

## RECEIVING AND ACCEPTING

We frequently hear decision-language in theology where it is not appropriate. When some preachers talk about conversion, they play down original sin, and make room for the co-operating will of human beings. They talk about “accepting Christ,” and either do not have a rationale for infant baptism or reject it. They argue, “How can I be said to have faith if I have not made a decision to commit myself to Christ?” They argue, “How can a baby decide for Christ?” Some Bible translations even use the word “accept” where they ought to use “receive.”

Words take their meanings from their contexts, and often change in meaning according to changing contexts. I admit, sometimes there is hardly any difference between “receive” and “accept.” A man receives stolen goods. However, the law construes from the fact that he has them in his possession that he is complicit in the theft. He has accepted them, knowing that they were stolen. If a dying man prays, “Lord, receive my soul,” there is not much difference if he prays, “Accept.” If a person receives a guest with honour, the meaning is not much different from saying that he welcomes a guest. A person is “received” into membership. However, we could also say that he is accepted into membership. We say, “Jesus received sinners”, and mean that He accepted and welcomed them.

However, usually “accept” means “consent to receive.” There are many instances where “accept” would not be appropriate. “He has received an offer of an appointment to a board of management” does not imply that he has yet accepted the position. If you receive an invitation, you may decline it. Then you receive it but do not accept it.

Sometimes the difference between receive and accept is very marked. The boxer who receives a blow to the head does not meekly accept it. He fights back. The meeting receives an apology for non-attendance. However, if we say that the meeting accepts an apology, we mean that it recognises that there are valid grounds for absence. I may unjustly receive the blame for breaking something. However, if I am sure that I did not break it, I do not accept the unjust blame. People may say, “The news was received with horror.”

Often, with negatives, “receive” may have two distinct meanings. “The prisoner did not receive food” may mean 1) that no food was brought to him, or 2) that food was brought, but that he did not accept it.” When we translate what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2: 14, there is no essential difference if we use “receive” or “accept.” “An unspiritual person does / not accept / not receive / the things of the Spirit of God. For they are foolishness to him; and he cannot know them because they are discerned spiritually.” However, his inability to know and discern the Spirit’s gifts makes it inappropriate to talk about an unbeliever’s accepting Christ when he becomes a believer. When a person becomes a believer, that is due entirely to God’s grace in Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit. When he rejects God’s grace, he is entirely to blame. He has put salvation away from himself by refusing it.

Because “accept” means “consent to receive,” we use the word “receive” rather than “accept” where there are inanimate things. “Accept” is not appropriate for them. “The arch received the weight of the roof.” “The basin received the blood.”

On other occasions, the context makes it clear that “receive” is the appropriate word, and “accept” would be out of place. The baby receives a bath, although he may cry when he gets it. The beggar receives some money. Because he is not in a position to decline, “accepts” is not appropriate. I receive a parking fine, but resent getting it. A bereaved person receives sympathy. The very context makes rejecting sympathy, not accepting it, very unlikely. We say, “The workman did not receive an adequate salary”, though, of course, he accepted the money.” The soldiers received an attack from militia. However, they retaliated, because they did not accept being attacked.

It is for such reasons that there is a word “acceptable”; but we do not use “receivable.”

Jesus made it clear that He had come for the poor in spirit, for the blind, the crippled, the deaf, and the lame, and to raise the dead. People who were needy received His gracious help. Because of their various forms of inability, there was no room for a conscious consent to receive His help, and no thought of declining it. There is no clearer demonstration of justification through faith without works than infant baptism. The baby receives God’s blessings. Adults may think about merit. The baby does not. Because baptism is God’s gift, adults, too, are said to receive it.

Where a prisoner has been on a hunger strike, we might say, “He accepted food.” He had been rejecting it. However, in ordinary life, when we receive food and drink, we do not consider eating and drinking as consent to receive. We receive nourishment. We take it into ourselves, and do not consider eating and drinking as work.

What is the spiritual point of all this? Because by nature we are spiritually blind, dead, and enemies of

God, the gifts of God come to us as beggars. We receive forgiveness. We receive the knowledge of God. We receive the Word of God, with joy. We receive the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is not a work of man, but the reception of God's great gifts Christ's body and blood, together with the spiritual blessings that they convey, forgiveness, life, and being joined to Christ's one mystical body, the church. The eating and drinking there are the same kind of reception as unbelievers receiving faith, and infants receiving rebirth, forgiveness, rebirth, and the gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism.

Jesus took a little child and used it as an object lesson to His disciples. "Truly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become like little children, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." What was it that Jesus saw in that child? We know that sometimes children can be most insistent in their demands. However, that is not the point here. Babies are helpless, and need to have everything done for them. They need to be fed, carried, put down, changed, and bathed. They earn nothing from their parents for themselves. Those in the kingdom of God are like them. Because they are beggars, they are receivers. They are not individuals who accept. When mothers brought their infants to Jesus, He said, "...for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly, I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will certainly not enter it" (Lk 18:15-17).

Indeed, the verbs that Jesus uses about the kingdom of God are not verbs that stress consent. God gives the kingdom. People receive it. People enter it through rebirth by water and the Spirit. There is no stress on conscious consent in being born in the physical sense, either. People inherit the kingdom.

The person whom God justifies is "ungodly" (Rm 4:5). The person whom God forgives is a sinner. Faith in Jesus Christ is, therefore, not acceptance, but reception of God's gift. In this sense, it is correct to say that faith in relation to justification is receiving His "passive" or foreign righteousness, or, in other words, the obedience of Jesus Christ, which God reckons to an undeserving person by grace. When we became believers, our faith was not the result of an act of our will or conscious assent. We could, and, sadly, still can, reject God's gracious gifts. Believers are not spiritually inanimate, as if they were like an arch that receives the weight of the roof without any possibility of deciding not to receive it. However, though we are animate, believing in God is not consenting to receive. It is, however, part of the nature of the faith, which the Holy Spirit works in cold and dead hearts, that it actively trusts, relies, and desperately clings to Jesus Christ, the Saviour, because He has given the poor, the helpless, His inexpressible gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Because faith works through love, part of the response of faith is devoted service and praise. However, love, service, and praise are not meritorious, as if they contributed to God's gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation.