

Tolerance vs Intolerance

"After the Bible was translated into English every man, nay, every body and wench that could read English, thought they spoke with God Almighty . . . every man became a judge of religion, and an interpreter of the scriptures to himself."

(Thomas Hobbes, 1588 - 1679)

The church has never been free from strife and disruption. Schisms have rent the church and hindered the progress of the gospel. Much energy has been wasted on disputes about non-essential truths. Christian tolerance and love have often been missing in the history of the church. When Benjamin Keach, a Baptist pastor in London, introduced a hymn in a communion service, six years later tried one at a Thanksgiving and fourteen years later presented one in a morning service, he became involved in so much trouble that his congregation split and a minority started a songless church. Churches have been torn asunder over minor points. Such attitude of intolerance is sinful and damaging the witness of the church. How careful we must be towards the opinion of others. Divided and weakened churches will not make an impact upon our times. When much effort is spent on internal strife, the strength of the church is sapped. The result is ineffectiveness and a victory for the evil one.

Tolerance is a virtue, but we also sin often in the name of tolerance. Tolerance can easily turn into indifference, and this destroys the church. The church does not need to fear the opponents from the outside who smear her and are out to destroy. She needs to fear the troublers within.

How far can we go with our tolerance towards those with whom we differ? Is there such a thing called "holy intolerance?" It is simple enough to be tolerant on issues which are not considered to be vital or fundamental. "Tolerance," said G.K. Chesterton, "is the virtue of people who don't believe anything." With this pointed exaggeration, he places his finger upon a real problem. Edward J. Carneei says, "Despite the severest apostolic warnings, schism in the church is often interpreted as a sign of Christian virtue." (1) J.C. Ryle observes, while commenting on John 17:22-23, that, "We can ask no stronger proof of the value of unity among Christians, and the sinfulness of divisions, than the great prominence which our Master assigns to the subject in this passage. How painfully true it is that in every age divisions have been the scandal of religion, and the weakness of the church of Christ! How often Christians have wasted their strength in contending against their brethren, instead of contending against sin and -the devil!" (2) But how far do we go with being tolerant? As we face many tensions in reformed circles and seem to have developed a climate of distrust, a brief study on this issue based on church history and Scripture is not out of place. May it aid us in our listening to one another with real love and respect and without immediate suspicion and distrust.

Tolerance and Liberalism

Liberalism takes the position that discipline on the part of the church for matter of doctrine is an infringement of the principle of religious freedom. The modernist position is that the dismissal of a liberal minister is contrary to the liberty of conscience. A man should be free to preach and advocate whatever his conscience dictates to him. John Horsch states: "A host of modern writers have asserted that a church that will not bear with modernism in her midst manifests the spirit of persecution that formerly lighted the state for those who dared to dissent from the creed established by the state." This view has led to a merely camouflaged religious indifference. John Dillenberger and Claude Welch claim that the central of the formative principles of liberalism is, "the spirit of open-mindedness, of tolerance and humility, of devotion to truth wherever it might be found." "Much that earlier generations of Christians had affirmed was now thought to be not essential to the faith, much had to be adjusted and accommodated to new knowledge and new ways of thought, but the essentials remained the same-and this could be affirmed especially because the essentials were not external forms of dogma, but the religious experiences which lay behind dogmas."

Are liberals really so tolerant? No! They plead for tolerance so that they can advocate their theological principles. But they have, as a whole, very little patience with their opponents.

In the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the 1920s, liberals claimed that scholarship was on one side – their side. The conservatives' views were no longer maintained by men with pretensions to scholarship. Dr. Charles A. Briggs of Union Seminary, N.Y.C. (1841-1914) called those who opposed his Higher Critical view of the Bible ignorant, prejudiced and illiterate. (6)

In 1919, the Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick, a liberal Baptist, became associate pastor and stated preacher of the First Presbyterian Church in New York City without transferring his membership from the Baptist to the Presbyterian ministry. In May 1922, Dr. Fosdick delivered a sermon entitled, "*Shall the Fundamentalists Win?*" "The present world situation smells to heaven!" he proclaimed. "And now, in the presence of colossal problems, which must be solved in Christ's name and for Christ's sake, the Fundamentalists propose to drive out from the Christian churches all the consecrated souls who do not agree with their theory of inspiration. What immeasurable folly!" (7) Dr. Fosdick's basic contention was that liberals could not be rightfully excluded from the Christian Churches. He insisted that the three contested doctrines – the virgin birth, Biblical inerrancy and the physical return of Christ – were not essential to the faith and therefore those who reject them should be tolerated within the churches. He viewed the church as an all comprehensive body and intolerance was seen as a sign of weakness. "He who thinks that his gospel needs to be bolstered up by artificial enforcement, by heresy trials and excommunications, by personal discourtesy and defamation, does not really believe in the validity and power of his gospel. His reliance on the extraneous instruments of intolerance is a betrayal of his own unstable faith."

