

Tolerance-Genuine or Counterfeit? (Part 1)
(Rev. Dr. John Bartol)

“Truth cannot be sacrificed at the altar of a pretended tolerance. It cannot be all-inclusive because truth by its very nature is exclusive.” Ravi Zacharias, Apologist

Are you a tolerant person? Before answering that question, we must realize how its meaning has changed over the years. The Dictionary defines tolerance as “A fair objective attitude toward those whose opinions, beliefs, racial or ethnic origins etc. are different from one’s own.”

In its original or classical form tolerance was a Christian virtue. It meant to be free from prejudice and bigotry and show understanding toward those who differ from us. We could respect their right to their own beliefs without necessarily offering agreement or endorsement.

Not anymore! The new concept of tolerance taught today is very different and is being applied to areas where it does not belong. It gives equal support to almost all beliefs, values and lifestyles. As Ravi Zacharias discovered: “It took me years to find out that the cry for openness is never what it purports to be. What the person means by saying, “You must be open to everything” is really, “You must be open to everything that I am open to, and anything that I disagree with, you must disagree with also.”

In some areas of our society, tolerance receives the highest praise and intolerance the greatest condemnation. This deification of tolerance demonizes those who kindly reject some forms of behaviour as unacceptable and dare to have conviction’s over matters of public policy. Now, tolerance has been redefined to include the idea that not only should I have the right to do what I want to do, but you must approve of it, as well.

But this view must be challenged because it runs contrary to the core meaning of tolerance. It does not mean that we are intolerant simply because we acknowledge our differences. To respect others does not mean pretending that we all think the same way and acknowledge the same truths. Tolerance is only relevant and needed when people disagree. Truth respects and listens to all people but does not embrace or agree with all beliefs.

It is very important that we make careful distinctions regarding tolerance. In recent years we have seen examples of its counterfeit use. Some group whose particular system of beliefs runs against the grain of society’s moral standards, wants to gain eventual full acceptance by claiming that society should show tolerance toward their convictions. The group uses tolerance as a pseudo-moral shield to gain enough social acceptance so that it can claim affirmation as a matter of justice. They begin by demanding tolerance but soon shift to become passionately intolerant of anyone who disagrees with them.

Today, when anyone strongly endorses tolerance and broad mindedness they should be fair and consistent in their application. For example, in recent years a number of books have been published in defence of atheism. Their authors requested the public to show a spirit of tolerance toward their writings. Then, renowned atheist, Anthony Flew, announced: "That by approaching new criterion with an open mind, he has found overwhelming evidence for belief in an intelligent Creator God." What was their attitude toward their distinguished, former Mentor? Did they show respect and tolerance toward his thoughtful conclusions? Not a particle! Most only treated him with scorn and ridicule.

"Real tolerance is a Christian virtue-and the empirical evidence shows that it is Christians who practice it best." Charles Colson