

SOLID GROUND

from Stand to Reason

January/February 2006

Probably no concept has more currency in our politically-correct culture than the notion of tolerance. Unfortunately, one of America's noblest virtues has been so distorted it's become a vice.

Dear Friend,

There is one word that can stop a follower of Christ in his tracks as he seeks to "give an account for the hope" that is in him. That word is "tolerance." Tolerant people are impartial, non-judgmental, and neutral. Each person is permitted to decide for himself. No "forcing" personal views.

This idea is especially popular with postmoderns, that breed of radical skeptics whose ideas command unwarranted respect in the university today. Their creed, "There is no truth," is often followed by a demand for tolerance.

In spite of all the confident bluster, the appeal self-destructs because it actually asserts two truths, one rational and one moral: the "truth" that there is no truth – a clear conflict – and the truth that one ought to tolerate other's viewpoints. Their confusion serves as a warning that the postmodern notion of tolerance is seriously misguided.

This neutrality – one of the most entrenched assumptions of a society committed to relativism – is a myth. Worse, it's a ruse, a swindle, and a hoax, a passive-aggressive tolerance trick.

THE TOLERANCE TRICK

By the relativists' definition of tolerance, true tolerance is impossible. Let me give you a real-life example.

A few years back I spoke to a class of seniors at a Christian high school in Des Moines. I wanted to alert them to this "tolerance trick," but I also wanted to learn how much they had already been taken in by it. I began by writing two sentences on the board. The first expressed the current understanding of tolerance:

All views are equally valid; no view is better than another.

All heads nodded in agreement. Nothing controversial here. Then I wrote the second sentence:

Jesus is the Messiah; Jews are wrong for rejecting Him.

Immediately hands flew up. "You can't say that," a coed challenged, clearly annoyed. "That's disrespectful. How would you like it if someone said you were wrong?"

"Like you're doing right now?" I pointed out. "It happens to me all the time and doesn't bother me at all. Why should it?"

"But your view is intolerant," she said, noting that the second statement violated the first. What she didn't see was that the first statement also violated itself.



GUARD THE TREASURE

QUICK SUMMARY:

- Just the threat of being called intolerant is enough to shame many Christians into silence. But the neutrality of postmodern tolerance, is a myth. Worse, it's a passive aggressive trick.
- If tolerance means that all views are equally valid, then the Christian's "narrow" view is just as valid as any other. Attacking Christians for their views, then, would be intolerant.
- Since each person thinks his own beliefs correct and those who differ wrong, no one is neutral, so no one satisfies the postmodern demands of tolerance
- The classical view of tolerance is synonymous with "acceptance." Accept (respect) all people based on our shared humanity. Don't accept (treat as legitimate) all behavior or all ideas. Some conduct is unacceptable and some ideas are unsound.
- Most of what passes for tolerance today is just intellectual cowardice. It is easier to call someone intolerant than to confront an idea and refute it or be changed by it. In the postmodern era, "tolerance" has become intolerance.

I pointed to the first statement and asked, “Is this a view, the idea that all views are equally valid?” They all agreed.

Then I pointed to the second statement – the “intolerant” one – and asked the same question: “Is this a view?” They studied the sentence for a moment. Slowly my point began to dawn on them.

If all views are equally valid, then the view that Jews are wrong for rejecting Jesus is just as true as the view that Jews are right for rejecting Jesus. But this is hopelessly contradictory: “All views are equally valid, including the view that all views are not equally valid,” or “All views are equally valid and not equally valid at the same time.”

They’d been taken in by the tolerance trick. If this is what tolerance amounts to, then no one can be tolerant because “tolerance” turns out to be contradictory gibberish.

ESCAPING THE TRAP

“Would you like to know how to get out of the trap?” I asked. They nodded. “Reject this distortion of tolerance and return to the classical view.” Then I wrote these two principles on the board:

*Be egalitarian regarding persons.
Be elitist regarding ideas.*

“Egalitarian” was a new word for them. Think “equal,” I said. Treat others as having equal standing in value or worth. This first principle, loosely equated with the word “respect,” is at the heart of the classical view of tolerance. Treat people with equal respect and deference.

They knew what an elitist was, though. An elitist was a snob, someone who thought he was better than others.

