



Tolerance and the Exclusive Claims of Christ

Christians believe that salvation is obtained *sola fide, sola gratia and solo Christo* – by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. The word 'alone' is significant. This is how salvation is given, and not in any other way at all. Acts 4:12 says, '*Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.*'

An Exclusive Claim

In the parlance of the day, Christians thus make an 'exclusive truth-claim', politely (we hope) but without any apology. What we are saying is that we are right, and that all other religions and world views are wrong. This is what gives rise to much of the opposition to Christianity in our society, and what may give rise to even more opposition in the future. If we simply claim that we are saved through faith in Christ, most people will be indifferent, but politeness or good will lead some to say, 'I'm pleased that you are happy', 'I'm glad that works for you', or even, 'I wish I had your faith'.

However, when we add, in as non-confrontational a way as we possibly can, that this faith in Christ is the *only* way of salvation, and that other religions are of no use in reconciling man to God, then we are in trouble. Then we are perceived as being intolerant and arrogant, and as contributing to the ills of a world that has already had enough of religious extremism.

Sometimes in these circumstances we can find ourselves on the defensive. We had thought we were presenting our friends and neighbours and colleagues with good news, but now suddenly we find that it is a very unwelcome message. We may wonder whether we need to tone down what we say in order to avoid stirring up hostility to the gospel. We may even wonder in our weak moments whether perhaps the world has a point when it accuses us of arrogance.

Grounds for Confidence

That hesitation is understandable in the current climate, but we need not fall prey to it. For a whole variety of reasons, we can have confidence in our message: confidence to believe it ourselves; confidence to stand up for it in front of other people without embarrassment; and confidence that it is a message that God can use to change people's minds and hearts in a perfectly rational way.

People are not thinking clearly when they accuse us of arrogance or intolerance, and the Holy Spirit working through us can convince them of that. However, some will never be convinced. They will not like us asserting the exclusive claims of Christ; and they will ignore us, or criticize us, or insult us. In the last analysis, that does not matter. Our concern is not with what men think, but with what God thinks. We seek to please him. '*I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness*' (Ps. 84:10). The kingdom of God is the pearl of great price; we would sell everything else in order to possess it. If the enemies of the gospel despise us, that does not matter, because our confidence is elsewhere.

However, if people are prepared to listen, and to engage in rational debate, our position is perfectly reasonable. Even if they do not come to agree with us that salvation is found in the Lord Jesus Christ alone, they should be able to see that it is a position that we can quite legitimately hold, and that it is not an arrogant or intolerant one.

On Being Right

Everyone thinks that they are right most of the time. As we do our daily work, we normally believe that we are doing the right thing – the thing that is necessary to get the task done. There is nothing

unreasonable about that. Sometimes we may become uncertain whether it is the right thing, and yet continue for the time being; but if at any point we decide that we are definitely doing the wrong thing, we change what we are doing and do the right thing instead. As a result we never spend very long thinking that we are certainly doing the wrong thing. Thus thinking we are right is our normal state of mind. Similarly, we all have various opinions about a range of topics, and we think that we are right most of the time. If we thought that we were wrong we would keep changing our mind until we came to hold an opinion that we did think was right, or until we decided that it was impossible to say. Even then, we would think we were right to decide that (at least for us) it was either impossible to say, or so difficult as not to be worth the trouble. So it makes no sense to criticize people for holding an opinion that they think is right; that is the same as criticizing them for holding any opinion at all. If nobody had an opinion about anything, life as we know it would come to an end.

Tolerance: What It Used to Be

'Tolerance' has become the supreme virtue of our age. However, everyone would concede that there has to be a limit. We would not want to tolerate Hitler, or Stalin, or Pol Pot. Similarly, everybody accepts that some things are right and some are wrong. Some people will contest that principle in the moral sphere, but they accept it in the area of arithmetic or personal data. They do not want their date of birth to be wrongly recorded in their passport, or their grocery bill incorrectly added up.

In matters of religion people hold differing views. The vast majority of Christians want to see tolerance of other's views in our society, in the sense in which that term used to be understood. That means that although as Christians we hold to one view, we do not want a situation where the law, or any other sort of social pressure, prevents people who have different views from expressing them. Subject to a few common-sense exceptions, we want adherents of all religions to be free to believe as they wish, and to worship as they wish, and to express their views without fear (provided they do not threaten to harm other people). Most of us also want adherents of other religions to be free to proselytize – that is, to be free to try to convince other people (including ourselves, if they wish) that they are in fact the only people who are right and that (after all) it is actually we who are wrong. That is what true tolerance is: a freedom for all people to believe and worship and speak as they wish, provided they do not advocate violence or child sacrifices or other practices that society as a whole deems harmful.

