

Accept or Decline?

Sunday, November 17, 2019

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

The twenty-first century is already being labelled the “Age of the App!” These mini operating programs are everywhere: on desktops, laptops, tablets, and smartphones. They tell us the weather, order food, arrange our dating partners, and even answer our doorbells. It’s so easy to download an app — Candy Crush, Snapchat, Starbucks or Garage Band — just push the download button and you’re all set! Or so you thought. Now you find yourself staring at a window on your device with a teeny checkbox, beside which are the words: “I have read and accept the terms and conditions for the use of this product.”

If you are one of those meticulous, rule-following types, you will scroll down and peruse pages of fine-print legalese. But, if you are like most people, you will simply check the “I agree” option and begin enjoying your new app. It’s okay! Everybody does it. Who wants to waste precious time reading the fine print, anyway? The average “terms and conditions” (T&C) paragraphs and privacy policies are more than 2,500 words long! Reading 250 words a minute, it would take at least 10 minutes to read through these terms and conditions. Multiply that by the approximately 1,400 apps browsers use each year, and you will need to devote 25 days annually to reading policies. Who does that? No one does that.

Yet, in checking that little box, you agree to the terms of a contract that could have serious implications concerning your rights and privileges. What’s more, since you made an overt act of assent by checking the box, courts consider this agreement to be legally binding. A quick online search reveals that many terms and conditions restrict your use of the product, your ability to share it with friends, and your ability to get compensation should it harm you or your equipment. There is truly a lot at stake here. You may be getting a lot more than you bargained for by marking “I agree.”

On the tiptoe of expectation. The same thing happens when we sign on with Jesus. We will always get more than we bargained for with him. One would hope that’s a good thing! After all, who can have too much forgiveness, grace, or mercy? Still, the going can sometimes be tough. One wonders whether Jesus’ disciples understood this when they agreed to follow him? Or did they just accept the T&C without reading the fine print? Were they so excited about getting to use this new app called “The Messiah,” that they threw caution to the winds?

Or consider the Christians of the church in Thessalonica to whom Paul is writing in today’s reading. Did they know the T&C of this new faith they embraced? They checked the “accept” box and suddenly found themselves the religious minority in Thessalonica facing down a misunderstanding of momentous theological importance: the second coming of Jesus. They thought Jesus would return soon, like any minute. His return was so imminent, they thought, they might not even have time to clear the breakfast dishes. They “accepted” the T&C of the “Christian faith” app and assumed that the promise of God’s deliverance of a glorious new world would happen immediately. Right now! Today even.

Paul’s correspondence with the churches of Thessalonica reflected a transition in the life of the emerging Christian community. Most scholars agree that Jesus’ ministry emerged in a time of apocalyptic excitement. The New English Bible describes the people as standing “*on the tiptoe of expectation*” (Luke 3:15). Something remarkable was about to happen and it would likely happen very soon. After all, if God planned to intervene in history, there was no better time than the present. The Romans who ruled Palestine suddenly decided to assert more direct control over the Hebrew people, levying new taxes (Mark 12:17) and meddling in the affairs of the Temple. Discontent and rebellion festered, as did the people’s hope that God would come and shake things up soon.

The Essenes, a Jewish sect and authors of the “Dead Sea Scrolls,” generated a dramatic war scroll, describing how the final conflict would play out. In the coming battle, the present darkness would be destroyed forever, and God’s light would triumph. Vivid, apocalyptic literature describing this final age circulated widely. Many Jews believed that God would not allow the present situation to continue or for God’s people to suffer much longer. The Jews believed that God would intervene, freeing them from their Roman oppressors, just as God freed the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. After the death of John the Baptist, many Jews saw the ministry of Jesus as the initial act in this final showdown.

The gospel accounts and Luke’s narrative in the Book of Acts continue that apocalyptic narrative. After Easter, Jesus’ followers anticipated his imminent return. Long-term planning seemed unnecessary and everything was disorganized and improvised. Luke’s description of the communal lifestyle (Acts 4:32-5:7), in which “*everything they owned was held in common*” (4:32), is an excellent picture of this temporary lifestyle mentality. The longer Jesus delayed the more questions arose. Was this interim way of life tenable in the long run? What if Jesus did *not* make a timely return? Could the church reorient its thinking to a longer-term, more-sustainable situation?

