commending and say it to the person in a sincere way. This is what Jesus found in the Samaritan woman when he told her that she said the truth.

St. Paul found a way to commend even the idol worshipper, **“Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you” (Acts 17: 22, 23).**

You see how St. Paul used his praises of them as an introduction to his evangelism. It is a good practice to say a good word about a person or commend a person sincerely. For those who are rejected or hurt or feel down, a word of commend comes as a relief to their troubled soul. Finding something good about them heals a deep hurt in their souls. So, please **combine acceptance with praise.**

There’s a famous story about St. Makarios the Great. It said that while he and one of his monks were walking, the monk was faster than St. Makarios and met a minister of idols. Instead of greeting him, he started to criticize him. The minister physically punished him badly. Then that minister met St. Makarios who immediately said to him, “Welcome the man of activity” along with other words of praises. The minister was touched by the words, and listened to the saint who told him about the love of Christ. The minister did not only accept Christianity but also became a monk.

Acceptance & Evangelism

An evangelist is an ambassador of Christ, **“We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.”(2 Corinthians 5:20).** As ambassadors, we show God’s love and acceptance of others.

Before we open our mouth with the word of God, we need to show love, respect, and full acceptance.

Let our acceptance heal the scars of rejection before we preach.

Let our love gently remove the hurts and wipe out the tears prior to proclaiming His salvation.

Warnings:

- ❖ Our invitation to accept others does not mean following others without wisdom.
- ❖ I accept a sinner, but I do not accept his/her invitation to sin or his/her sinful ways. If acceptance of someone will lead me into temptation, I should flee from such a relationship. We read in the story of St. Pelagia that before her conversion, she lived as a harlot. When the grace of God touched her heart, she asked to meet bishop Nonus, but he refused to meet her alone, asking her to meet him with other bishops, saying that he is afraid of temptation.
- ❖ I accept others and evangelize them as long as the relationship will not affect my spiritual life. If it does, I will hand the case to someone else.
- ❖ Accepting sinners and evangelizing them have the risk of following the ways of sinners. So, examine yourself first, and talk to your spiritual father second, then decide whether you initiate communications with them or continue to pray for them, asking God to send a stronger person to them.
- ❖ Acceptance of sinners should not allow me to change my spiritual or ethical standards.
- ❖ Acceptance of Non-Orthodox does not mean adopting their ways in their meeting, sacrificing a long treasure of tradition we received from the Christ through His apostles. For example, to show acceptance, an Orthodox person might not use the sign of the cross, neglect using "Our Father" in the conclusion of every prayer, or pray while seated. Instead, we need to tell them what they missing.
- ❖ Learning about the others, and knowing the way of dealing with them, is the foundation for acceptance, especially when it comes to prisoners, gang members, or thieves, homeless, and special cases. There are well-established rules that you need to spend time to learn and practice under the supervision of someone who is knowledgeable and has the experience. Some people rush to some kind of evangelism or service and endanger their lives and the lives of those who're related to them. Training is essential.
- ❖ Acceptance of sick people does not mean dropping the general health rules followed by nurses and doctors.
- ❖ Participating in missions outside your country necessitate a special care of selecting the kind of food or drink you will use during the mission. I know of a person who continued to have severe health

problems for a whole year because of the food she consumed during a mission to India.

- ❖ Same rules are also applied to urban mission, when you evangelize in a poor neighborhood or a poor village without established sanitation facilities. I know of one youth passed away after doing mission in one of the poorly sanitized areas in Cairo. Faith does not mean ignoring health rules. Old Testament has many medical rules that were given at that time as commandments to help people, in a time of lacking medical knowledge, to avoid transmission of infectious diseases, such as leprosy.
- ❖ Always have a spiritual father who counsels you
- ❖ Share what you do in evangelism with someone else who has more experience in the area of evangelism you choose.

A True Story of Acceptance: "Come to Christ As You Are"

There was a young woman with ill reputation. A few Sunday school servants decided to evangelize her. Each time they knocked at her door, she opened the door but laughed at their invitation for her to live with Christ. Those servants however never lost hope. Once when she opened the door, she told them, "I am a sinner, and I can't come to Christ." Their answer was ready, 'Come to Christ, as you are.'" They left. She thought about 'coming to Christ as you are' and decided to follow their advice. She approached God saying 'as I am I come to you, with my sins, weaknesses, and immoral behaviors.' Her words and tears found their way to the heart of God and later she became a good servant of God.

Questions:

Please answer two of the following questions:

- 1- Intentionally, I did not show examples of accepting others in the service of our Lord Jesus Christ, Please mention a few situations and sayings of our Lord that show how He accepts others.
- 2- Can you find some Biblical verses that talk about acceptance of others, especially those applied to evangelism and mission?
- 3- Lives and writings of the Church Fathers showed acceptance of others. Could you mention a few examples?