

Is There a Limit to Tolerance?

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Outline

Thesis: By understanding the principles of pluralism and the role of tolerance, the church can formulate an effective strategy based on genuine love and authoritative truth for reaching Canada with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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Is There a Limit to Tolerance?

During recent years, tolerance has been a “hot button” social issue. Its ideological influence has touched most spheres of life: politics, education, culture, religion, and morals. As one of the core tenets of Canadian pluralism, tolerance has been promulgated as the solution to living harmoniously within the diversity of the Canadian Mosaic. But tolerance has gone too far. It has been exalted above truth and has been substituted for genuine love. Tolerance has relativized morals and decried absolutes. It seems all is to be tolerated but intolerance, itself.

If the church is going to impact Canadian society with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, it must understand the pluralistic and relativistic climate of modern Canada. It is only through an understanding of our times that the church can authoritatively address the issues of contemporary society from a solidly Biblical position. The church must formulate a Biblical view on the issue of tolerance. Then, staying within the boundaries of Scriptural tolerance, the church must also learn to effectively minister within the context of Canadian Society.

In this paper, I will attempt to formulate a Biblical and reasonable approach to tolerance. In addition, I will offer suggestions for how the church can demonstrate a balance of genuine love and authoritative truth as it proclaims a universal yet exclusive message of salvation to a pluralistic and relativistic society. We will begin by discussing the the role of pluralism, relativism, and secularism in Canadian Society.

The Context: Pluralism, Relativism, and Secularism

Canada is described by sociologists as a “pluralistic society” or a “mosaic” of ethnic diversity. These terms recognize that Canada is comprised of “ethnic groups that live in peace and conflict within a common cultural, economic, and political framework, while maintaining cultural and social institutions that are to some extent distinctive.”¹ Obviously this definition of pluralism is accurately descriptive of Canada.

¹James J. Teevan, ed., *Basic Sociology: A Canadian Introduction* (Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., 1990), p. 202.

Though there are dangers with excessive pluralism — as we shall come to see — in its proper place, pluralism is beneficial.

As a policy, pluralism contributes to collective and personal freedom by legitimizing diversity. It resolves the question of how different individuals who want to be free can live in community. Pluralism diplomatically and optimistically declares that the whole is best served by the contribution of varied parts.²

Over the years, the concepts of pluralism have moved beyond association with ethnic and cultural diversity and have infiltrated every aspect of Canadian society.

The pluralism infant has been growing up in the past three decades. It has been traveling across the country, visiting our moral, religious, family, educational, and political spheres. We now have not only a cultural mosaic but also a moral mosaic, a meaning system mosaic, a family structure mosaic, a sexual mosaic. And that's just the short list. Pluralism has come to pervade Canadian minds and Canadian institutions.

Everywhere it has traveled, pluralism has left behind its familiar emphases — tolerance, respect, appreciation for diversity, the insistence that individuals must be free to think and to behave according to their consciences.³

Pluralism's emphasis on individualism, relativism, and tolerance arose as corrective values to the strong community and group loyalties that Bibby states were "excessive to the point of often being detrimental to personal well-being"⁴ The industrialized work place often exploited its workers, churches were often authoritarian, and community life was often characterized by cultural-religious controls. Those suffering the most under the discrimination of dominant societal norms were women and minorities. Individualism, relativism, and pluralism were reactions to the oppressive controls of pre-1960 Canadian society. These values brought the needed reprieve for those stifled by the former despotism of societal groups.

Though pluralism has brought greater freedom for racial, gender, and religious minorities, it has also opened Pandora's box to a host of societal ills. The problem that now exists is that Canadians have taken the values of individualism, relativism, and pluralism too far. The right of choice and emphasis on tolerance has been exalted to the disregard of truth. The discrimination of bigotry is confused with valid forms of value discrimination that enable us to evaluate good and bad or right and wrong. Pluralism's fear of discrimination has left little room for the discernment that is so crucial to making the best choices. Excessive individualism has resulted in disordered coexistence of independent individuals

²Reginald Bibby, *Mosaic Madness* (Toronto, Ontario: Stoddart Publishing Co. Ltd., 1990), p. 1-2.

³*Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 18.

and societal groups with little commitment to the well-being of others and of society as a whole. This state of excessive pluralism, relativism, and individualism, Bibby calls *mosaic madness*. The excess of these new values now threatens the well-being of Canada and its major institutions. The pendulum has swung too far. Balancing the rights and needs of the individual and of the group is always precarious, but Canada is now in desperate need of realignment. Pluralism's emphasis on individualism and relativism has undermined any base for moral, doctrinal, and ethical absolutes.