The Redefinition of Tolerance

In the modern age, however, tolerance has been redefined. This is part of the pattern of thinking that is sometimes referred to as 'post-modernism'. This does not merely say to us, as Christians, 'I do not agree with you as to what the truth is', or even, 'I do not think you can ever really know what the truth is', but it says, 'There is no truth; there are no eternal and universal verities. There is only what is true for me today; what works for me.' There is nothing, the post-modern commentator says, that can be known for certain. Having said that, however, he immediately contradicts himself, and exposes the folly of his thinking by claiming that there is one exception to his rule. This lack of certainty that he posits is, he maintains, something that we *can* know for certain.

In this way of thinking tolerance is no longer the freedom to think and speak as we wish; it is an approach that says that everyone is right, and that nobody is wrong. If a friend or neighbour is a Bible-believing Christian, then that is fine; and if another neighbour or friend is something else, that is fine too. 'I'm glad it works for you', is the post-modern verdict. As already indicated, the problem comes when the Christian says, 'By all means say what you want and believe what you want – it's a free country – but I must tell you that the way of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation, and all other ways are futile.' Then the Christian is abused as being intolerant and arrogant and bigoted and ignorant – and indeed as being wicked, which is a moral category that is barely accepted any more in any other context.

In fact, however, true tolerance implies disagreement. We can only be tolerant of things that we disagree with. If our neighbour's opinion is the same as ours we do not *tolerate* it; we simply *agree with* it. If his opinion is different from ours but we do not disagree with it, even inwardly, then that is not tolerance; it is indifference. That might be acceptable if we were talking of some inconsequential matter, but in the things of God indifference is absolute folly.

The Intolerance of Tolerance

Paradoxically, the new version of tolerance as redefined by post-modernism is profoundly intolerant, because it only wants to give a hearing to people who agree with it that each person is right, whatever he thinks, even when people take opposing views. It does not want to give a hearing to anybody who disagrees with that assumption. So those who tell Christians that they are wrong to maintain exclusive claims are themselves putting forward an exclusive claim. 'Everybody is right,' they say, 'and I'll tolerate no argument about it.' Those who claim to believe that it is wrong to tell people that they are wrong do not seem to mind telling Christians that they are wrong.

This would be laughable, if it were not so serious. There is no other sphere of life where we accept the principle that there must always be multiple right answers. If our children come home from school saying that two plus two equals five, we do not say, 'Well, I'm glad that works for you, and in a very real sense that's quite true at a meaningful level.' We say, 'No, I'm afraid that's wrong. Let me help you to find the right answer.'

If somebody is about to drink poison because they believe it to be fruit juice, we do not say, 'Well, that's a very interesting question, with much to be said on both sides.' We dash the cup from their lips before irreparable harm results.

What Is Religion?

Sometimes we hear people say, 'Well, I like to think of God like this, or like that.' (We will find that they usually like to think of God as someone who does not mind their sin.) But of course the more relevant question is not how we like to think of anything, but whether it is so or not – what is actually the case. We may like to think that the traffic lights are green, but if they are actually red we may well have a collision. With a subject as important as what God is like it makes sense to find out and not to invent our own answer.

People who criticize Christianity, and want religion taken out of the classroom and out of public life, often overlook the fact that their views on this matter are religious views too. Someone who addresses questions such as the meaning of life, whether God exists, and whether there is life after death, is expressing his views on religious questions, whatever conclusions he reaches. Even if he concludes that no firm conclusion is possible, that is still a view on a religious issue. If a scientist says that he does not believe in God, that is a religious view, not a scientific one. All such religious views (other than the view that no conclusion is possible) are based on some sort of view about God – that he does not exist at all, or that he is no more than a depersonalized cosmic force, or the sum of all things, or whatever it may be.

The sentimental view that everyone is right in religion and that all roads lead to God, and that everybody ends up in some sort of heaven in the end is not a neutral 'default position'; it is a religious opinion based on a particular view of God that sees him as vaguely benevolent but completely unconcerned and un-offended by any sort of wicked behaviour that may be perpetrated by mankind.

It is not a particularly coherent view, because if God is unconcerned by wicked behaviour done by us, he must be equally unconcerned by wicked behaviour done *to* us – which is simply the opposite end of the same behaviour. If he is in fact unconcerned about what happens to us, then he cannot be as benevolent as this view at first seems to suggest.

Christians, by contrast, hold a view of God as holy in his nature and acts, and offended by our sins and wickedness, but yet so loving that he himself bore the penalty for those sins on the cross in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

These are two different views of God. Why, in a supposedly tolerant society, should other people be allowed to express their views without criticism, whereas when Christians express theirs they are vilified as arrogant and bigoted? If the sentimental view is the only one that can be expressed, to the exclusion of all others, then society is far from tolerant.

Conclusion

Christians will never persuade anyone into the kingdom; that is the work of the Holy Spirit. But that does not mean that people have to suspend their rational faculties when they come to Christ. We need to explain to those around us the reasonableness of our views, because we have a robust case; we do not need to be apologizing for the gospel.

'There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.'

David F Williams

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