

Reaching the “Whatever” Generation

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Ministering in the Context of Western Culture

--Challenges and Opportunities--

America: A pluralistic society that is rich in multiethnic and multi-cultural diversity (even though the culture of your daily work might not reflect it). We (Christians) welcome this diversity without partiality and recognize that the gospel is meant for all nations and peoples on earth (Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8; Revelation 5:9- heaven itself will be inhabited by people “from every tribe and language and people and nation”)

A Major ideological shift

But, more recently, we have experienced a major ideological shift in our nation aimed at *protecting and promoting* the pluralistic make-up of society, and a *pluralistic civility* within it.

Certainly, in a free and diverse nation, we recognize the need for pluralistic civility—for people to treat respectfully those with whom they disagree. Maintaining civility within diversity requires citizens who respect those who differ from them. People who (within the law) choose different beliefs, morals and lifestyles, must be asked to respond respectfully to each other.

But the promotion of pluralistic civility over the past several decades has gone beyond asking for respect to demanding affirmation of other morals, beliefs and lifestyles. And it has been done based on a radical brand of tolerance (which turns out-- on certain occasions/issues-- to be amazingly intolerant).

Some have begun to speak of the tyranny of tolerance because on certain issues no exceptions to tolerance will be tolerated.

True tolerance

The true virtue of tolerance only activates or is practiced when two people/groups disagree with each other and treat each other with respect. Where disagreements either do not exist or do not matter, there is no need for tolerance.

But under the tyranny of *radical tolerance* respect has been replaced with required affirmation of the validity of each person moral and religious opinions (especially the ones deemed politically correct and protected by elitists within our culture).

We agree that tolerance is a safeguard to civility but tolerance that asks for more than respectful treatment of others, is not only deeply misguided, it is a form of intolerance. And, if we don’t respect this distinction, the liberty of our nation will be threatened. (Is being threatened).

In this new emphasis, people are pressured to remove from their beliefs or at least to downplay any notions of absolute truth or claims to moral superiority or exclusivity.

Here is a profound irony: This is being done under the guise of protecting the diverse nature of society and promoting pluralistic civility. Yet, in the end, it leads to a monolithic culture where we have to down play or mute our differences. What we end up with is a multi-cultural diversity we cannot talk about lest we offend others by sounding intolerant, superior or in some way, imperialistic.

Of course, this new rule of tolerance especially applies to the culturally sanctioned politically correct issues. And, it applies most forcefully *against* Judeo-Christian beliefs. It joyfully celebrates the marginalization of Christianity. Christians have had their day for being the reigning ideology.

Exceptions to the rule of tolerance

Exceptions to this rule of tolerance are found in areas where society decides the acceptable views for everyone. The primary tools of influence on these matters come through the media and academia. Elitists in these fields pressure others to see things their way or face ridicule and condescension. Uniformity of opinion is required for all who wish to be considered open-minded and progressive. Those who see things differently will be labeled (among other things) narrow, hate-mongers, bigots, backwards and right-wing conservatives.

For examples, homosexual lifestyles and gay marriage must be considered acceptable. Abortion is a fundamental right, not the taking of innocent life. All religions lead to God in their own way and the value of religion is found not in its truthfulness but in the benefit it brings to adherents. As long as you are sincere in your efforts to serve God, it doesn't matter what religion you follow. Conversely, one must never publically refer to what the bible teaches—outside of Church at least. Those who are brave enough to do this should expect to hear collective groans and sighs about the presence of "one of those radical Christians."

An entire generation socially conditioned

Without sounding too alarmist, I believe that an entire generation of Americans have been socially conditioned under this tyranny of tolerance and that it has been one of the greatest threats the health and stability of our nation. But I also believe that the Church has been profoundly affected.

First - *Mainstream culture*

How has this made its way into mainstream culture-- particularly youth culture?

In Christian Smith's book "*Soul Searching*" he analyzed the beliefs and values of today's teenagers. Regarding absolute moral or religious beliefs, youth today have a one-word response: "**Whatever.**"

And this response has been subtly and systematically encouraged through mainstream education. Let me explain.

Children and youth spend six to seven hours a day in school (perhaps more for extra-curricular activities). During that time they recognize that when it comes to certain opinions on morality and religion in particular, "You don't go there" is the safest policy. No matter how strongly held or valued, mentioning some beliefs or values could get you either in trouble or mocked. This is especially the case for beliefs that sound too exclusive or absolute in nature.

As a result of the "you don't go there" approach, our young people have developed two very dangerous behaviors:

1. A learned ability to suspend commitment to certain beliefs.
2. An inarticulacy regarding the faith—"you don't go there."

See: John 12:42-43: "Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved praise from men more than praise from God."

Think about it

A learned capacity to talk about differences becomes unnecessary in a society that asks us to avoid speaking in particular or absolute categories. As a result, large numbers of people are not only unable to articulate what they believe and why they believe it, they are guarded against beliefs that are too particular or in any way exclude or offend the beliefs of others.

Even if they *actually* hold to particular moral or religious beliefs, they have learned to suspend their commitment to them in most social circumstances. And, since they have been taught that moral and religious opinions are merely matters of personal taste, why stir things up over such matters? You don't go there.

How would this affect the offer of evangelism, logic or apologetics classes? Would these classes be viewed with suspicion?

No need for evangelism or apologetics classes

Under this kind of social conditioning, it becomes unnecessary to be trained in moral argument or to learn how to constructively engage someone in a discussion about different beliefs. Young people in particular might question the value of such training. Why talk about things that could be perceived exclusive or violations of pluralistic civility. Some might even suspect hidden imperialistic agendas designed to oppress a minority group or to impose your politics on others. Let's not go there.

