

Tolerable Intolerance

A strange phenomenon is with us today: a tolerable intolerance. All around us we hear the words 'tolerance' and 'intolerance'. Nothing is as bad as being called 'intolerant' today. If you fall into this category you will no doubt incur the wrath of the society and even, in some cases, the law. In other words, there is no tolerance for the intolerant.

Webster's dictionary defines intolerant as 'refusing to tolerate others in the enjoyment of their opinions, rights, or worship'. That's a fairly good definition. The problem surrounds what the word 'tolerate' has come to mean. Unfortunately, this has become the label given to evangelical Christians. Increasingly, we are being told that if you preach that Jesus is the only way, you are intolerant. We are hearing that if you disagree with the views and philosophies of others, you are intolerant of other religions and viewpoints. Apparently, so long as you agree that everyone else is right in some way, you are fine. The moment you suggest that someone else is wrong, you are branded as intolerant.

There was a time when intolerance meant something very different. It meant that you refused to allow other religions or opinions to exist. Intolerance was not disagreeing with the religion down the road; it was openly persecuting it and seeking to destroy it. This kind of intolerance, Jesus flatly repudiated. He said to Pilate in John 18:36, "*My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.*"

Indeed, when Peter had attempted to do just that, He told him, "*Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.*"

Certainly over the past 2000 years, there have been those who, in the name of Christ, persecuted other religions. In so doing, they demonstrated they were not truly following the message of Christ, and hence were more than likely not His true children. It is a plain fact, not very often pointed out, that more Christians have been killed by people claiming to be Christians than members of any other religion. Simply read Foxe's Book of Martyrs to get some idea of the river of blood that has always flowed from the death of true Christians. So there has always been a false church practising true intolerance.

It was for freedom from this kind of tyranny that many fled Europe. Where they landed they immediately set about implementing laws that preserved religious freedom. But what did they mean by freedom of religion? Did they mean all religions are equally true? Did they mean all religions are just different ways up the mountain? Did they mean it did not really matter what you believed? Was this the freedom they meant? No, it was not. What they meant was the freedom to believe differently to others without forcing those beliefs on others. By forcing beliefs, they did not mean what people mean today. They meant forcing with the sword. Today, if you have a conversation with someone, you are said to be forcing your beliefs on them. Original freedom of religion meant you could live out your beliefs without fear of death or imprisonment for doing so. People could disagree philosophically, but not violently. There was freedom to disagree without persecution. Nowhere in the minds of these pioneers of freedom of religion did they ever think that what they were trying to

create was complete uniformity of religious opinion. They were not trying to create a one-world religion, nor did they expect this new freedom to mean everyone would agree. Indeed, it was with this understanding that many from foreign nations came to places like the United States, knowing they would be allowed to practise their religion there without being arrested or executed.

But somewhere along the line, this idea of religious freedom mutated. It became something it was never meant to be. It came to mean that freedom was not only living side by side with others, but now it included never suggesting your neighbour was mistaken in his beliefs. Whereas tolerance used to be the right to practise your beliefs without fear of violence, it has now become freedom to practise your beliefs without fear of contradiction. Tolerance no longer means not persecuting other religions with the sword, it now means saying other religions are not wrong or mistaken. It now means that evangelising and seeking to win others to Christ is part of being intolerant.

Intolerance used to mean refusing to allow another man to voice his opinion. Now intolerance means regarding your view as truth. So today, if you raise your voice and state that Christ said He was the only way to the Father, you will be immediately shouted down as part of the intolerant. Of course, the deep irony is that the world is tolerant of everyone except those who disagree with them. They are very intolerant of those who do not embrace the new tolerance. I was just reading how a British politician was arrested on a charge of inciting racial hatred, because he made the statement that a particular religion was wicked and violent. Now you may or may not agree with his statement. But that's all it was – a statement. He did not burn down any religious buildings, or send poison in the mail. He voiced his view – and the new tolerance came down on him like a ton of bricks. His supposed lack of tolerance for another religion was met with the lack of tolerance for such people.

In this new world, the only kinds of people who are tolerated are those who say that everyone is right in some way or another. If you smile at everyone, and say, “God bless you, you’re finding God just like me, simply a different way, you’re just taking another route up the same mountain” – then you’re tolerated, because, in their eyes, you’re tolerant. If you say, “You know, I love you, but I believe you’re wrong. I believe you’re headed for destruction, and I want to show you what I believe is the truth” – this is intolerant, and it won’t be tolerated.

