

## **Building A Christian Community**

### **Accept One Another**

#### **Romans 15:7**

### **Introduction**

If there's one thing we should know very well, it's that the church is not a building; it's a body of related believers. Crossroads Chapel is not simply an organization; we are a living organism. We are a body of believers. This church is alive because we are connected to the head of the body, Jesus Christ. As the body of Christ, we are here to serve a living Christ. God wants to transform us from sinners to saints. Becoming a New Testament saint requires transformation and renewal.

The disciples purposefully followed Jesus' command to love one another through several "one another" imperatives. In this series, we have studied:

- Serve one another
- Encourage one another
- Admonish one another
- Confess your faults to one another
- Forgive one another, and finally
- Accept one another

The base text for this study has been John 13:34,35, where Jesus said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35 NKJV)

Paul clearly echoes Jesus teaching on acceptance in Rom. 15:7, "Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God." (Romans 15:7 NKJV)

The New American Standard Versions says, "Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God." (Romans 15:7 NASB)

### **I. What Is Acceptance?**

At first glance, acceptance may sound like a synonym for "forgive one another," which we studied last week. And in practice, they are related to each other, but they are distinctly different too. Forgiveness means to lay down the right to pay someone back when they sin against you. The opposite of forgiveness is what? Bitterness!

Acceptance, however, means to welcome someone who is different from you. In the context of Rom. 15:8,9, Paul's challenge is for Jewish and Gentile Christians to welcome one another into loving fellowship without trying to spiritualize their ethnic and cultural differences. Listen to what he says, "Now I say that Jesus Christ has become a servant to the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers, and that the Gentiles might glorify God for *His* mercy, as it is

written: "FOR THIS REASON I WILL CONFESS TO YOU AMONG THE GENTILES, AND SING TO YOUR NAME." ([Romans 15:8-9 NKJV](#))

The opposite of acceptance is arrogance, intolerance, or belligerence. Acceptance is a vital part of Christian living and witness. Accepting others does not mean that you have to agree with them. It also doesn't mean that you condone their attitudes or behaviors. Acceptance is acknowledging that every person is created in the image of God - no matter how marred or tarnished that image may be, recognizing that Jesus can change anyone who wants to change!

Paul says this acceptance is crucial because it is "to the glory of God." In other words, it manifests something about the greatness of God to every person that God loves them!-- and that through Jesus Christ, God welcomes all people--regardless of their differences--into fellowship with himself.

What evidence does God give that this is true? (This congregation right here!) Jesus said the proof of God's love and acceptance is demonstrated in the body of Christ. All you need to do is look at a Christian community, observe how they treat each other, and how they welcome people into their fellowship, regardless of their differences.

The first-century world was fractured into thousands of factions based on differences that alienated people from one another: especially race, gender, and socio-economic status. Jesus came with a radical and revolutionary message that God wanted to form a new humanity. Jesus came to save us and teach us how to accept one another in His love. The differences remained, but they were superseded because Christ was living in them, and they realized they all belonged to Jesus regardless of their differences. Acceptance of others because of Christ's work in us is what Christian community is all about.

In Galatians 3:28, he says that in the fellowship of believers, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." ([Galatians 3:28 NKJV](#))

This is not just a pious platitude that is unconnected to the real world. It is the lifeline of the body of Christ. Wherever the message of God's love through Jesus Christ went, local Christian communities sprang up and brought people together who would never have been together otherwise.

One example is the Christian community in Syrian Antioch. In Acts 13, verse 1, it says, "Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod, the tetrarch, and Saul." ([Acts 13:1](#))

These elders would never have associated with one another: Barnabas (a Hellenistic Jew), Simeon (a Gentile), Lucius of Cyrene (probably a Greek), Manean (an aristocrat, maybe half-Jewish), and Paul (a Hebraic Jew).

Many people mocked the Christian message and still do. The idea of a crucified Messiah caused them to sneer at the claim that Jesus is the true and only way to God. But one thing they could not deny is that Christians from very different backgrounds loved one another in a way that no one else could.