When a society abandons its transcendent values, each individual's moral vision becomes purely personal and finally equal. Since no preference is morally preferable, anything that can be dared will be permitted. This leaves the moral consensus for our laws and manners in tatters. Moral neutrality slips into moral relativism. Tolerance substitutes for truth, indifference for religious conviction.⁵

With the truth relativized, and moral principles obfuscated, society itself becomes the new standard of right and wrong. Truth is no longer innate and transcendent, it is now a product of social construction.

Pluralism translates into emancipated groups and emancipated individuals. Indispensable to such a posture is the accompanying declaration that all viewpoints are equally valid and that all pursuits are equally noble.

Such legitimization of diverse choice has been provided by the widespread acceptance of relativism. Absolutists assert that truth transcends cultures and individuals. In contrast, relativists assert that viewpoints reflect the social and intellectual settings from which people come. "Truth" is socially constructed. Consequently, the origin of ideas is not mysterious: ideas can be traced back to social locations.⁶

In pluralism, all viewpoints are to have equal value. "Relativism holds that religious, moral, or aesthetic claims relating to values such as truth, meaningfulness, rightness, reasonableness, appropriateness, aptness, or the like, are relative to the contexts in which they appear."⁷ "No one viewpoint is superior to or more accurate than another; no one lifestyle is more valid than another."⁸

In Canada, truth has become little more than personal opinion. "It's all relative," declare Canadians from British Columbia to Newfoundland. . . . Relativism has slain moral consensus. It has stripped us of our ethical and moral guidelines, leaving us with no authoritative instruments with which to measure social life. . . . we triumphantly

⁵Chuck Colson, "Making the World Safe for Religion", *Christianity Today*, November 8, 1993, p. 32.

⁶Bibby, *Mosaic Madness*, p. 9.

⁷Roger Cresswell and Peter Hobson, "The Concept of Tolerance and Its Role in a Pluralist Society, with Particular Reference to Religious Education" *Journal of Christian Education*. Papers 98 (September 1990), p. 29.

⁸Bibby, *Mosaic Madness*, p. 13.

discarded the idea that there are better and best choices in favor of worshipping choice as an end in itself.⁹

Though in concept, all views are to be given equal value and validity in a pluralistic society, in reality and daily practice, this is far from true. "A 'pluralistic' society in which 'all points of view' are treated equally is unrealistic and ultimately unworkable. In reality, a 'pluralistic' society is one which is making a transition from one controlling set of beliefs to another controlling set."¹⁰ The dominant ideology of a nation will gain momentum and overpower the other ideologies. With broader acceptance comes greater influence and control. This influence can be used to control the information flow through the media, education, and other social institutions. This control can result in screening or even tainting the views that may be in opposition to the dominant ideology. For example, "the deliberate abuse of labeling has conditioned the population to respond negatively to any mention of religious concern in the public sphere."¹¹

What then is the dominant ideology shaping the views of Canadian society? According to astute Christian authors, the dominant ideology of Canada — as well as the U.S. and much of the world — is *secular humanism*. Secular humanism can be understood by examining each word that comprises its descriptive designation. "Secularism (as described in modern thought) is a notion that God is outside the scope of human understanding: Either God is nonexistent or unavailable. In both cases He is irrelevant."¹² Secularization is that process whereby the realms of life are secluded from religious influence. Secular people, then, are

those whose life simply has no room for God; they are people who "have shoved religion to the sidelines. Religious ideas and religious institutions have absolutely no impact on how [these] people spend their money, use their time, watch television or run their business" writes Glenn Smith, an urban ministry specialist.¹³

Asserting that God does not exist, modern humanists exalt the sufficiency of man, reason, and scientific process. Secular humanism can therefore be defined as "a philosophy

⁹ibid., pp. 13-14.

¹⁰Bill Gothard, *How to Understand Humanism* (Oakbrook, Illinois: Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts, 1983), p. 4.

¹¹Franky Schaeffer, *A Time for Anger: The Myth of Neutrality* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1982), p. 16.

¹²Brian Stiller, *Sundial* (Quarterly newsletter published by The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, 1st quarter, 1988), p. 1.