A growing number of people actually feel that there is something morally repugnant about followers of one religion maintaining that they are correct in their beliefs and that sincere adherents of other religions are mistaken in what they believe. Most college students, for example, accept the idea of some creative force behind the existence of the universe. "What is a debated topic is how you move from this rather impersonal force to the beliefs of a particular religious tradition, and especially whether in affirming the truth-reliability of one path, you must stand against the truth-reliability of all other paths." (Professor Daniel Liechty, Illinois State University).

The new tension is not about belief in God but whether or not it is "safe" to believe in one absolute deity. The tyranny of tolerance has scared people into postures of neutrality. It feels safer to choose not to believe anything too conclusively but to hold all beliefs in their broadest terms. The by-product is a culture that has lost its ability to think, discuss and debate. "Whatever" has become the common response to differences on morality and religion. In this environment, it becomes increasingly hard to train people to share and defend their faith.

Observation about Christian missions

Those who study trends in Christian missions tell us that in the very near future America will cease to be the primary sending nation for Christian missionaries. Already large numbers of missionaries are being sent to bring the gospel to the world from places like Latin America, India and South Korea (to name a few). And they are even being sent to reach us. Question: *Why is it that our Churches are full (especially in their Mega forms) and yet a steadily decreasing number of Christians answer the call to take the gospel to the ends of the earth?*

Division of truth: Personal and Public

A division of truth into personal and public categories strengthens the social conditioning based on radical tolerance. So moral and religious opinions are widely viewed as matters of personal taste like preferences for chocolate over vanilla. Media and academic elite (the primary means for social conditioning) have tried to persuade the public that moral and religious opinions (unlike scientific facts) are merely personal matters we should keep to ourselves. An unsuspecting public has been taught to marginalize and trivialize religion and morality into a private sphere irrelevant to life in the real world.

Pressure on religious communities

In the cause of promoting and protecting pluralistic civility, social pressure is particularly placed on religious communities to de-emphasize all positions that could be perceived as claims to superiority among the religions of the world. Under the tyrannical rule of the twisted version of tolerance, people have been conditioned to be deeply suspicious of attempts to privilege one religious tradition or teaching as normative for all. If a religious tradition claims to have special access to truth about God, it is considered intolerant no matter how respectfully it relates to others. Absolute religious and moral opinions are considered potential threats to pluralistic civility.

Effect on Christian witness and missions

Should we be surprised that Christians with a missionary faith feel intimidated by this attitude? How can they obey Jesus' call to, "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19), without being considered rude and intrusive? Under the tyranny of tolerance, how should we think about Jesus statement, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No man comes to the father but through me" (John 14:6)? Should we change Jesus' words and make him say, "I am *a* way, *a* truth, and *a* life. People can come to the father through me or any other means they desire."

It's tempting to feel marginalized by the selective tolerance of our culture. The primary object of intolerance is Christianity. Islam doesn't receive the same level of ridicule and hostility. Professors who openly mock Christianity wouldn't dare attack the Islamic faith in university classrooms. But like the first followers of Christ, we must not compromise the message of salvation. In a fiercely pluralistic and polytheistic Roman society, the early apostles testified of Jesus that, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). They did not offer this as a personal opinion among many equally valid options. This was proclaimed as a fact of prophecy and history.

When Jesus described his true disciples in the beatitudes (see Matthew 5:10-16), he included persecution as distinguishing mark (cf. John 15:20). Persecuted people live provokingly different lifestyles in the world. They are true difference-makers and Jesus picks up on this when he reminds his disciples that they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. He also cautioned them not to follow the temptation to dilute the salt or hide the light. The followers of Jesus must be like well-lit cities on a hill that cannot be hidden. We must capture strategic places of influence for Jesus and not allow ourselves to be marginalized by the pressures of selective intolerance.

The Christian School

Good news: The Christian school environment is not bound by such restraints. It fosters the ability to freely express and evaluate moral and religious conclusions. Used wisely, this could be one of the most important contributions Christian schools make to the Church and the wider culture.

Witness with wisdom and grace

Considering the atmosphere I have described, Christian witness should be offered with wisdom and grace. Scripture that is particularly applicable exhorts us to, "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone" (Colossians 4:5-6). Given the prevailing distortions of tolerance and the misdirected attitude toward religious beliefs, it is also wise to emphasize the inclusive parts of our message. The good news of salvation is meant for all people.

At least seven truths related to the gospel apply to all people - without exception.

1. God has demonstrated his love for all people (John 3:16).
2. God desires the salvation of all people (I Timothy 2:3-4).
3. God has made provision for the salvation of all people (I John 2:2).
4. God commands all people to repent (Acts 17:30).

5. God will hold all people accountable for their response (Acts 17:31).
6. God takes no pleasure in anyone's rejection of his provision (Ezekiel 18:23,32).
7. God will save all people who place faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (John 3:16).

Questions for discussion:

1. What are the long-term effects for those who spend large amounts of time in environments where they learn to avoid talking about particulars and absolutes?
2. Would a learned ability to suspend commitment to one's belief lead to moral compromise in similar circumstances?
3. How can churches address these matters and the issue of inarticulacy regarding the faith?
4. How does the Christian teaching that all people are created equal in the image of God serve as the only reliable basis for true tolerance?
5. Does tolerance ask too little of people?
6. Would it be better to use the word respect instead of the term tolerance? If so, Why?
7. How would a call to radical neighbor love over tolerance be more socially transformative from a Christian perspective?
8. How do the salt and light metaphors relate to the roles of Jesus' followers in the world?

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