Getting along with those who disagree with you is not easy, and the New Testament is honest to reveal that this was a constant struggle even in the early church. They weren't perfect--but they were able to let the Holy Spirit conquer their spirit and help them powerfully demonstrate the reality of the Savior, just as Jesus said they would. They were able to rise above their differences because of their mutual love for Christ and his command to love one another.

People today still face alienation over race, gender, socio-economic, generational, political, and cultural differences. Sadly, many people and churches, instead of displaying Christ's love and acceptance, support division and alienation. There are a few significant exceptions, but for the most part, even in the church world, we have black churches, white churches, Hispanic churches, white-collar churches, blue-collar churches, Baby Boomer churches, Gen X churches, right-wing churches, left-wing churches, and on and on the list goes.

Francis Schaeffer said, "Every Christian church, every Christian school, every mission should be a community which the world may look upon as a pilot plant. When a big company is going to invest several million dollars into building a plant, it first builds a pilot plant to show it can be done. Every Christian community ought to be a pilot plant to show that we can have relationships with (each other in spite of all kinds of differences in Christ)."

It is a real test for the maturity of any church. Hopefully, here at Crossroads Chapel, we are allowing God to continually stretch us into a church where people of very different backgrounds can come together and really accept and love one another. It's a complicated issue, and there are no easy answers--but according to Christ, we are to be committed to practicing Christian community in this way.

## **II. The Biblical Basis For Acceptance**

If we commit to practicing Christian acceptance, we need a biblical basis and practical steps to develop it. Let's look at the biblical basis first.

You can't create a truly accepting community simply by passing non-discrimination laws and affirmative action quotas. Sometimes these things are necessary for a fallen society like ours; we have to go deeper than this if we want to display the love of God towards one another. We have to go beyond regulating behavior and understand the root issue underlying it—namely, identity. I only have time to sketch out this outline, but I pray God will use it to help us all grow in the area.

Identity refers to the incurable need we have to define ourselves in a way that validates our existence. The question "Who am I?" challenges all of us and insists on an answer. Identity can only come from one of two sources:

Most people, including Christians, define themselves *horizontally*; by how we are different from other humans. Some of these differences are because of birth or culture, while others are a matter of choice. For instance, you can be:

- Intellectually: above average/average/below average
- Concerning Wealth: rich/middle-class/poor
- Politically: liberal/conservative
- Caucasian/Afro-American/Hispanic/Native-American/Asian
- Age: young/middle-aged/old
- Physical Features: attractive/unattractive,
- Mobility: high energy/physically handicapped
- Marital Status: married/divorced/single
- Pursuits: jock/artsy/tech nerd
- Views: counter-cultural/mainstream
- Personality: introverted/extroverted

None of these differences are right or wrong; the issue is the identity and importance we attach to them. When we define ourselves by any of these things, they inevitably draw us to those like us and alienate us from those who are different. The reality is, because of our own desires and preferences, we are drawn to certain people and develop prejudice and intolerance towards others.

The only alternative is to develop a vertical identity. Vertical identity is the identity God assigns to us and reveals in us. It is the kind of identity we find in the Bible, and it is entirely different from all horizontal identities. The Bible acknowledges that each of us is different and unique, yet we are similar and have many things in common.

But our differences have nothing to do with our real identity. God says we all have the same basic identity. According to Genesis, Chapter 3, humans were created by God. We did not evolve from pond scum. We were made in His image, giving us dignity and value in God's eyes.

Unfortunately, Adam and Eve's sin in the Garden impacted the entire human race. We are born with a sin nature. Our natural inclinations are to disobey and disbelieve in God. From birth, we are all alienated from God. Our propensity to sin causes us to hide from God (just like Adam and Eve) because of our true moral guilt. Because of our sins, we cannot redeem ourselves. That is the reason Jesus came into the world. His mission is to redeem us! Christ's death and sacrifice is sufficient to atone for our sins, and we are all invited to become God's children through faith in his Son Jesus Christ.