¹³Donald Posterski, *Reinventing Evangelism* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1989), p. 61

which holds that God is nonexistent or irrelevant to human affairs, and that man must choose or invent his own ethics; secular humanism makes man the measure of all things.”¹⁴

In the name of neutrality, “there is a mounting campaign to remove all traces of Christianity from the public schools and institutions of our land.”¹⁵ Yet neutral education like pluralistic equality of ideas is impossible. No one is totally objective and free from bias. “Teaching knowledge without God *is* the religion of Humanism.”¹⁶

Every human being has a religion: he holds certain values, and these values imply a rationale; in this it makes no difference whether someone has accepted the values of an organized religion or has chosen his own. Everyone believes in something, even if that “something” is his repudiation of all organized religions. Although man is capable of dispassionate inquiry, there is, finally no such thing as a nonreligious view of truth: to value one thing as opposed to another is to make a declaration of faith. All life is religious, and all life is secular. There is no real division between the two.¹⁷

Whether it’s education, morals, politics or religion, neutrality is a myth. Nonreligious people are no less bias than religious people.

Everyone has some moral base, even if his “morality” is expressed in immorality or his faith is faith in not having any faith at all. That those who do not hold traditional religious or moral positions are somehow operating from a more “neutral” and open-minded stance is illogical and preposterous, especially when seen in the light of the religious fervor with which they propagate their secularist position.¹⁸

In can be seen from the above discussion, that though Canada is a pluralistic Mosaic, it is apparent that not all pieces of the Mosaic have equal voice and influence. In fact, treating all points of view as equal is unrealistic and ultimately unworkable. Pluralism provides for transition to a new dominating ideology.

Up until the 1960’s, the church and Christian values and standards were still a dominant force in the institutions of Canada: educational, family, legal, political, and community. With the rise of pluralism and its emphasis on individualism and relativism—which by the way, are very compatible with secular humanism—there has been a transition to a new dominant ideology, secular humanism. Though pluralism is being promoted, most

¹⁴Schaeffer, *A Time for Anger: The Myth of Neutrality*, p. 24.

¹⁵Gothard, *How to Understand Humanism*, p. 4.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁷Schaeffer, *A Time for Anger: The Myth of Neutrality*, pp. 23-24.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp.24-25

Canadians still assume a secular mindset, that God does not exist or is irrelevant to life. It is in this context, that the church finds itself in its discussions on tolerance.

The Concern: Defining the Limits of Tolerance

Most recognize the dangers of bigotry, prejudice, and discrimination toward those that are different. Many minorities have experienced the evils of intolerance. It's obvious that tolerance is a necessary ingredient to all peaceful societies, but has the cry for tolerance gone too far? When does tolerance cross the line of compromising moral principles? In the name of tolerance, are we to accommodate child abuse, thievery and other deviant behaviors that damage individuals, families, and society? Where does discrimination end and discernment begin? When do we defend an individual's right to freedom and choice; and yet, when are human rights to yield to higher moral principles?

Before some of these questions can be answered, we need a clearer understanding of tolerance. Tolerance can be defined as "willingness to let other people do as they think best; willingness to endure beliefs and actions of which one does not approve. Tolerance implies being willing to let others think, live, or worship according to their own beliefs and to refrain from judging harshly or with prejudice."¹⁹

Canada is a Mosaic of races, cultures, and creeds. Not allowing for differences in belief and action would result in *forcing* conformity of all to one dominant ideology (though even pluralism is coercive, as we shall see later.) Totalitarian conformity is obviously a dangerous extreme and is the reason why we allow freedom for those of different beliefs and practices. Though Canadians do not agree with one another on all points, they grant one another the unqualified legal right to be wrong.

However tolerance has moved to the opposite, yet equally dangerous, extreme. "The presence of choices says much about a society's tolerance level; but it says little about the efficacy of the choices themselves."²⁰ As we have seen, due to relativism, there is a pervading influence that right and wrong do not actually exist. All views are equal. Differences in belief and practice are not only to be endured and allowed, but there is a hidden assumption that they all have equal value and merit. Homosexuals for example, are

¹⁹Clarence L. Barnhart and Robert K. Barnhart, eds., *The World Book Dictionary* (Chicago, Illinois: World Book-Childcraft International, Inc., 1982), p. 2202.

²⁰Bibby, *Mosaic Madness*, p. 139.

wanting others not only to acknowledge their right to choose their own lifestyle, but to also recognize homosexuality as an *acceptable* alternate form of sexual orientation and family structure. This is moving beyond tolerance to *approval*.²¹ But tolerance asks us only to *forbear* with practices and beliefs of others, not to approve of them. Netland also identifies this distinction.

It hardly makes sense to speak of tolerating something of which one heartily approves! Thus Maurice Cranston defines toleration as "a policy of patient forbearance in the presence of something which is disliked or disapproved of." (Cranston 1967:143). Toleration has an element of condemnation built into its meaning.²²

Netland continues,

A fundamental distinction emerges here: it is one thing to accept someone's holding a particular belief, or someone's right to hold a particular belief, but quite another matter to accept the content of the belief itself. Religious tolerance does imply the former, but not the latter.²³ Netland, p. 81.