“Right,” I said. “When you are elitist regarding ideas, you acknowledge that some ideas are better than others. And they are. Some are good; some are bad. Some are true; some are false. Some are brilliant, others are foolish, and many are dangerous.”

“Here’s the key,” I summed up. “True tolerance applies to how we treat people, not how we treat ideas. In other words, all people are equally valid, not all ideas.”

We respect people who hold different beliefs from ours by treating them with courtesy, allowing them a place in the public conversation. Though we may strongly disagree with their ideas, tolerance requires us to be civil towards them in spite of our differences.

TOPSY-TURVY

The postmodern practice of tolerance turns the classical formula on its head.

Be egalitarian regarding ideas (all ideas are equally valid).

Be elitist regarding persons (all people are not worthy of equal respect).

Since all ideas are equal, if you reject another’s ideas you are automatically accused of disrespecting the person (as the student did with me). On this new view no idea or behavior can be opposed, even if done graciously, without inviting the charge of incivility.

Ironically, this results in the very elitism regarding persons relativist are trying to avoid. The “intolerant” one can be publicly humiliated, labeled as bigoted, ignorant, indecent and – ironically – intolerant. Sometimes you can even be sued, punished by law, or forced to attend re-education programs.

Tolerance has thus gone topsy-turvy: Tolerate most beliefs, but don’t tolerate (show respect for) those who take exception with those beliefs. Contrary opinions – especially politically incorrect ones – are labeled as “imposing your view on others” and quickly silenced.

THREE ELEMENTS OF TOLERANCE

This classical view, though largely absent from the public square, can still be found in dictionaries. According to *Webster’s*, the word “tolerate” means to allow or permit, to recognize and respect others’ beliefs and practices without sharing them, to bear or put up with someone or something not necessarily liked.

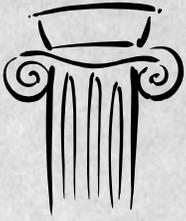
Tolerance, then, involves three elements: (1) permitting or allowing (2) a conduct or point of view one disagrees with or doesn’t like (3) while respecting the person in the process.

Notice that we cannot truly tolerate someone unless we disagree with her in some way. This is critical. We don’t tolerate people who share our views. They’re on our side. There’s nothing to “put up” with. True tolerance is reserved for those we think are wrong, yet still choose to treat decently.

This essential element of classical tolerance – disagreement (elitism regarding ideas) – has been completely lost in the postmodern distortion of the concept. Nowadays if you think someone wrong on culturally protected matters (e.g., sexual conduct, religious views, abortion), you are called intolerant no matter how you treat her.

This presents a curious problem. One must first think another is wrong in order to exercise true tolerance, yet expressing that conviction brings the accusation of intolerance. It’s a “Catch-22.” According to this approach, true tolerance becomes impossible.

The myth of tolerance forces everyone into an inevitable conflict. Each person in any debate has a point



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of view he thinks correct. Each person thinks those who differ are therefore wrong. As such, no one ever satisfies the demands of postmodern tolerance. That is why the "neutrality" of tolerance is a myth.

THREE FACES OF TOLERANCE

Adding to the confusion is the fact that tolerance could apply to different things – persons, behaviors, or ideas – and the rules differ for each.

Tolerance of persons – what might be called "civility" or "respect" – is at the heart of the classical view of tolerance: the freedom to express one's ideas without fear of reprisal.

We respect those who hold different beliefs than our own by treating them courteously and allowing their views a place in the public discourse. We may strongly disagree and vigorously contend against them, but we still show respect for the individual in spite of the differences.

Tolerance of behavior – the liberty to act – is an entirely different issue. In free societies, a person may believe as she likes – and usually has the liberty to express those beliefs – but she may not behave as she likes. Some behavior is a threat to the common good. Rather than being tolerated (allowed, though disagreed with), it is restricted by law. Historically, our culture has emphasized tolerance (respect) of all persons, but never tolerance of all behavior. In Lincoln's words, there is no right to do wrong.

Finally, there is tolerance of ideas. Tolerance of persons requires that each view gets a courteous hearing, not that all views have equal worth, merit, or truth. The view that no

person's ideas are any better or truer than another's is absurd. Reason and intellectual integrity require we treat some ideas as better than others. Any other approach is dangerous because ideas have consequences. To argue that some views are false, immoral, or just plain silly does not violate any meaningful standard of tolerance.

