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Practical Understanding and Application of the Approbation of Christ

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Practical Understanding and Application of the Approbation of Christ

Abstract

In December 1912, William Borden embarked on a journey halfway around the world to become a missionary to Chinese Muslims. Just four months later, Borden contracted meningitis, which took his life. He was never to serve as a missionary. American newspapers picked up the story, as Borden was the heir to the Borden family fortune. The outcry by some was, "What a waste!" People lamented that a man who had so much to live for had wasted his life by giving it to God and dying before he had a chance to fulfill his calling or collect his fortune. William Borden addressed these cries before his death. In his journal, he wrote these words, "No reserve, no retreat, no regrets."

A life lived for the glory of God can make this same claim of no reserve, no retreat, and no regrets. Christ demonstrated approbation during His time on earth among those He encountered. He gave approbation to those who lived with no reserve, no retreat, and no regrets. Christ approved those who sacrificed extravagantly, abandoned fully, and obeyed completely. Jesus Himself earned the approbation of God by displaying these same qualities of sacrifice, abandon, and obedience through His life and death. An understanding of the approbation of Christ during His time on earth will not only show the people and actions that merited His approval but will also lay the foundation of what Jesus Himself did to gain the approbation of His Father.

Keywords

approbation, sacrifice, obedience, abandon, example, application

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

In December 1912, William Borden embarked on a journey halfway around the world to become a missionary to Chinese Muslims. Just four months later, Borden contracted meningitis, which took his life. He never served as a missionary. American newspapers picked up the story, as Borden was the heir to the Borden family fortune. The outcry by some was, "What a waste!" People lamented that a man who had so much to live for had wasted his life by giving it to God and dying before he had a chance to fulfill his calling or collect his fortune. William Borden addressed these cries before his death. In his journal, he wrote these words, "No reserve, no retreat, no regrets."¹

A life lived for the glory of God can make this same claim of no reserve, no retreat, and no regrets. Christ demonstrated approbation during His time on earth among those He encountered. He gave approbation to those who lived with no reserve, no retreat, and no regrets. Christ approved those who sacrificed extravagantly, abandoned fully, and obeyed completely. Jesus Himself earned the approbation of God by displaying these same qualities of sacrifice, abandon, and obedience through His life and death on earth. An understanding of the approbation of Christ during His time on earth will not only show the people and actions that merited His approval but will also lay the foundation of what Jesus Himself did to gain the approbation of His Father.

Approbation

Approbation is a word not often used in casual conversation. The word itself does not appear in modern English translations of the Bible, nor is there a Greek word used in the Bible directly translated as *approbation*. Strong's concordance lists *ἀποδοχή* (*apodoche*) as the closest match, meaning *acceptance* or *approval*. It is translated as one of these words two times in 1 Timothy (1 Tim. 1:15, 1 Tim 4:9), but Strong notes the scope of the word usage to include *acceptance, appreciation, or approbation*.² In both Timothy passages, approval refers to statements of truth, not a person or action.

Another word, *δοκιμος* (*dokimos*), has a similar definition but describes a person or group of people. *Dokimos* is translated as *proven, tried, approved, or acceptable*. Romans 14:18 says, "Whoever serves Christ in this way is acceptable to God and receives human approval" (*δοκιμος*).³ 2 Corinthians 10:18 says, "For

¹ Mary Geraldine Guinness Taylor, *Borden of Yale* (China Inland Mission, 1926), 260.

² James Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Academic, 2009).

³ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are from the Christian Standard Version (CSB) Bible.

it is not the one commending himself who is approved (δόκιμος), but the one the Lord commends." James 1:12 reads, "Blessed is the one who endures trials because when he has stood the test (δόκιμος), he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him." Δόκιμος is also used in Romans 16:10, 1 Corinthians 11:19, 2 Corinthians 13:7, and 2 Timothy 2:15. In each instance, a person or a group of people are the ones who have merited approval or approbation.

The word *disapproved* (ἀδόκιμος, *adokimos*), the antonym of the word *approved* (δόκιμος), appears eight times in the Bible, six of them being in the New Testament. These six references refer to a person whom God has not approved. Romans 1:28 says, "They do what is not right." 2 Corinthians 13:5-7 defines ἀδόκιμος as failing as in failing a test. 2 Timothy 3:8 and Hebrews 6:8 translate the word as *worthless*. English translations sometimes translate ἀδόκιμος as *disqualified*, as in *disqualified to win the race* (1 Corinthians 9:27). The harshest is Titus 1:16, which translates ἀδόκιμος as *detestable, disobedient, and unfit for any good work*. From these antonyms, a clearer picture can emerge of what is approved by God.