So to sum it up succinctly: the world is very tolerant of all things but one: Biblical Christianity. It tolerates the continued slaughter of Christians in countries like Nigeria and Indonesia, but if Christianity so much as disagrees with something, it shouts intolerance at the top of its voice. It tolerates those who still commit religious violence, but if the true evangelical church sends missionaries, it has no tolerance for such things – which it calls arrogance. It tolerates perversions and abominations; it glorifies and laughs over sin, but it is very, very intolerant of Biblical Christianity, which speaks out against sin. It tolerates all kinds of philosophies, some of which openly claim to be the only way themselves, but when Christians preach Christ as the only Saviour of the world, there is no tolerance for this.

Why is this the case, and what must we do?

The reasons for this state of affairs is really twofold – the nature of true Christianity, and the nature of darkness.

Let's look at the nature of Christianity. Much of the reason why biblical Christianity feels the brunt of this new so-called tolerance is its very nature. Christianity is firstly a message of:

Objectivity: Biblical evangelical Christianity makes the bold claim that truth is not inside us. Truth is not what you decide it to be. Truth is not situational. Born-again Christianity says that objective, absolute truth resides in God's Word – the Bible. This is very offensive to the new tolerance, because its very premise is that something can be true for you, and not true for me – but it is still true. In other words, they make truth subjective. Something becomes true because a human decides it to be. This, of course, makes mankind the authority for determining what is true and what isn't. But biblical Christianity, although it is branded as arrogant, in fact adopts a humble position, saying God is the authority, and all that is true is in His Word, regardless of whether a man or woman agrees with it. Truth is truth – forever settled in heaven. You can say gravity doesn't exist, that doesn't make it any less true. Christianity is hated because it stresses objective truth.

Secondly, Christianity is a message of **Authority**. It takes the message of objective truth, and says, "God is the Authority, and He said it, so it is true for all men". There are some who claim that they have found the truth about life, but not all will say it must be so for all people. But the message of the Bible is that God's Word is the truth for all people. The very nature of evangelism suggests this- God wants people to embrace His Word as the final authority. If the Bible is the final authority – it means all other truths must be measured by its truth. It is the absolute standard. Jesus said in John 17:17: "*Thy word is truth*". And thus, if it is a message of authority, it immediately becomes absolute truth. It is not just one of many truths competing for relevance, importance or popularity. It is the final truth to which all truth will eventually return. This kind of message is, of course, what stirs up so much hatred. In a pluralistic, relativistic society, the only thing worse than saying you have found the absolute truth, is to say it is the absolute truth for all men. The world will quietly fume when you say that Jesus is the only way, but they will blow a gasket when you say He is the only way for all mankind.

But again, there is no logical reason to evangelise if the message of Christianity does not carry the authority to overrule man's ideas. If it is just another human truth, it certainly is arrogant of Christianity to try and claim its truths are more worthy of attention than another's. If Christianity is simply another man-made philosophy, it is rude, uncaring and impolite to tell others that their views are wrong. It is like the man who insists he is always right and everyone else is always wrong. But this kind of belligerency is not the nature of biblical Christianity. Biblical Christianity evangelises in a world hostile to evangelism, not out of pride, but out of the humble conviction that God's Word is the final authority for all mankind. This biblical authority is not the authority to in any way mistreat, persecute, or restrict the rights of others. It is delegated authority. Jesus said, "*As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you*". Our authority is not belligerency or arrogance or narrow-mindedness; our authority is a gift. It is the gift of salvation with the illuminated understanding it brings, and the gift of the Word of God, which we then proclaim. If a government official knocks on your door and tells you that your home is in the direct path of a new railway line they plan

