

Swimming Against the Tide

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The *Macmillan Dictionary* defines "tolerate" as, "to allow someone to do something that you do not like or approve of".¹ Should Christians be tolerant? Is the free world becoming a more tolerant society, as some media report, or less?² What do the answers to these questions mean for Christians in the twenty-first century?

Picking and Choosing What We'll Tolerate

The answer to the question of whether the free world is becoming more tolerant would seem to depend on what we're getting tolerant about. While the *Economist* article above cites a study indicating we are becoming more tolerant than ever of "communists, gays and atheists," Cristina Odone reports in *NewStatesman*³ that Christians, Muslims, and Jews "increasingly feel they are no longer free to express any belief, no matter how deeply felt, that runs counter to the prevailing fashions for superficial 'tolerance' and 'equality' (terms which no longer bear their dictionary meaning but are part of a political jargon in which only certain views, and certain groups, count as legitimate)."

Odone tells of trying to find a venue in London for a conference to discuss traditional marriage. They thought they had bookings, first at the Law Society and then at the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, but both were in turn cancelled because the meeting supposedly would violate diversity policies. So, in the name of "diversity," which is supposed to be an expression of toleration, the management of both venues made decisions that were blatantly intolerant. But, as those who have been on the receiving end of it can tell you, advocates of traditional institutions, such as one man one woman marriages, and religions, especially Christianity, are the new discriminated-against minorities. And this is considered perfectly acceptable by many people.

What really seems to be happening is not a rise in overall tolerance, but merely a change in the tide as we go from intolerance of one group to tolerance of that group but intolerance of another. This is

¹ (<http://www.macmillandictionary.com/us/dictionary/american/tolerate>)

² e.g. "Getting nicer" (<http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2015/03/tolerance-america>)

³ (<http://www.newstatesman.com/2014/01/new-intolerance-will-we-regret-pushing-christians-out-public-life>)

resulting in a rise in polarization,⁴ extremism, and downright bullying. At the same time, people are using political correctness as a shield for their unreasonable hypersensitivity to any position contrary to their own (again, particularly if that position supports traditional values or religion), pushing us to target thought crime.⁵ This in itself then becomes another form of bullying any dissenting voices into silence.

Our modern society seems to have set itself a course toward intolerance that, as much as we electronically babble, prevents real communication and the free exchange of ideas. It seems that, rather than trying to understand one another, we are more interested in shouting each other down. The freedom of conscience, freedom of thought, and freedom of speech that our forefathers worked so tirelessly for and sacrificed so much to attain, we now effortlessly give up in the name of political correctness.

I don't want to appear one-sided. Religious dogma also has a long history of trampling on people's rights. Christian dogma, even, has been wrongly understood and misapplied to silence and persecute dissenters, and, as I explain in "Sorting Out the Two Kingdoms" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/twokingdoms.htm>) there are those today who are waiting in the wings to regain power and institute the Law of Moses. These legalists do not understand the full significance of the New Covenant that Jesus instituted. I believe that it is fully in line with the new world that Jesus Christ ushered in to say that each of us, in love, owes his neighbor and even his enemy a non-threatening atmosphere where we can all air our viewpoints without fear or coercion. The opposite tendency to suppress dissenting voices needs to be exposed for what it is: bullying.

Thus, the answer to whether Christians should be tolerant is yes, as far as our interfacing with the society around us. This does not mean that we are to tolerate what we know from Scripture to be sin in our own lives or in the Christian assembly. We have no biblical mandate, however, to be condemning of non-Christians and no right to expect them to obey Christian moral standards. Remember, too, that to tolerate something does not imply that we necessarily like or approve of it.

⁴ "Polarization at highest level in 25 Years" (<http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2012/06/05/study-polarization-at-highest-level-in-25-years/>)

⁵ "Is America Starting to Target Thought Crime?" (http://news.yahoo.com/america-starting-target-thought-crime-015023317.html?soc_src=mediacontentstory)

We should also keep in mind that Jesus told us to "be wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16). It is neither wise nor harmless to be judgmental of others or to be harping on the way they live. Remember, "Such were some of you, but you were washed. But you were sanctified. But you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). The only difference between you and the world is Jesus Christ, so if you want to make a difference in the world, preach Christ and Him crucified. If we are more tolerant toward what the world is saying, we might find that the world will be more willing to listen to our Gospel message. Remember the Golden Rule: "Therefore whatever you desire for men to do to you, you shall also do to them" (Matthew 7:12).

Intolerance Leading to Totalitarianism

The possibility of hard times, however, must be faced. Thanks to the internet, web, mobile communication, social media, or whatever this thing is that now connects us all into instant and unrelenting chatter with one another, our civilization is becoming one big shout fest. Never before in history have individuals had such a chance to express themselves and be heard by so many others. But, although we can each have our say, it seems that, more and more, self-appointed committees of speech police are expecting us to conform to their pre-approved worldview. Should anyone dare disagree with the politically correct, media-approved, emotionally charged opinion on a topic—and especially if that poor soul has the guts to present a rational argument against that position—he or she will immediately be shouted down, slandered, and even threatened.

If the momentum from both sides of the political spectrum continues without check, we in the so-called free world are going to find ourselves in a society as oppressive—at least as far as conscience, speech, and religion are concerned—as any totalitarian regime in history. Political extremism has now risen to the point that the extremes, instead of seeking to understand each other, do all they can to try to outlaw the other's values. Instead of holding productive dialog, they polarize themselves with ad hominem attacks.