This is the situation in our text. Jesus has not yet made his triumphant return. The battle predicted in the War Scroll is not yet commenced. The ardent desire of faithful Christians to attain God's promise of a world reimagined "now" is met with God's equally stubborn "not yet." The church is forced to be the sign, foretaste, and instrument of God's Kingdom "now" even as God continues to work out the Kingdom which is "not yet." This is not what the Thessalonians signed up for when Jesus called, and they checked "accept." They expected immediate results and they had a tough time "accepting" this change in plans.

Some members of the Thessalonian community lived off the labors of others, not contributing to the overall support of the group. As Paul's letter put it, they were "*living in idleness*" (v. 6). So, Paul instructed the community: "*Anyone unwilling to work should not eat*" (v. 10). His remark is directed at those who believed the return of Christ to be so imminent that they refused to work. These were true believers, and their so-called idleness was a testimony to their fervent belief, however misguided, that Jesus was coming any moment!

Paul describes them as "*walking idly*" (v. 6) and as "*being busybodies*" (v. 11). He exhorts them to "*do their own work quietly and to earn their own living*" (v. 12). It was not just that they ate the "*bread of others without paying for it*" (v. 8), but that they actively kept others from doing the work necessary for the good of the whole community. Their self-centered and short-sighted view hindered the church from going about the business of laying the foundation for God's preferred and promised future.

"Follow me!" This text is a cautionary tale for us when we are asked to accept the T&C Jesus lays before us. Do we fully understand what it means to be a disciple of Jesus? In Matthew, Jesus invites Simon and Andrew with the words, "Follow me," and reports that "*immediately they left their nets and followed him*" (4:19). Jesus' call came with none of the "trigger warnings" we expect today: no statement of the potential side effects of such an action, no disclaimer of consequences, no limitations of liability. There was simply Jesus' command, "Follow me." Their acceptance of Christ's call led them to suffer and die for their faith. Christian discipleship is always more than we bargained for or agreed to.

Perhaps the "idlers" in today's reading received a similar summons, and maybe they accepted it without looking at the fine print. Perhaps, like Simon and Andrew, they left their nets and followed Jesus. Which made sense, since Jesus promised to usher in the Kingdom of God. It would only a matter of time, and a brief one at that, before they would all be in the "*great light*" (4:17). But there was more to this bargain. Jesus did not simply ask his

disciples to follow him; he warned them, saying, "*If any want to become my disciples, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*" (Matthew 16:24).

There are always consequences to clicking "accept" on Jesus' "app." Those consequences are frighteningly real. Discipleship involves a cross. There is a social and a political cost of identifying with Jesus. This is a countercultural way of life that goes against the grain causing friction with our neighbors. For the disciples in Thessalonica, a community under siege, there was no place for those who were unwilling to carry their share of the load. Paul pressed them to contribute to the task, not only for the sake of others, but for their own sake. There was work to do and a prize to be won. Eventually.

In his criticism of these idlers, Paul might have echoed the words of Jesus: "*For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?*" (Matthew 16:24-26). After all, that same Jesus is the one who said, "*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly*" (John 10:10).

There's a truism that says that you can do anything you want if you're willing to pay the price. The problem is that too often we do not know the price. The call in this text, one that echoes the call to the first disciples, is to follow Jesus. We can do this, but do we accept the terms and conditions that come with it? Do we even know what those terms and conditions are? If we do, are we still willing to follow, surrender all, and not count the cost?

Prayer: Good and gracious God, Your Son, Jesus Christ, invites all people to follow him and become his disciples. Touch our hearts, enlighten our minds, and stir our spirits. Help us daily to take up our cross and follow him; by living his Word and proclaiming his Good News to those around us. May our faith in you increase, may our hunger for the Gospel intensify, and may our church be strengthened as we live "now" into God's promised "not yet" of a world restored. For this we pray. Amen.

Sources:

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