to build, all he is doing is conveying the message from a higher authority. He is not going to break down your house himself. There is no sense in shouting at him, or calling him arrogant for suggesting the government can build on your private property. He is just the messenger. When Christians tell the world that Jesus Christ is the Supreme One of the universe and salvation is only through Him, or else destruction awaits, they are simply the messengers. Any violence, hatred or mistreatment of their neighbour in conveying this message is a betrayal of the message itself. But to convey that message is not hate-speech. It is not intolerant. It is in fact love. In an environment hostile to evangelism, nothing would be more comfortable for me than to quietly stick to me, myself and I. Arrogance would in fact compel me to say, "Well, if that's the way you want it, we just won't share the good news. We'll happily enjoy our Christian life here and sail on to heaven, and you can plunge on to destruction". But the reason a Christian can never do that is two-fold, love and obedience. He loves God, and therefore is God-like in His compassion. That means he loves his neighbour. God has told him to love his neighbour and obey the call to tell him the Gospel. If a Christian truly believes in the reality of hell, he will share the message with his neighbour, not out of arrogance, but out of concern. If you see a blind man walking towards the edge of a cliff, will you run toward him and try to rescue him, or will you reason, "If I try to stop him, it might offend him"? Clearly, the second idea is preposterous, due to the reality of the situation. He is on his way to destruction. Is trying to rescue him an act of arrogance or an act of love? Clearly, if he is simply going for a walk, and you insist he changes paths, that would be arrogance. But it comes back to objectivity. Christians believe the Word of God is the absolute truth. Hence, if you have any integrity, the outflow of humbly believing that message is evangelism. To the unbeliever, such claims sound preposterous. They will say, "You claim to have the monopoly on truth!" The answer is, "We believe God has the monopoly on truth, and we are trying to convey what He has said is the truth".

So Christianity will not be tolerated in the new tolerance because it is a message of objectivity, and it is a message of authority.

But the second reason why Christianity is not tolerable to many is because of the nature of darkness. The Bible speaks fairly extensively on this.

Jesus said in John 3:18-21: *"He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God."*

Darkness hates conviction. Jesus said the guilt of the world is this: God has presented the world with truth – with light. It is as if man is skulking away in a pitch dark cave, committing all sorts of evils. The darkness suits him, because it covers what he is doing. It aids him in his sin. But a light appears some distance from the cave. Instead of going to the light, he stays in his cave, because he knows the light will reveal him to be evil. Man's corruption is so severe, that he loves his sin, and hates whatever will show the evil of his sin. Therefore darkness will hate the message of Christianity. Biblical Christianity does not say: "You're a wonderful, great person.

Keep doing what you are doing. God accepts you. It says, “You are a sinful, miserable rebel, headed for judgement. The best of your good works are like filthy rags to God. There is nothing in you to endear you to God. You must repent and receive Christ for salvation”. This message is one of painful conviction. It is blood-honest, soul-searing and gut-wrenching. It shows the skulking man in the cave, his reflection in blinding light, and calls him to God, who lovingly offers grace and forgiveness. So darkness will hate a message of conviction.

The second reason why Christianity is fast becoming intolerable is because **Darkness hates truth.**

That is to say, it enjoys its lies. It hates the light of God’s Word because it will expose its way of life to be vanity, futile and foolish. So it prefers its lies. Now this concept seems hard to understand. If man seeks his own interests, why would he lie to himself? Why would man knowingly do the opposite of what he knows is true? Is it really possible for a man to deceive himself? The answer is yes. James speaks of a man who looks into a mirror but makes no changes is guilty of self-deception. I take that to mean, he focuses on one truth, to purposely distract him from another truth. He has looked in the mirror – that is one truth. He focuses on his visit to the mirror, instead of the truth that he made no changes. Focusing on truth no.1 seemingly gives him an excuse from seeing truth no. 2. In the same way, man’s self-deception, his belief of lies comes from believing one truth to the exclusion of others.

For example, he believes the truth that he is a noble creature created in God’s image to the exclusion of the truth that he is accountable to God.

Romans 1:18 says: *“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth”*.

What does it mean to suppress the truth? It means to refuse to allow the truth any exposure. Why? – Because it will cause conviction. Man innately knows truth about one Creator God, and the need for reconciliation to Him. But darkness hates conviction, and so hates that truth. It seeks to obscure it, cover it, disprove it, or reason it away. With unrighteousness, man deliberately seeks to cover up the truth. This is why darkness will be tolerant of any message that does not expose its darkness. But the Bible, knowing the hearts of man, holds man culpable. 2 Peter 3:5 calls scoffers *‘willingly ignorant’*. It sounds like an oxymoron. If you are ignorant, you didn’t choose to be that way – or did you?

