

Christian Tolerance

There are enormous misunderstandings today regarding the virtue of tolerance. As Don Carson points out in his recent book, “The Intolerance of Tolerance”, the definition of this virtue has changed in recent years from “the acceptance of the existence of differing views” to the “acceptance of differing views.” There's a big difference between those two ideas. Intolerance is no longer the patient endurance of contrary ideas, but rather the treatment of every idea as though it has equal truth or value; and if one questions this notion, he himself is considered intolerant, which cannot be tolerated. In fact, the United Nations published a paper on this matter in 1995, entitled “Declaration of Principles on Tolerance,” which said, “Tolerance...involves the rejection of dogmatism and absolutism.” (Doesn't that sound a bit dogmatic and absolute?) Those who promote this new definition boast of its multi-cultural inclusion, forgetting, apparently, that this new definition is itself culturally conditioned by Western secular values.

Because of this shift in our culture's understanding of tolerance, much of what Christians believe, including many of our views on issues of public morality have come to be seen as massively intolerant by the general population. At times we deserve some of this scorn, but much of it is horribly misdirected at those whose religious legacy is one of notable liberty and toleration, as well as helpful and faithful engagement with civic affairs. If one thinks about the largest and most influential group of our national founders, she realizes that these folks were themselves largely escaping the evils of state-sponsored religious intolerance. How ironic, then, that these people's heirs would today face the charge of religious intolerance.

The temptation for Bible-believing Christians is sometimes to push back on this unfair criticism, which often merely has the effect of giving seeming justification to the criticism! This is not Jesus' way. We see His view of things in our text today.

Mark 9:38-41

³⁸ John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” ³⁹ But Jesus said, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ For the one who is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.

I. We all tend toward religious intolerance (v.38)

It is painfully embarrassing to observe the disciples' reactions to Jesus' announcement that He is going to Jerusalem to die for us—in 8:32 Peter tries to talk Him out of it; in 9:34, the disciples argue about who's the greatest; in 10:35, James and John jockey for positions of honor; and here, they try to shut down ministry that they think has not been properly authorized. It's particularly ironic in this instance, because just hours before this, the disciples were unable to cast out a demon from a troubled boy.

This text reminds us of our own jealousies and desires to control things, which so often lead to various attempts to compare ourselves favorably to others or to attempt to thwart their efforts to do good. (Recall Joshua's attempt to forbid Eldad and Medad from prophesying in Numbers 11:27-29).

This has been done, and is being done, by every sort of person and type of religious group throughout history: the Roman Catholic Church with the Crusades, the Inquisitions, and the history of political oppression of religious minorities; the Muslim Religion with the violent threats and bloody terrorism frequently perpetrated against their religious opponents; the Protestants in the early days of the Colonies with the witch trials and with the requirements in some colonies of

church membership in order to vote in civic life; and of course the atheists, who in the last century murdered millions of people simply because they adhered to various religious beliefs. (It's fantastically ironic to hear the New Atheists make their claims that religion kills, when one can just look at the bloodshed at the hands of Stalin, Hitler, Mao, and Pol Pot in the 20th century.) And today, in our own society, we can see some of the most outrageous violations of true toleration, often in the name of "tolerance."

Why do we do this? Because very early on in our relationship with Jesus we begin to pervert our calling to serve God and neighbor into a very sophisticated religious scheme to control others and to serve ourselves!

2. Jesus commands religious tolerance (v.39-41)

Does He then imply that all religions are equally true or useful? Absolutely not! (Consider the sons of Sceva in Acts 19:13-16.) But sometimes we infer from our differences with someone or with some group of people that we should then separate from and censure, rather than accept them. Jesus gives three reasons why we must be truly tolerant:

A. Our tolerance encourages restraint (v.39)

This is why we celebrate Worldwide Communion Sunday. All of God's people are in this together, and we must look for ways to honor our brothers and sisters in other denominations, and we must look for new ways to work together in Kingdom work, without being naive, sentimental, or dishonest about our serious doctrinal differences. When we do this, others will tend to think and speak well of the Christian faith.

B. Our tolerance builds coalitions (v.40)

The advice here is most interesting. If we look at Matthew 12:30, it appears that Jesus is giving conflicting instructions. (Solomon also seems to be doing the same thing in Proverbs 26:4,5.) The reality, however, is that we are being taught to nuance our approach; there are times when we must separate ourselves from others, and time when we must unite with those with whom we might disagree on some issues. We must learn, for example, in our church mission, to work with other NGOs and government agencies, when possible. If we can accomplish something together, let's do it.

C. Our tolerance invites blessings (v.41)

You can genuinely be thankful that others are helping you in your ministry, not just for your sake, but also for theirs. See how the Apostle Paul expresses this principle in Phil. 4:17.

Of course, ultimately, we must be tolerant of others because we are saved by the tolerance of God. It is by the riches of His kindness, forbearance, and patience that we are led to faith and repentance. (Cf. Romans 2:4, e.g.)

This study leads us, then, to at least these five practical conclusions:

1. Know what you believe. It is more important than ever that you study to develop deep, biblical convictions about what is true, good, and beautiful.
2. Yoke yourselves equally in partnerships that are meant to be exclusively with those who share your deepest convictions (as in marriage, church membership, or in evangelistic ministry).
3. Respect, listen carefully to, and learn much from those with whom you disagree.

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4. Build meaningful friendships and partnerships with those with whom you disagree on some issues by finding common ground and by structuring your common mission so that your differences are irrelevant to that mission.
 5. Teach, promote, and defend true tolerance, as opposed to its oppressive counterfeit.

Discussion Questions

1. How have you experienced or observed the new “intolerant tolerance?”
2. What is Jesus' solution for this?
3. Why is it important, individually and collectively, that we exercise true tolerance?
4. How do we decide when to partner and when to remain separate?
5. How can we best promote true tolerance in our society?
6. What is our ultimate motive for tolerance?

Going Deeper

1. How do you need to become truer in your tolerance, both in attitude and action?
2. What do you think is at the root of your intolerant moments? How should the Gospel come into play there?