As a simple rule of thumb, think of the word "acceptance" as a synonym for "tolerance." Accept (respect) all people based on our shared humanity. Don't accept – treat as legitimate – all behavior or all ideas. Some conduct is unacceptable and some ideas unsound.

These three categories are frequently conflated by muddled thinkers. If one rejects another's ideas or behavior, he is automatically accused of rejecting the person and being disrespectful.

To say I'm intolerant of a person because I disagree with his ideas is confused. On this view of tolerance, no idea or behavior can be opposed, regardless of how graciously, without inviting censure and the charge of incivility. Instead of hearing, "I respect your view," those who differ in politically incorrect ways are told they are bigoted, narrow-minded, and intolerant.

STICKS AND STONES

This is nothing more than old fashioned name-calling. A case in point was an attack made in my community paper on Christians who were uncomfortable with the social pressure to approve of homosexuality. I wrote the following letter to the editor to show how the postmodern notion of tolerance had been twisted into a vice instead of a virtue.

Notice, my opening sounds like a standard defense for political correctness, then quickly shifts to use the tolerance trick against it:

Dear Editor:

I am consistently amazed to see how intolerant South Bay residents are to moral views other than their own. Last week's letters about homosexuality were cases in point. One writer even suggested that your publication censor alternate opinions!

This narrow-mindedness and self-righteous attitude about sexual ethics is hypocritical. They challenge what they view as hate (it used to be called morality) with caustic and vitriolic attacks. They condemn censure by asking for censorship (there's a difference). They accuse others of intolerance and bigotry, then berate those same people for taking a view contrary to their own.

Why is someone attacked so forcibly simply for affirming moral guidelines about sex that have held us in good stead for thousands of years?

Not only that, the objections are self-defeating. The writers imply that everyone should be allowed to do and believe what they want and that no one should be permitted to force their viewpoint on others. But that is their viewpoint, which they immediately attempt to force on your readers in an abusive way.

Those with opposing beliefs were referred to in print as bigots, lacking courage, disrespectful, ignorant, abominable, fearful, indecent, on par with the KKK, and – can you believe it – intolerant.

Why don't we abandon all of this nonsense about tolerance and open-mindedness? It's misleading because each side has a point of view it thinks is correct. The real issue is about what kind of morality our society should encourage and whether that morality is based on facts and sound reasoning or empty rhetoric.

INTELLECTUAL COWARDICE

Most of what passes for tolerance today is nothing more than intellectual cowardice, a fear of intelligent engagement. Those who brandish the word "intolerant" are unwilling to be challenged by other views, to grapple with contrary opinions, or even to consider them. It is easier to hurl an insult – "you intolerant bigot" – than to confront an idea and either refute it or be changed by it. In the postmodern era, "tolerance" has become intolerance.

As ambassadors for Christ we choose the more courageous path, "destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God" (2 Corinthians 10:5). In a gracious and artful way we speak the truth, then trust God to transform minds.

Whenever you are charged with intolerance, always ask for a definition. When tolerance means neutrality, that all views are equally valid and true, then no one is ever tolerant because no one is ever neutral about his own views. Point out the contradiction built into the new definition. Point out that this kind tolerance is a myth.

The classical rule of tolerance is this: Tolerate persons in all circumstances by according them respect and courtesy even when their ideas are false or silly. Tolerate (i.e., allow) behavior that is consistent with the common good. Finally, tolerate (i.e., embrace and believe) ideas that are sound. This is still a good guideline.

Your partner for the truth,



Gregory Koukl
President, Stand to Reason



PUTTING YOUR KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION

- Keep in mind that virtually all charges of intolerance are no more than simple name-calling.
- When someone labels you intolerant, always ask for a definition. Ask him what he means when he says you're intolerant (or arrogant).
- If he claims you're intolerant because you think you're right and everyone else is wrong, ask if he thinks his own views are right (no one knowingly believes falsehoods).
- If he says his views are true for him, point out if that were really true he wouldn't be talking to you. It sure looks like he's trying to push his correct, "tolerant" view on you, not simply report on his private, personal convictions.
- Finally say, "I'm confused. Why is it when I think I'm right, I'm intolerant or arrogant, but when you think you're right, you're just right? What am I missing here?"
- Be sure to wait for an answer. Expose the name-calling, then guide the conversation onto a more productive track.