The Bible says that man who scoffs at the Word of God’s promise that Christ will return is willingly ignorant. He has chosen to distract himself from that truth, to suppress the truth with his sinful life. His sinful life distracts him from pondering the reality – does God exist? Will he hold me accountable for my life? How do I become reconciled to him? It is because man willingly, knowingly refuses the light, that the Bible says in Romans 1, that he is ‘without excuse’.

Darkness hates truth because it causes conviction, and because it exposes this self-deception. The truth is, no-one would admit to self-deception. But light exposes what is false. John MacArthur said, “In a time like this of tolerance, listen, false teaching will always cry intolerance. It will always say you are being divisive, you are being unloving, and you are being ungracious, because it can only survive when it doesn’t get scrutinized. So it cries against any intolerance. It cries against any examination,

any scrutiny—just let's embrace each other; let's love each other; let's put all that behind us. False doctrine cries the loudest about unity.”

So this chapter in the history of the church has come about because of the nature of biblical Christianity – a message of objective truth and a message of authority. And it has come about because of the nature of darkness; darkness hates this light of biblical Christianity because it hates conviction and it hates truth. But that raises the question: What do we do about it? Firstly, we must hold the message as the authority. As soon as the church begins to back-peddle, and play the world's tune, it loses the light it has. It loses its position as salt and light. It joins in the chorus of Babylon which believes it can build a tower into heaven, in defiance of God's grace. The church has never grown through compromise. The church has never grown when it has retreated. Sometimes advancing has meant being thrown to the lions in the circus. Sometimes going forward has meant being burnt at the stake, or being imprisoned for life. But persecution seems to be the soil in which the plant of faith thrives greatest.

When Satan has breathed fire on the church, he has ironically set it ablaze with commitment to God. But wherever the church has retreated, recanted, and watered down the Gospel, it has shrivelled up and died. In seeking to find acceptance with the world, they found only that they had to surrender more of the message, till there was nothing left of it at all. A church sounding the retreat is a church lacking confidence in the promises of God, and exercising unbelief, not faith. Many today think that by agreeing with the pluralism of the day, they will win a hearing for Christianity. But they sadly do not see that once they make that compromise, their message can have no authority, and lacks the very hearing they sought to achieve. Darkness will not be satisfied to sit with even a semblance of light, till it has completely de-clawed the truth. Jesus expects us to hold the truth up as truth, not as opinion.

“Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt has lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.

(Mat 5:13-15)

2) Secondly, we should prepare for persecution, with our eyes on the promises. It is not that we seek persecution. As normal human beings we seek the comforts of life and joy and peace. But this chapter in Western history where the true church has been able to preach its message without martyrdom is more than likely coming to an end. The choices will become increasingly black and white and the so-called tolerance of our day puts a new name on a very ancient thing – hatred of Biblical Christianity.

Jesus promised these things, but attached promises of reward that we ought to focus on:

“They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.” (Jhn 16:2) “Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

(Mat 5:11-12)” The reason we are willing to go through persecution is not because we delight in loss, it is because we believe we are gaining something even better – a reward in heaven. It is not that we seek to be persecuted. We must seek to be truthful. If truth brings persecution that is under the sovereignty of God – and He will give us the grace to go through it.

3) Thirdly, we must love the lost. The world is not our enemy. People with viewpoints and philosophies and beliefs that we believe are wrong are not the enemy. Christians are not to hate anyone. We are to hate lies. We are to hate sin. But we love people. It is that very love which causes us to confront evil belief systems. That is what Paul is speaking about when he writes 2 Corinthians 10:4-5: “(For the weapons of our warfare *are* not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) *Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;* (2Co 10:4-5)

That’s real spiritual warfare – battling unbelief and exposing error. Matthew 10:16 is our Lord describing the balance: “*Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.*” *Be humble, gentle – messengers of grace – but be wise, shrewd, not given to compromise. Be tough-minded, but tender-hearted. Be uncompromising with the truth, but be unwavering in compassion*”.

The new kind of tolerance will not tolerate biblical Christianity. This should not cause resentment or outrage from us – God never promised us justice would come from this world. Instead, we need to feel the privilege of being ambassadors of Christ, the honour of being children of light, and continue to shine, come what may.