

Authentic Tolerance

Sociologists tell us that *tolerance* is a key value in our society today.

You've heard it said, "*Everyone has his or her own interpretation.*" "*You have your view. I have mine.*" "*I'm okay, you're okay.*" "*If it feels good to me, then it is good. End of discussion.*"

Such a counterfeit tolerance bypasses the hard work of relational discovery. This may temporarily skirt conflict yet will ultimately birth shallow relationships. We never get to know the real person with this counterfeit tolerance because we bypass the process of deeper relational knowing. Insightful discover often comes in rough waters, especially as we respond with healthy attitudes.

Since *natural learning* is a highly relational culture, such an approach to life also undermines our ability to learn well together. Relativism (there are no absolutes) drives this counterfeit tolerance. When we approach the Bible (or any literature) with such a distorted approach, we can twist the text to say what slides most easily into our lives. If there are absolutes, then it **may not** be OK even if it feels good.

Here is a "tipping point" for change for followers of Jesus. When we notice something in Scripture that does **not** align with our present views and responses, how do we respond?

- *Do we seek to find an alternate meaning to clear and crucial texts that cut across our choices to control our own lives, fitting Scripture into our existing lives without changing?*
- *Do we partner with the Spirit to change our lives to align with God's Word?*

The Bible is not malleable. There are absolutes...and also numerous "*Both/And* nuances. Observe the difference. Authentic *tolerance* has strong values and beliefs, absolutes in some areas. Learn to discern. God has spoken. And we are simply attempting to understand what Jesus says so we can *do* it, not vote on whether it fits into our current lives.

Jesus practices an **authentic tolerance**, yet without the anything-goes of the current counterfeit tolerance. As followers of Jesus, He is our Model.

Our society has a deep need for followers of Jesus to live loved with an **authentic tolerance** like Jesus does. Rapidly read through the Gospels, especially the Gospel of John, noting only how Jesus relates to people. Jesus approaches people by meeting them where they are, and lovingly and directly challenging their false views and values with revealed truth. For examples, carefully read how Jesus related to the woman at the well in John 4, the man at the pool in John 5, and the woman caught in adultery in John 8. He spoke to them directly, not softening truth, yet conveying it gently and with kindness (2 Timothy 2:23-26. Jesus saw them as they were, accepted them without judging or looking down on them, yet didn't cave to their harmful responses.

This is **authentic tolerance**.

Like Jesus, say today with words and actions: "*There are absolutes!*" and also "*I accept you where you are, even though I may not agree with what you believe.*"

A genuine, relational tolerance requires that we accept each person where they are, even though we may not agree with them. We value the person as an image-bearer above and beyond any differences. We meet them on the plain of equality as we seek to see them the way Jesus does. True tolerance encourages both sides to *advocate* strongly for their opinions with gentleness and kindness after honestly *inquiring* with equal interest into the ideas of others so we are able to see through their viewpoint, not our filters.

Valid tolerance possesses strong values and beliefs. Yet an equally strong value of *accepting* each person where and how they are. Disagreement is necessary at times for learning and for healthy relationships, as long as “*we disagree without being disagreeable.*” A true tolerance puts our views and values on hold for a time, even as we communicate respect so we can understand the other as they see themselves and their world. We *inquire* to understand their views, not primarily to refute their views.

If everyone holds his or her interpretation of clear texts in the Bible as “*infallibly*” right, then our lives cannot be lovingly challenged by others. For that person, Christianity begins to crumble into human morality. The Bible loses its sharp-edge and has a compromised message for us today (which is the modern counterfeit tolerance being pawned off on us). If a person can make the Bible say what he or she wants it to say, we place our individual thoughts above God’s and the Bible cannot be an authoritative guide for our lives. It then often becomes a misused weapon to support personal agendas (and this has happened!)

The Bible reveals God’s thoughts and ways, His heart and passions. However, the Bible can be misused. Freely add your own thoughts in the margin.

***Six ways to misuse the Bible.*¹**

1. *By being ignorant:* The Bible can be misused when a person is ignorant about what the Bible says on a given subject relating to faith or life.

2. *By taking a verse out of context:* All meaning is context dependent (what goes before or comes after the verse). When Satan quoted Psalm 91 to Jesus in the wilderness, he did not misquote the psalmist. Rather, he misused the passage by misrepresenting the intent of the writer in context, just like he did with Eve in Genesis 3:5. This is the enemy’s MO so let’s not imitate it.

3. *By reading into a passage:* We all have our own biases. We often read our own foreign ideas into a text and thereby make God’s Word say something it never intended to say. This is why we must *temporarily* lay aside our values and assumptions. To the degree we bring our biases to a passage is the degree to which we will see what we want to see, rather than what the passage actually says. We then stand in judgment over Scripture. This is why we are dependent on the Spirit and need one another to learn in community to bring perspective and allow us to expose our own filters.

4. *By misplacing emphasis:* Promises in the Bible must be blended with the total context of the Scriptural teaching on a theme. Major on the majors and minor on the minors. Be a person who is known for focusing on the “*main & plain,*” not on the controversial and questionable arenas, despite what is modeled by popular talk show hosts. Just because we have one verse to back our idea does not mean it fits into the overall tenor of Scripture and reflects the weight of the entire counsel and heart of God. Emphasizing our speculative ideas narrows our impact in a healthy body of Christ. Discern differences that really make a difference.

5. *By seeking our own agenda:* The purpose of Scripture is that we might know the heart and mind of God. When we use the Bible to try to get God or others to do what we want done, rather than what God wants done, it’s cultic. Our vested interests (our need to support our theological bias, for instance) are hidden agendas.

¹ Gleaned from Walter A. Henrichsen, “A Layman’s Guide to Interpreting the Bible” (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1978), pp. 96-97.

6. *By interpreting through tradition:* Traditions are not wrong; we all have them. To use traditions though as a lens through which to interpret Scripture limits and stifles Scripture. God's Word must begin to impact our traditions.

"They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men. And he said to them: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!" (Jesus' warning to the learned in Mark 7:7-9; also Mark 7:10-13).

By contrast, here are ***four attitudes or mindsets in how to approach the Bible for change.***

- ***Positive:*** "I may struggle learning some of the skills, but I want to learn and grow spiritually. I'm convinced the Spirit will help."
- ***Receptive:*** "What God requires is an open heart and mind and I offer Him that."
- ***Expectant:*** "I'm expecting God to communicate His heart to me and change me in some way as I come to His Word."
- ***Faithful:*** "I realize that a cost in time, energy and responsiveness goes with a solid understanding and practice of His Word as I partner with the Spirit."