Liberalism's tolerance has led to doctrinal indifference and even rejection of essential Scriptural truths. Recent history has ample illustrations. In 1918, John D. Rockefeller Jr.,

a modernist layman, wrote an article for the *SATURDAY EVENING POST* advocating admission to the church without any profession of belief whatever. (9) Mrs. Pearl S. Buck, the famous author of *THE GOOD EARTH*, appeared on the official list of missionaries of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. submitted by the Board of Foreign Missions to the 1932 General Assembly. While she was still on the missionary roll she denied the basics of the Christian faith. She represented the deity of Christ as a non-essential doctrine. "Some of us (Christians) believe in Christ as our fathers did. To some of us He is still the divine son of God, born of the Virgin Mary, conceived by the Holy Spirit. But to many of us He has ceased to be that." (10)

Not too much has changed in our times. When you hold to the orthodox position you are called either a blind fundamentalist or a narrow-minded conservative. The Rev. Duncan Chalmers paints such a beautiful picture of tolerance in his article, "The Fundamentalists and the Sophisticates." (11) Within the liberal reform church the spirit of toleration has been encouraged and valued throughout the ages, an organism within the spirit of enlightened humanism which has been free to explore the finest and the best of the human spirit. The truth has been acknowledged that the "spirit of man is the candle of the Lord." But he claims that "Verbal inspiration and doctrinal dogmatism have laid a chill hand of authority upon the sectarian movements, and have stifled the free spirit of inquiry so beloved of the liberal Christian ethos." Ben Smillie speaks in the same trend when he asserts that, "We (in the United Church) emphasize that as the church we must be the community of love; we spell this out to mean that we should be open to everyone's views, insisting that our decisions should not be phrased in 'either ... or' alternatives but should rather be 'both . . . and' solutions." Yet he calls the orthodox position on the Bible "blind-old-time religion." (12)

Tolerance and Ultra - Fundamentalism

Liberalism and ultra - fundamentalism are on the opposite sides of the theological spectrum. Liberalism, on the one hand, professes to be tolerant towards the orthodox, but isn't. Ultra-fundamentalism on the other hand, is also intolerant but professes it to be. The ultra-fundamentalist has no tolerance for anyone who cannot pronounce his shibboleth and differs from his cultural pattern. To be intolerant is a holy duty. His world and life view is identified with historic Protestantism. He wages holy wars without acknowledging the elements of pride and personal interests, that prompts his call to battle.

The ultra-fundamentalist is a negative ideologist. You can quickly discover what he is against. He lives in a spiritual ghetto – as he is continually called to come out of apostate churches and withdraw into fellowships of like-minded and like-living. His code of ethics is legalistic. He preaches about the evils of card playing and cosmetics but says very little about the sins of racial injustice and the exploitation of the poor. It was against this type of legalism that Zinzendorf was led to remark that the discipleship of Christ should not be seen as "legalistic duty" but instead as "our life" and "our joy." (13)

Many ultra-fundamentalists are dispensationalist in their eschatology (the doctrine of the last things.) Dispensationalists divide history into seven dispensations and eight covenants. Their view of the second coming of Christ centers upon the future of Israel, her national conversion, her return to the promised land and a literal one thousand year reign of Christ. They consider the application to the church of matters referring to Israel as gross error. The statement of faith of the Minnesota Baptist Convention gives us this summary: "We believe the Scriptures teach that at death the spirit and soul of the believer pass instantly into the presence of Christ and remain in conscious joy until the resurrection of the body when Christ comes for His own; the blessed hope of the believers is the imminent, personal, pre-tribulational, pre-millennial appearance of Christ to rapture the church, His bride. His righteous judgments will then be poured out on an unbelieving world during the Tribulation (the seventieth week of Daniel), the last half of which is the Great Tribulation; the climax of this fearful era will be the physical return of Jesus Christ to the earth in great glory to introduce the Davidic kingdom; Israel will be saved and restored as a nation; Satan will be bound and the curse will be lifted from the physical creation; following the Millennium, the Great White Throne judgment will occur, at which time the bodies and souls of the wicked shall be reunited and cast into the Lake of Fire." (14) The ultra fundamentalist sees this as the only correct system of interpretation and theology. Norman C. Kraus says that dispensationalism "is so closely identified with the Bible itself that some of its adherents tend to judge the orthodoxy of other Christians by their acceptance or rejection of the system." (15) An incorrect view on even the finest points of this doctrine becomes a cause for separation. Kraus remarks: "It is a matter of record that the denomination which has been most closely associated with the dispensational movement has been torn with division and strike almost from the beginning." (16) The New Testament Association of Independent Baptist Churches, which is of recent date, has come into being, under the leadership of Dr. Richard V. Clearwaters, through numerous splits and controversies among the Baptists over fine points of difference on eschatology. It identifies dispensationalism with the historic Baptist faith. (17)

Tolerance and Intolerance in the New Testament

If we could only have the faith and the spirit of the early Christians! How many haven't expressed this thought? It would be good if we could say that the church is a but a shadow of her former self. That suggestion is appealing, but history forbids it. The former self never existed, that is to say, the church has never been free from the most serious and even sordid problems. Troubles have beset the church throughout her history.