If you challenge the political left, expect vicious attacks from every corner of the globe by a unified mob of green, global-warming, feminist, rainbow, pro-choice, pseudo-scientist, evolutionist, animal rights, atheists who, above all, are anti-Christian. I'm not talking about people who happen to believe in some of these causes but still hold to the principle of freedom of the conscience. I'm talking about people

who give the impression that they are itching to buy guillotines by the gross and start using them on anyone who doesn't tow their line.

Challenging the political right brings a similar reaction from intolerant legalists who are raising their children to someday hold key political and military positions so that they can impose and enforce the Mosaic Law and start stoning sinners.

Out of such intolerant polarization come dictators promising stability. Napoleon Bonaparte rose through the military ranks during the French Revolution that began in 1789, seized power in 1799, and crowned himself emperor in 1804.

On January 30, 1933, the President of Germany, Paul von Hindenburg, appointed Adolf Hitler as Chancellor. Up to that point, Germany was a democratic nation, and most of its people still thought their freedoms secure. Just six years later, when World War II started, Germany was fully a fascist (specifically Nazi) dictatorship. It would be a mistake to think that such things can no longer happen. What, then, are we to do?

Role Reversal

While decrying the religious persecution of the past as evidence against Christianity, the left have themselves become modern inquisitors. Just a few years ago, these same people were crying out for tolerance and accusing Christians of being narrow-minded. Now they seem unable to tolerate anyone who is out of step with their agenda. They remind me of Stephen's persecutors who "gnashed at him with their teeth" and "cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and rushed at him with one accord" (Acts 7:54-58).

On some forums, you can hear people clamoring for the reinstatement of Mosaic law; on others you will find people calling for the criminalizing of Christianity. Each side would like to remove the rights (and perhaps the lives) of the other. Yet, both sides are as opposed to the true Gospel of New Covenant Christianity as they are to each other.

What, then, should we as Christians do?

PC in the Bible

Let's look at the examples of those who have gone before us. Being persecuted for not adhering to politically acceptable speech was a common situation for believers in ancient times.

There are too many examples to give them all in this article, but I will mention Elijah who, despite persecution from Jezebel, challenged the prophets of Baal and got the people to proclaim, "The LORD, he is God! the LORD, he is God!" (1 Kings 18:39). Amos was another. This is what he said at the command of God: "Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt, saying: 'You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth. Therefore I will punish you for all of your sins'" (Amos 3:1-2). The result was a sentence of exile: "Amaziah also said to Amos, 'You seer, go, flee away into the land of Judah, and there eat bread, and prophesy there: but don't prophesy again any more at Bethel; for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a royal house!'" (Amos 7:12-13).

The politically powerful persecuted Jeremiah because he told the unflattering truth about them and their false prophets and did not hold to patriotic lies when the nation was floundering (Jeremiah 15:15; 17:18; 20:11; 26:11; 37:15, 16; 38:4-6). There was a prophet named Uriah who said politically incorrect things. "They fetched Uriah out of Egypt, and brought him to Jehoiakim the king, who killed him with the sword, and cast his dead body into the graves of the common people" (Jeremiah 26:23).

Jesus speaks of "Zachariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary" (Luke 11:51). Stephen, shortly before he himself was killed for politically incorrect speech, said "Which of the prophets didn't your fathers persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, of whom you have now become betrayers and murderers" (Acts 7:52).

The writer of Hebrews speaks of others who "were tortured, not accepting their deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Others were tried by mocking and scourging, yes, moreover by bonds and imprisonment. They were stoned. They were sawn apart. They were tempted. They were slain with the sword. They went around in sheep skins and in goat skins; being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in

deserts, mountains, caves, and the holes of the earth" (Hebrews 11:35-38). Yes, of whom the world was not worthy.

As Jesus' followers, we should expect persecution: "Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his lord.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will keep yours also" (John 15:20). Jesus told us that when we are persecuted for the truth, we are blessed: "Blessed are you when people reproach you, persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven. For that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11-12).

The world would have us believe that we are living in a time that has gotten—or at least is getting—beyond narrow mindedness, one that values freedom of thought and free speech. But no, that is not the age we live in. All we've had is a switch. Instead of being persecuted by narrow-minded religionists for saying that the Earth is not the center of the universe, we are now subject to persecution by narrow-minded elitist scientists for our teaching the Creation or for our saying that global warming isn't man made, or for our affirming that Jesus died for sinners.

What we really have is not growing freedom but a mere change of the tide. Yes, there was a relatively free time between tides, but we are now definitely well into another extreme tide, and it will be a very low one of intolerance.

What are we to do?

If it is possible, as much as it is up to you, be at peace with all men. Don't seek revenge yourselves, beloved, but give place to God's wrath. For it is written, "Vengeance belongs to me; I will repay, says the Lord." Therefore "If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in doing so, you will heap coals of fire on his head." Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:18-21

If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed; because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. On their part he is blasphemed, but on your part he is glorified. For let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a

thief, or an evil doer, or a meddler in other men's matters.
But if one of you suffers for being a Christian, let him not
be ashamed; but let him glorify God in this matter.

1 Peter 4:14-16

This in no way means that we are to give up on the commission Jesus has given us: "Go into all the world, and preach the Good News to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15). This is our principle way of showing love to the world. The ebbing tide is God's natural way of removing what is dead from the waterways. Those of us who are spiritually alive will swim against the tide. Whatever the world throws at us, remember that Jesus is risen, and with His resurrection, He said, "Rejoice!... Don't be afraid.... All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.... Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:9, 10, 18, 20).

Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time.

Colossians 4:5

Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified, even as also with you; and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and evil men; for not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you, and guard you from the evil one.

2 Thessalonians 3:1-3