But we must make a conscious decision to turn to God. It requires us to acknowledge our sin and guilt before God and accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. The Gospel of John underscores this in Chapter 1 verse 12, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name:" ([John 1:12](#))

Once we take this step, the barrier of sin that separates us from God is removed, and we receive a new identity as God's child. This new identity in Christ includes:

- complete forgiveness through Jesus' death,
- a deep personal relationship with God through the indwelling of his Spirit,
- a common calling to God's purpose for this life and a destiny of eternal life in God's kingdom.

When you come to Christ and experience a new life as God's child, your relationship with God causes some radical changes in your perspective. With your new identity as God's child, you don't have the same need to validate yourself by all the horizontal differences with others. Your differences no longer define you because you begin to realize you are a gift of God to this world!

As you look at other people, God begins to give you a new set of eyes. The differences become relatively unimportant because you see people through the eyes of Jesus. 2 Cor. 5:16,17 says, "Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know *Him thus* no longer. Therefore, if anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." (2 Corinthians 5:16-17)

We stop evaluating others from a human point of view even though, at one time, we thought of God merely from a human point of view. But now, our eyes have been opened, and we can see just how much God loves us. We have become a completely different person than we used to be. The old life is gone, and a new life has begun!

As you look at those who don't yet know Christ, God shows you that you are no better than they are. The only real difference between you and them is that you have received God's mercy, while they have not yet done this. Instead of passing judgment, God urges us to have compassion for others. They may cling to their differences for identity, but remember, you did the same thing before you met Christ. God's love causes us to reach out to them the way Christ reached out to us -- through his people.

As you look at other Christians, you no longer view them based on differences but on your common identity in Christ. What we have in common in Christ far outweighs our differences. We are all members of the same family, and God transforms our character to be like Christ's. Paul writes in Colossians 3, "Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new *man* who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave *nor* free, but Christ *is* all and in all." (Colossians 3:9-11)

As we learn to accept one another in the love of Christ, it gives us a basis for appreciating and learning from one another's differences. It also gives us a basis for being patient with the character weaknesses of others because Jesus is patient and forbearing toward us.

In verse 13, Paul says, "bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also *must do*. But above all, these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful." ([Colossians 3: 13-15](#))

This is the biblical basis for accepting one another, and we need to stay focused on it and remind one another of it often.

### **III. Practical Steps Toward Acceptance**

But unless we combine this with practical steps, it will be a dead letter instead of the life-changing reality that God wants it to be.

Question: Do you have any close Christian friends that you can honestly say, "I would never have even wanted to know these people if I hadn't come to Christ?" Do you ever acknowledge how God has spiritually enriched your life through these friends who are different from you? If you can't say YES, then you're probably not involved enough, and you're missing out on one of the most significant features of the Christian life!

If you want God to change you, let me give you a couple of practical steps you can take: First of all, commit yourself to get consistently and personally involved with some other Christians who stretch your "difference envelope." Small groups or church bible studies are a great way to begin this.

And I definitely challenge you to start coming to Wednesday bible study or Sunday night teaching group. You'll find more than enough differences to challenge you along with the support and encouragement of mature Christians who will help you learn how to "accept others," especially the ones that are different from you.

Also, consider serving in a ministry that serves people who are different than you and has you serve with people who are different than you (Teaching Children Church, Youth Group, College Ministry, Men's Group, Women's Bible Study).

### **Conclusion**

As you encounter relational problems (and you will), focus on the attitudes God wants to change in you rather than on the differences of your Christian friends. Let the Holy Spirit drive you more deeply into your new identity in Christ, and let Him expose and free you from:

- racism,
- chauvinism,
- intellectual pride,
- generational/cultural snobbery,
- political dogmatism,
- spiritual arrogance and superiority and
- rigidity & impatience with people who have different personality flaws.

Differences will always arise that threaten to divide and alienate us. But when we remember God's love and acceptance of us, we can be confident that he will help us resolve our differences with each other.

Building a Christian Community requires us to learn how to love one another the way Jesus loved his disciples. Don't settle for being a church attendee. Get involved and make some Christian friends. And remember, it's essential to learn how to give and how to receive. Relationship is a two-way street. We welcome you to achieve this goal by becoming a part of the Christian community right here at Crossroads Chapel.