Jesus was very patient with His opponents. His attitude towards His adversaries ought to be an example. "Consider Him (Jesus) who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow wary and lose heart" (Hebrews 12:3 The New International Version). He taught that we must love our enemies (Matt. 5:44-48). But His tolerance had a limit, The Lord had no tolerance for hypocrites (Matt. 23:13). He was intolerant towards those who lived a loveless life and caused others to stumble. He said, "If

anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck" (Mark 9:42).

The apostle Paul tolerated diversion of practice and thought within the early church. He didn't expect people to be all of one mould and one opinion. For him, the secret of the Christian life is the humble respect and genuine love for fellow believers. He tells the Christians in Rome "So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way" (Romans 14:12,13), There must be a love that "always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (I Cor, 13:7). We must be careful with handling the keys of the kingdom. This should never be done with pride or loveless spirit. Though Paul was tolerant, he was not indifferent. His first Corinthian letter is a dreadful catalogue of theological and moral disorder which no modern suburban church could match. The early church was rent by considerable struggle over doctrine and Paul used no uncertain terms in his condemnation of false teachers. "Avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned" (Titus 3:9-11). The calling of the church is to ensure that the light of God's grace and mercy will not be extinguished by anyone who seeks to bring another gospel into the church. Therefore, the apostle Paul strongly opposes the Judaizers. He does not compromise but condemn the false teachers as the heart of the gospel message was being attacked (Galatians 1: 9). He enjoins the church to be aware of those who deny the teaching of Christ (Colossians 2:8). He wrote to the church in Thessalonica, "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us" (2 Thessalonians 3: 6 f. 2 John 9:11).

Reading the New Testament, we'll find ourselves continually caught in a tension. On the one hand we must be the least of all saints and go the second mile and even further, but on the other hand, there is a real spirit of intolerance. Why is this tolerance? A Christian cannot compromise when it comes to the saving grace of Jesus Christ. He loves the Lord above anyone or anything else. Therefore he loves the truth and is intolerant when God's honor is at stake. There is a deeply moving verse at the end of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. "If anyone does not love the Lord – a curse be on him" (vs. 22). This expresses Paul's flaming love for Jesus Christ.

As we see much tension and intolerance, we should draw some lessons from Scripture and history. We witness hot polemics (controversy) but little love. Some seem to be so busy maintaining the purity of the bride, the church, that they neglect the bridegroom - Jesus Christ. Also, how easy it is to be against something, how difficult to promote a positive stand.

Love is primarily directed to God. A Christian loves God with all his being. Therefore, he loves the truth and is intolerant when God's honour is at stake. He cannot compromise

when it comes to the fundamentals of the faith. But this love for God and the truth also includes love for others. True, there is so much indifference, spiritual laziness, accommodation and compromise in the churches today. These spirits should be resisted with determination and vigour. All polemics are not evil. But the spirit in which we see polemics carried out is not much of a recommendation for the church in this post-Christian world. So many harsh, unloving things are said in the name of truth. What is worse, we find it apparently difficult to speak truth in love. What makes everything so complex is that we so often convince ourselves that our polemics have pure motives and are for the sake of the truth. I suggest that some of the troubles are caused by the absolutizing of our insights. No time is taken out to listen to others. We think that only our own insights are worthwhile and therefore that what somebody else says should be immediately judged. That we ourselves might be mistaken does not enter our minds. Oliver Cromwell once said, while facing the peril to the state of conflicting religious absolutes: "By the bowels of Christ, remember that you may be mistaken." A good word to keep in mind.

Within the boundaries outlined for us in Scripture, we should be able to appreciate someone else's point of view. The absolutizing of viewpoints breaks the church and squelches discussion. "Abraham Kuyper wrote that "in the service of the Holy Spirit, theology is called ever and anon to test the historic, confessional life of the Church by its source, and to this end to examine it after the norm of the Holy Scripture." (18) He encourages the spirit of discovery and free movement in theology. He asked the theologians to dig for golden nuggets of truth in the mines of Scripture. A theologian must be free to do his work, but freedom does not mean license. "Scientific theology must be entirely free in her movement. This, of course, does not imply license. Every study is bound by the nature of its object, and subjected to the laws that govern the activity of our consciousness. But this is so far from a limitation of its liberty, that its very liberty consists in being bound to these laws. The railway train is free, so long as the rails hold its wheels in their embrace. But it becomes unfree, works itself in the ground, and cannot go on as soon as the wheels jump the track." (19)

Be on guard for the truth (2 Timothy 2) and speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15).

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