Through these positive and negative examples, it is apparent that even though the word approbation is not found in scripture, one can see both the concept of approbation and descriptions of those that merited the approbation of Christ and those were not worthy of His approbation in scripture. Examining some of the synonyms and general ideas of approbation in the Bible allows one to create a picture of who and what was deserving of the approval of Christ. Before looking at examples, one must first understand the meaning implied by the word approbation and its synonyms. Analyzing the typical definitions of approbation and who it is that gives approbation will help provide this understanding. The biblical and secular interpretations of the word will help answer these questions.

What is Approbation?

The dictionary defines approbation as "the act of approving; an assenting to the propriety of a thing with some degree of pleasure or satisfaction."⁴ This word's synonyms are "approval or commendation." One source distinguishes between approbation and approval by saying, "Approbation and approval have the same general meaning, but approbation is stronger and more positive."⁵ Man often seeks approbation from someone who is in a leadership position or has

⁴ Wiktionary, "Approbation," *Wiktionary*, last modified 2023, <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/approbation#:~:text=Approbation%20and%20approval%20have%20the,approval%20of%20our%20own%20consciences>.

⁵ G. and C. Merriam, *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1913).

power over him. If someone works hard to accomplish something, they often want to be praised for their effort and accomplishments. Approbation may come through words of affirmation, a tangible reward such as a bonus or commendation, or simply by being entrusted with greater responsibilities or roles. Traherne believes, "Approbation is much the interest of human nature and in some respect the very end of our desires and endeavors as it is the gate and means that leadeth unto more honors and enjoyments."⁶ People seek approbation as it makes them feel accepted, approved, praised, and encouraged.

Who Gives Approbation?

Approbation often describes the approval of a man upon another person or object. Traherne says, "Approbation is the first affection of the mind, that follows upon the apprehension of an object's goodness, for having well examined its nature, when we see it right and what it ought to be, we approve."⁷ In these instances, approbation is earned by the receiver or recognized by the giver.

The biblical understanding of approbation is a bit narrower. Although man's approval is both sought and received in biblical examples, striving for this approval is condemned by Jesus. He says, "Whenever you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, because they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by people. Truly I tell you, they have their reward." (Matt 6:5). These hypocrites sought and received approbation from man, but exchanged it for God's approbation, which Jesus says should be more highly sought. The approval of man is fleeting, but the approbation of Christ is lasting. "The Pharisees and hypocrites sought the approbation of men, and the Lord said, 'They have their reward.' How infinitely vast the difference in value are the approval of God and the approval of men."⁸

The Godhead is the ultimate giver of approbation in the Bible. Being perfectly holy and sovereign, they have a perfect perspective to recognize actions, motives, and words worthy of approval or praise. As is common throughout scripture, the ones that the Divine seeks to acknowledge do not always align with the thoughts of man. This idea was made evident in I Samuel 16:7 when the Hebrew people chose whom they thought would be the best leaders, but God reminded them that the qualifications He seeks are often much different from

⁶ Jan Ross, "Commentaries of Heaven." *The Works of Thomas Traherne III: Commentaries of Heaven, Part 2: Al-Sufficient to Bastard*, ed. Jan Ross, 5–468 (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2007), 183.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁸ Alex Sanfilippo, "God's Approval or Man's Approval: Which Matters More?" *The Good Christian Blog*, last modified 2015, <https://www.thegoodchristian.co/blog/gods-approval-or-mans-approval-which-matters-more>

man's expectations when He said, "Humans do not see what the Lord sees, for humans see what is visible, but the Lord sees the heart." To understand this kind of approbation, one will find it helpful to examine those that received the approbation of Christ while He lived on earth.