¹ This way of putting it comes from Peter Kreeft of Boston College.

² In actual practice, not every idea or practice is legitimized, only politically-correct ones.

³ This has happened in a number of communities regarding the homosexuality issue.

⁴ *Webster's New World Dictionary*, Second College Edition



Bulletin Board

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- Pray for STR as we begin 2006. Pray that God will give us wisdom and vision as we continue the work of equipping Christians to be effective ambassadors for Christ. Pray for Greg & the staff as they develop new talks and training materials.
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GREG'S SCHEDULE:

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29-31 C.S. Lewis Christian Thought Series, Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

FEBRUARY

- 6** Masters Series in Christian Thought, Hope Chapel, Hermosa Beach, CA 7 p.m., – Topic: [Truth Is a Strange Sort of Fiction: Understanding the Emerging Culture](#) Contact: (310) 374-4673
- 10-12** Faith Community Church, Dover, DE Topics: [Various](#) Contact: (302) 697-1673
- 17** North Coast Calvary Chapel, Carlsbad, CA 7 p.m. – Topic: [TBD](#) Contact: (760) 929-0029 or [northcoastcalvary.org](#)
- 25** Lighthouse Bible Church, Simi Valley, CA 8 a.m. – 3 p.m. Topics: [TBD](#) Contact: (805) 522-4573

STEVE'S SCHEDULE:

JANUARY 2006

- 15** Rivers Community Church, Westlake Village, CA Contact: Matt Garcia (818) 865-9529
- 18** North Coast Calvary Chapel, Carlsbad, CA 7 p.m. – Topic: [TBD](#) Contact: (760) 929-0029
- 22** Sanctity of Human Life, Manhattan Beach, CA 8:15 a.m. - 12 p.m. – Contact: Sharon (310) 367-2060

BRETT'S SCHEDULE:

JANUARY 2006

- 8** Rock Hills Student Ministries, Mission Viejo, CA 1-3 p.m. – Topic: [TBD](#) Contact: Jim Wallace (949) 347-1540
- 15** Rock Hills Student Ministries, Mission Viejo, CA 1-3 p.m. – Topic: [TBD](#) Contact: Jim Wallace (949) 347-1540
- 22** Rock Hills Student Ministries, Mission Viejo, CA 1-3 p.m. – Topic: [TBD](#) Contact: Jim Wallace (949) 347-1540
- 29** Rock Hills Student Ministries, Mission Viejo, CA 1-3 p.m. – Topic: [TBD](#) Contact: Jim Wallace (949) 347-1540

FEBRUARY

- 5 & 12** Rock Hills Student Ministries, Mission Viejo, CA 1-3 p.m. – Topic: [TBD](#) Contact: Jim Wallace (949) 347-1540
- 10** South Bay Evangelical Christian Church, Rancho Palos Verdes, CA 7:30 p.m. – Topic: [TBD](#) Contact: Helen (310) 594-1909
- 17- 22** Rock Hills Student Ministries, Berkeley Missions Trip, Contact: Jim Wallace (949) 347-1540

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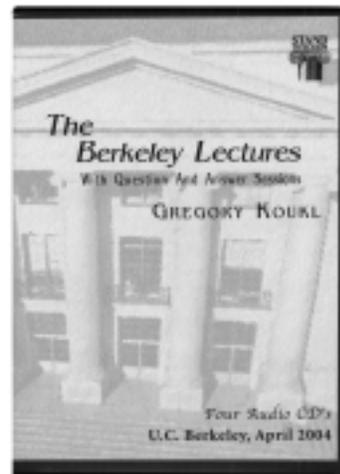
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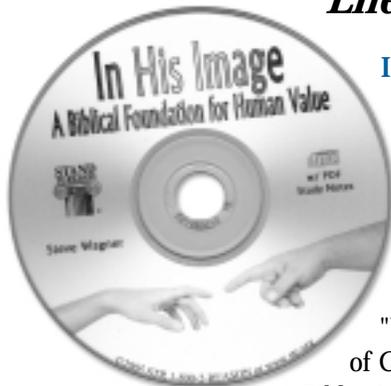
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