

Truth and Tolerance

By David Feddes

Jesus encourages respect for all people and a desire for their wellbeing; but he does not encourage respect for all gods or say that all religions help people's eternal wellbeing. "Eternal life," said Jesus, "is to know the only true God, and Jesus Christ" (John 17:3). There are no gods or goddesses besides the only true God, and there is no eternal life without Jesus. So it's not merely an option for Christians to tell others about Jesus; it's an obligation. People's need for a Savior demands it, and Christ himself commands it. After Jesus died and then rose from the dead, he told his followers:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

These words of Jesus are called the Great Commission. Jesus the Messiah has ordered his followers to bring his gospel to everyone in the world. It is not arrogance toward others but obedience to Jesus which moves his followers to keep calling everyone to faith in Christ.

Some people find it offensive to be told to believe in Jesus for their salvation, but that's nothing new. From the very beginning there has been opposition to the gospel message. When Jesus' early followers told their fellow Jews that Jesus was the Messiah who died for the sins of the world and rose from the dead to bring eternal life to those who believe in him, some leaders got angry and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:18-20). The apostles were beaten and thrown into jail, but the moment they got out, they picked up where they had left off, urging people to trust in Jesus. This made the hostile authorities even angrier. They brought the apostles in and angrily reminded them, "We gave you strict orders not to teach" (Acts 5:28). The apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than men!" (Acts 5:29) They couldn't forget their Lord's Great Commission. They had to do what God said, even if some people were offended and wanted them to be quiet.

When I urge people who don't follow Jesus to believe in him, it's not because I think I'm wiser or better than others. It's because Jesus is wiser and better. If I kept my mouth shut about Jesus to avoid offending anyone, I would be offending Jesus himself. If I said that every religious system is as true and helpful as faith in Jesus, I would be calling Jesus himself a liar. Jesus did not say that every religion works equally well. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

What Is Tolerance?

Jesus has plainly said that he is the ultimate truth, the only way to God. There is no other. Some object to this and say that it's intolerant to believe in Christ as the only way. But what is tolerance? Does tolerance mean we assume that everyone is equally right? No, in that case, there would be no need for tolerance. Tolerance is not the notion that all views are on the right track; tolerance is putting up with people even when we are convinced that they are on the wrong track. There is no need for tolerance except when there is sharp disagreement on important matters. In such cases, tolerance means that although we are convinced other people are badly mistaken about something, we try to persuade them in a kind and respectful manner, rather than forcing them to change or killing them if they refuse to change.

For example, if you are a heterosexual person, you may think you're tolerant if you believe that homosexual activity is just as normal and moral as the union of a man and a woman. But if you believe something is normal and moral, you're not tolerating it; you're approving and endorsing it. If, on the other hand, you believe homosexual behavior is a disordered and sinful expression of sexuality, but you still love persons who engage in such behavior and show kindness to them, then you are being tolerant.

If you try peacefully to persuade people to change their minds and their conduct, you may sometimes be accused of "hate speech." But is that because you hate them, or because they hate and resent you? What if you consider adultery and swearing to be wrong? Does that mean you are intolerant and hate all foul-mouthed adulterers? No, you may tolerate them and even love them very much. Indeed, the more you love them, the more you will want them to change for the better, and the more earnestly you will pray for them and try to persuade them.

Tolerance is not approval or agreement; tolerance is gentleness and respect in spite of disapproval and disagreement. Religious tolerance is not the notion that all religions are true and lead to God; religious tolerance is recognizing the differences among religions and at the same time loving those who differ from us. There is nothing intolerant about praying for other people and trying to persuade them to choose a better path. Indeed, a hallmark of true tolerance is that people of different religions can speak freely to one another about what they believe.

Christians who try to persuade others to follow Jesus are accused of intolerance, but how tolerant are people who tell followers of Jesus to shut their mouths about him? Christians who say Jesus is the only way of salvation are charged with being narrow-minded, but what if it's true that Jesus is the only way? Would you call it narrow-minded to say that the earth is round and to say that the Flat Earth Society is wrong? It's just the truth. Likewise, it's not narrow-minded to say that Jesus is the way to God and other religions aren't; it's the truth. Jesus himself said it. Which is more arrogant: to tell others what Jesus said, or to make Jesus out to be a liar? Nothing is more arrogant than calling the Son of God a liar. Some non-Christians claim to be open-minded and tolerant toward other religions, but how open-minded and tolerant are they if they contradict Jesus himself and don't want his message to reach the ears of non-Christians?

Taking God Seriously

People have a tendency to dream up their own ideas and to invent their own brand of religion. In Ezekiel 8 the Bible describes a time when the Lord's people weren't satisfied with the one true God. They thought nature worship, various images, or supernatural occult powers might be more useful. Meanwhile, the priests and religious leaders who were supposed to serve the Lord decided to go with the flow. They crammed the Lord's temple with images and symbols honoring many different gods. These leaders appeared to be tolerant and inclusive, but what was the real reason they felt free to mix many religions in one pot? They didn't take God seriously. God told the prophet Ezekiel that deep in their hearts these leaders were telling themselves, "The Lord does not see us" (Ezekiel 8:12). They thought the Lord Almighty was out of the picture. That's why they felt free to put all sorts of different religions into the Lord's temple.

Something similar happens among some church leaders today who pride themselves on open-mindedness. When leaders claim that any religion is as true as any other, when they want to blend various religions together, when they want to prevent Christians from persuading people of other religions to follow Jesus, they show that they don't take the God of the Bible seriously. They don't believe that eternal life comes only through Jesus' death and resurrection. They say all roads lead to God, but how would they know? They don't know God themselves. They don't

recognize the light of God's glory in the face of Jesus. They are following their own fantasies. They are willing to endorse almost any religious claim except the claim of Jesus himself: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

If you think all religions work equally well, you are not thinking like a Christian. You are thinking like a Hindu or a humanist. Hindu doctrine teaches that all religions are true because everything is ultimately God, including you. Humanist doctrine teaches that all religions may be "true" as useful myths only because all religions are false as fact. There is no God, say the humanists, but they grant that religious stories and rituals may help and encourage some people. If you believe that there is no God, like an atheistic humanist, or that everything is God, like a pantheistic Hindu, you can claim that all religions belong on the same level. But if the God of the Bible is real, and if Jesus really died to pay for the sins of the world and then rose from the dead, then you must believe it and do all you can to persuade others to believe it.

Introducing people to Jesus as the only one who can save them is not "hate speech." It is the most loving thing a Christian can do for any other person. It is also the only obedient response to the command of Jesus himself. So if you are not yet a follower of Jesus, please don't expect those of us who know the Lord to be quiet about him.

If you are a follower of Jesus, please realize that everybody ought to know what you know. Be ready to tell others, and do it in a way that shows the love and truthfulness of Jesus. The Bible says, "In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their conduct" (1 Peter 3:15-16).

People cannot be won to Christ by bullying or cruelty or political power. As the great missionary Paul wrote in the Bible, "We do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world" (2 Corinthians 10:3-4). Rather, we spread the gospel "in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God, with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and the left" (2 Corinthians 6:6-7). Let all who follow Christ cast aside any unrighteous weapons and use only the weapons of mercy and truth. At the same time, let all who follow Christ cast aside cowardice, not fearing the jeers and complaints of those who try to shame us into silence. All authority belongs to Jesus, and his command is clear. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.