Approbation Given by Jesus

Those who have professed Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior should be committed to living in His will for the duration of their time on earth. This commitment should come from a heart of sacrifice and service and not for validation or approval. As one seeks to model their life to please God, there are examples to look to in scripture to describe the life that is deserving of the approval of Christ. While on earth, Jesus gave approbation to those He found to be deserving. He gave approbation to those who sacrificed extravagantly, those who shared with abandon, and those who acted in obedience. Jesus recognized these groups and put them forth as examples of who will receive His approval. Examining these instances of the approbation of Deity can give a Christ-follower a blueprint for a life lived for the glory of One.

Approbation for Sacrificial Extravagance – No Reserve

Luke 21:1-4 tells a story of a woman who earned the approbation of Jesus during His time on earth. It reads,

He looked up and saw the rich dropping their offerings into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow dropping in two tiny coins. "Truly I tell you," He said, "this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For all these people have put in gifts out of their surplus, but she out of her poverty, has put in all she had to live on.

The temple treasury in verse 1 probably refers to a contribution box.⁹ Somebody likely announced the amount of the widow's gift as she deposited it. If the widow sought man's approval, this would not be a means to that end, as the coins were a small fraction of a day's wage.

The widow was not seeking either man's or God's approval but was simply giving a gift. Jesus, however, upon observing what she had sacrificed, commended the widow. Thabiti says, "It's no sacrifice to give to God out of your generosity, but our Lord watches this widow with intentionality. He focuses

⁹ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd Edition. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 186.

others' attention on her. She emerges as the hero who gives God her all."¹⁰ Jesus approved this woman's gift as He knew the sacrifice for her. She gave with no reserve.

A second example of Jesus giving approbation is the account of the woman who anointed the feet of Jesus as found in Luke 7:37-38 which reads, "And a woman in the town who was a sinner found out that Jesus was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house. She brought an alabaster jar of perfume and stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to wash his feet with her tears. She wiped his feet with her hair, kissing and anointing them with the perfume."

Like the widow, the woman in this passage was not seeking man's approval. The aftermath of her actions proves that to be true as she is quickly criticized by those who observe her behavior. Jesus shows why this woman's behavior is not only acceptable but commendable. He does this through a series of comparisons between the woman and the criticizing host. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus says of the woman, "Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her." (Matt. 26:13). It was the woman who received the approbation of Jesus, despite her sinful past. "The woman expressed herself not by a loud voice but by quiet action. She speaks no words in this story, yet her actions of devotion to Jesus speak volumes. Her testimony stands on its merit. Some perhaps misunderstood and even doubted it, but God sees her heart and declares her clean."¹¹ The disciples sought the approval of Christ by declaring themselves better stewards and by expressing what they deemed the right thing to do in the situation. They went so far as to say the woman had wasted her gift on Jesus (Matt 26:8), but Jesus declared, "She has done a noble thing for me" (Mark 14:6). She had gained the approval of One that truly mattered.

Approbation for Abandon – No Retreat

A second characteristic of those given approbation was a spirit of abandon. While on earth, Jesus clarified what He expected from those following His words and ways. He clearly taught what a faithful follower would be and do that would be pleasing in His eyes. In many cases, gaining that approval required abandoning a former way of life without returning. The calling of the first four disciples is an example of Jesus' call for total abandon. In Matthew 4:19-22, Jesus called Peter and Andrew to himself with the simple command of "Follow Me."

¹⁰ Thabiti Anyabwile, *Exalting Jesus in Luke* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2018), 43.

¹¹ Darrell L. Bock and Gary M. Burge, *Luke* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 1996), np.

Verse 21 repeats the scenario with James and John. Jesus called to them in the same way.

One can discern from that text that when Jesus asked these four men to follow him, He meant physically and immediately. The verses following the command prove this. Verses 20 and 22 both say those called left immediately and began following Jesus. Platt describes their actions: "The early disciples left behind everything familiar and natural for them. They exchanged comfort for uncertainty. They didn't know where they would be going; they only knew who they would be with."¹² Keener points out the uniqueness of this calling in light of the religious context. "Disciples normally chose to become students of a particular rabbi. Only the most radical teachers called their own disciples."¹³ Keener goes on to say that observers would have understood this sudden abandonment of the men's families and livelihood as a sign of radical followership.

As Jesus put together the team for His early mission, He did not call them to be leaders but followers. His call to followership was immediate, literal, and all-encompassing. Platt says that as one studies this scripture, "we should feel the wonder and weight of the One who gives this invitation, this command, to four fishermen to 'Follow Me.'"¹⁴ The application for the followers of Jesus from this passage is that when Jesus called his disciples, He called them to follow Him in humility and service. This job of a disciple was not one of fame and fortune but of humility and service to others above themselves.

