

Tolerance vs. Intolerance

Balance is a vital component to Apostolic life. We must have a balanced approach to life, ideas, and to biblical concepts. Balance means, among other things, “a situation in which different elements are equal or in the correct proportions” (Oxford). In connection with this idea, how do we balance these two important topics: tolerance vs. intolerance?

We are facing many challenges in these last days. We are pressured from many sides—including from within our ranks to be tolerant and to be accepting, to just ignore whatever novel ideas or trends that are now currently being bantered about, and to simply look the other way when we already know that the things they are promoting are wrong on many levels.

On one hand, we should be tolerant of others, their ideas, their choices, and their decisions; it's a free country. But how about our obligation as ministers to stand for God by hating what God hates?

In the days of the Spanish Inquisition, a little course on the importance of tolerance would have been in order. Now in many denominational churches a little course on the importance of intolerance would be in order.

Elton Trueblood, in his book *Foundations for Reconstruction**, makes the case for intolerance. As a matter of fact, he entitled the second chapter “The Necessity of Intolerance.” He cites partly from Exodus 20:4, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image,...”; and partly from Exodus 20:5, “thou shalt not bow down thyself unto them, nor serve them” (22).

Trueblood said many interesting things regarding this subject. Such as, “The second of the commandments, in the classic formulation, is the one which seems to modern man the least valuable of all... Though the commandment which condemns obeisance to graven images seems the most trivial and obsolete of all the items in the ancient code, it is an arresting fact that the Biblical writers mentioned it more than they mentioned any other commandment” (22).

He also states, “Though, in the Decalogue itself, the space allotted to the second commandment is surpassed by one other, the fourth, in the Bible as a whole the references to the second are far more numerous than are the references to any other... If we are wise, we shall be slow to take lightly what was deeply important to so many whom we have reason to respect” (22-23).

“The prophets of Israel gave terrific emphasis to the second commandment because it referred to the greatest single danger of their people. *That danger was the danger of an easy tolerance*” (23). We will continue as prophets or will succumb to the seduction to be overly tolerant. Somebody needs to stand in the gap against the forceful attitudes of this permissive generation.

Trueblood continues “The constant tendency...”, what tendency? The constant tendency for God's people to “mingle” with pagans and to glean pagan ways. “This tendency led continually to a compromise between stern faith... and the lax or even

obscene religion which was the practice of their neighbors. Their temptation was not the temptation to give up their faith in Yahweh, but rather the temptation to add to that faith in a tolerant manner, thus producing a syncretistic worship with various elements existing conjunctively” (23).

This tendency “was in the direction of an easy and tolerant liberalism, while the great prophets were continual *protestants* against this tendency. The great prophets were uniformly conservative in that they resisted, through three crucial centuries, the temptation to indulge in the kind of toleration which blurs all distinctions” (23).

Trueblood says, “The prophets, therefore, were not *representative* of their times, but were *critical* of their times... The characteristic prophet, from Elijah on, seemed a *narrow* man, resisting the desire to make an easy accommodation... The prophets barely won! Time after time, new fashions arose which included Baal worship... The prophetic way was a hard way, but it was the only way in which the noble tradition which we prize could be preserved” (23-24).

Trueblood has tremendous insight. There are those among us that can use a measure of this insight, as well. We have an obligation before God to continue the prophetic ministry of our Old Testament brethren. This ministry will be just as uncompromisingly intolerant towards anything that clearly crosses a line against the truth of God’s Word. We have a biblical injunction to be intolerant. But we also need to be tolerant. Maybe it’s not tolerance vs. intolerance; but tolerant when warranted and intolerant when warranted. God must help us to have a balanced approach between these two crucial items. There are many things we must tolerate in a pluralistic society. But the church needs a man, a watchman, a seer, to be intolerant when the occasion arises.

- Elton Trueblood, *Foundations for Reconstruction: How to build an Enduring Moral Order: New Interpretations of Old Commandments*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1961, Revised Edition.

dsg