In Mark 8:34-37, Jesus makes a similar request.

Calling the crowd along with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me and the gospel will save it. For what does it benefit someone to gain the whole world and yet lose his life? What can anyone give in exchange for his life?"

In this passage, Jesus again calls for followers who will abandon all to follow him. The audience in this scenario includes the entire crowd as well as the disciples. Unlike the literal call to the disciples in Matthew 4, this call is symbolic to all of Jesus' followers. Jesus lays out three essentials for those who wish to follow Him. The first is that one must deny himself. Akin describes this denial as "Give up the right to self-determination. Live as Christ directs. Treasure and value

¹² David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 63.

¹³ Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 55.

¹⁴ Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew*, 72.

Jesus more than yourself, your comforts, and your aspirations. Put to death the idol of I."¹⁵ This sacrifice was a difficult thing to ask. Even Jesus' disciples, who had left all to follow Him, struggled with this concept. In Luke 22, we read of these men arguing over who was the greatest among them. Jesus reminded them, "Whoever is greatest among you should become like the youngest, and whoever leads, like the one serving" (Mark 22:26).

The second thing this passage requires of a disciple of Jesus is that they take up their cross. In Luke 9:23, the writer adds the word *daily* to this command. Jesus warns those who wish to follow him that they must "be ready to face literal scorn and death, for they must follow to the cross."¹⁶ Those listening to Jesus were familiar with the punishment of crucifixion. They knew the scorn and humility of this type of death. This command of Jesus is radical in that it requires dying to self and the willingness to face literal death.

The third part of Jesus' requirement in this passage was to "follow me." This command reminds those willing to deny their self-interest and face the cross that there is a reason to do so. It is to follow the only One worth following. Platt says, "Because life is worth more than the world itself, giving one's life in this world to gain it in the world to come is a wise transaction."¹⁷

Jesus' disciples gave with abandon. They held back no reserve. As Jesus was preparing to leave this earth, He spoke to His Father of these disciples who had given so much. He said, "I have given them the words you gave me. They have received them and have known for certain that I came from you. They have believed that you sent me." (John 17:8). The disciples received heavenly approbation for their lives lived in abandon.

Approbation for Obedience – No Regrets

In addition to Jesus giving approbation for acts of sacrifice and abandon, scripture also shows His approval for those who lived in obedience to His ways. In the New Testament, one can read the blueprint for how to gain approval. 1 Timothy 2:15 says, "Be diligent to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who doesn't need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth." Christ gives approbation to those who obediently follow His commands to study the scriptures. In Acts 17:11, a group identified as the Bereans were referred to as people "of more noble character than those in Thessalonica since they received the word with eagerness and examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things

¹⁵ Daniel Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Mark*. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 168.

¹⁶ Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 49.

¹⁷ Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew*, 168.

were so." Those who followed the teachings of scripture were worthy of the approbation of Christ.

Jesus expresses approbation to others for their obedience. Zacchaeus pleased Him with his immediate change of heart and generous actions. Contemporaries of Zacchaeus did not approve of the tax collector or the attention he received from Jesus. Luke 19:7 says, "All who saw it began to complain, 'He's gone to stay with a sinful man.'" But Zacchaeus, who had experienced a change of heart that day, responded by saying in verse 8, "Look, I'll give half of my possessions to the poor, Lord. And if I have extorted anything from anyone, I'll pay back four times as much." Jesus responded, "Today salvation has come to this house." (verse 9). Zacchaeus' acts of obedience and sacrifice were acknowledged and approved by Jesus on that day.

The Approbation of Christ in Today's World

It is evident that the approbation of Christ was earned in Bible times by those who sacrificed extravagantly with no reserve, those who gave with abandon and no retreat, and those who offered obedience with no regrets. The same applies to Christians today. God is looking for followers who will be worthy of His approval in these same areas. In applying these ideas, it is essential to remember that approbation is not something humankind can either earn or deserve. It is instead about what one will give. Approbation is not as much about sanctification as simple sacrifice and obedience. Approbation of God or man is also not something that Christians should seek or strive for while here on earth. Jesus warned against that very idea. Francis Dixon warns,

As Christians and God's servants, our chief concern should be gaining God's approval. We should not seek the approval of men, even of our family and friends, but of God Himself. Sometimes, in order to gain God's approval, we have to lose men's approval. John the Baptist discovered this (Matthew 14:8), and so did the man in John 9 (verse 34). Stephen also lost the approval of men but gained God's approval (Acts 7:59). The same was true of Paul and Silas (Acts 16:23-24).¹⁸

As with all that God asks of His followers, He also provides the example and the resources to live in a way that would meet His approval. Jesus was the ultimate example of life worthy of approbation while living on earth. Jesus Christ, as a perfect example to all, personified and demonstrated the same attributes that He praised in those around Him. While on earth, Jesus Christ gave approbation to those who gave with sacrificial extravagance, followed with abandon, and obeyed

¹⁸ Francis Dixon, "How to Gain God's Approval," *Words of Life Ministries*, <https://www.wordsoflife.co.uk/bible-studies/study-5-how-to-gain-god%C2%92s-approval/>

completely. While on earth, Jesus Christ also received the approbation of His Father as He also demonstrated sacrifice, abandon, and obedience.

Jesus Receives God's Approbation Through Sacrificial Extravagance

When the woman with the alabaster jar breaks it as a sacrifice for her Master, Jesus quickly points out that what she is doing foreshadows future events. In Matthew's account, Jesus says, "By pouring this perfume on my body, she has prepared me for burial "(Matt 26:12). The ultimate and most extravagant sacrifice is that which Christ gave on the cross of Calvary. Although this act was the culmination of the sacrifice of Christ and the approbation of God, the sacrifice started before those events. In fact, the sacrifice started with the incarnation. Philippians 2:7 says that Jesus "emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity." Jesus sacrificed His perfect life with His Father in Heaven to come to a sinful earth. He did this, knowing it would lead to His death on the cross. This sacrifice was for the approbation of the Father, and the Father approved of the sacrifice and the obedience. Verses 8-9 say, "He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross. For this reason, God highly exalted him and gave him the name above every name." God exalted Jesus for His extravagant sacrifice.

Jesus Receives God's Approbation Through Abandon

Not only was Jesus' gift extravagant, but He gave this gift with abandon. Giving one's life means there is nothing left to give. Jesus had given all. There was no way to retreat once the decision was made. Jesus demonstrated that giving with abandon is not easy. In the prayer in the garden before His death, He pleaded with His Father to provide another way. Yet, at this moment, the Son realized that the only way to appease the Father ultimately was to abandon all as both the Father and the weight of sin demanded.

Jesus Receives God's Approbation for Obedience

At the outset of Jesus' earthly ministry, He finds Himself offering up His body for baptism in the waters with John the Baptist. When John protests what he feels is the absurdity of baptizing His own Savior, Jesus insists on John performing the ritual. Some may question why Jesus submitted to this ordinance. MacArthur believes that one reason Jesus submitted to baptism was to give an

example of obedience to His followers.¹⁹ Piper says, "The fact that participating in a baptism of repentance even though he had no sins to repent of is part of that shows that the righteousness he wanted to fulfill was the righteousness required not of himself, but of every sinful man."²⁰

Although there may have been multiple reasons for the baptism of Jesus by John, one clear thing is that God approved of their actions. God's approbation of this act of obedience by His Son was swift and specific. The gospel of Matthew states, "The heavens suddenly opened for him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming down on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'" (Matt 3:16-17).

Conclusion

Scripture is replete with examples of times when man's opinions differed from those of the Divine. 1 Samuel 16:7 says, "For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." The things that humans value are often the opposite of what God values. Jesus told some confused disciples in Matthew 20:26 that "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant." The approbation of Christ is another example of the thoughts of the Godhead being different from those of man. Approbation is given to those who sacrifice extravagantly, abandon fully, and obey completely. It is this approbation that the one living for Christ should seek until the day come of ultimate approbation, and the Master says, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You were faithful over a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Share your master's joy." (Matthew 25:23). Until that day, the example of Christ will be the guide of those living their lives for the approval of God.

¹⁹ John MacArthur. *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary on Matthew*. (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1985).

²⁰ John Piper, "Why Was Jesus Baptized?" *Desiring God*, last modified 2016, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/why-was-jesus-baptized>

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