Though Netland is specifically addressing religious tolerance, the principle applies to all issues of tolerance. It is one thing to acknowledge the civil right of a homosexual to practice his lifestyle; it is quite another to violate one's own moral conscience in approving of his lifestyle as normal and morally appropriate. It is one thing to allow others to hold to different religious beliefs; it is another to say that the the opposing beliefs of others are as equally valid as my own.

Bibby also makes this important distinction between tolerance and approval. He writes, .

Here it would seem to be extremely important to differentiate between what we tolerate and what we advocate. For example, it is one thing to say that people who experience divorce should not be stigmatized. It is quite another thing to say that divorce is personally and socially desirable. . . . Our current emphasis on choice in Canada has blurred the distinction between toleration and advocacy. Our major institutions — the media, the school, government, and even religion — have been saying less and less about better and best possibilities.²⁴

Accusations of "intolerance" and "discrimination" have been hurled at many who hold a different conviction or persuasion than those making the accusations. For example,

²¹John Leo, "Gay Tolerance, Not Approval," *U.S. News & World Report* (May 3, 1993), p. 20.

²²Harold Netland, "Exclusivism, Tolerance, and Truth," *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (April 1987), p. 80.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 81. See also Harold Netland's book, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991)

²⁴Bibby, *Mosaic Madness*, p. 139.

homosexuals often make claims that they are being discriminated against because of the moral standards of Christians. But, couldn't the accusations be reversed? Shouldn't the accusers tolerate the convictions and opinions of those they are accusing? Can it not be said that those crying "intolerance" are just as "intolerant"? Are not gay views of sexual orientation as equally offensive to those holding a traditional moral ethic with which homosexuals disagree? Who is to say which view is intolerant? On what basis is intolerance to be determined?

Even secular educators recognize that "not all acts of refusal to tolerate are examples of intolerance. . . . people are not considered intolerant if they refuse to tolerate child abuse, sexual harassment, indoctrination in schools, and other actions that our society generally considers intolerable."²⁵ Though they admit that there are some behaviors that are not to be tolerated, the determining factor is the general consensus of society. The problem, though when there is no absolute moral standard, is that the boundaries of tolerance are relative to the general consensus of society. Behavior considered deviant at one time, may become socially acceptable at another time—abortion and premarital sex, for example. Previously it was not considered intolerant to oppose such behaviors, but now social mores have changed and those who oppose such behaviors are often labelled intolerant. What we must realize is that in reality all views are not given equal place or validity in a pluralistic society. As we have seen, the dominant ideology influences a societal construction of what is right and wrong, moral and immoral, or in this case tolerant and intolerant.

Perhaps what we don't realize is that pluralism's relativistic tenet that all ideas are equal undermines the concepts of truth and absolutes. Pluralism requires that one compromise his convictions by acknowledging that other views are equally as valid. Yet the law of noncontradiction clearly indicates that contradictory truth claims cannot both be true. Can God exist and not exist at the same time? Obviously both cannot be true. As Christians, can we truly say that the truth claims of a humanist, Buddhist, or Satanist are as equally valid as our own? We need to realize that under the guise of tolerance, pluralism, as it is being promoted, is itself intolerant of absolutes. Liberal pluralism is a deceitful force that destroys truth by insisting that all views are equal. Donovan recognizes this danger.

²⁵Craig, Cheryl, *Promoting Tolerance, Understanding, and Respect for Diversity: A Monograph for Educators* (Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Dept. of Education, 1985), p. 43.

On the contrary, pluralism is coercive. It does not allow others simply to be themselves. To play the pluralist game properly, parties are expected to countenance quite radical reinterpretations and amendments being made to their own positions as well as those of others. Pluralism presupposes liberalism, which involves compromise, accommodation, and the dismantling of distinctive traditional convictions. The common features and agreed truths it purports to arrive at, through embracing a wide range of viewpoints, are in fact simply reinforcements for the political and economic interests of a dominant ideology.²⁶

Again he writes,

Does pluralism's "high-minded commitment to freedom of thought contain, in its implicit assumptions, a capacity for coerciveness which destroys its would-be neutrality, and makes it through-and-through ideological, intrinsically intolerant and culturally hegemonic?²⁷

Also recognizing the danger of relativism and its implications for the Christian and Biblical truth, Goetz writes,

It is one thing to advocate religious openness in a spirit of relativism or half belief, and quite another to suffer deeply the sense of pathos which arises when we try to be open to points of view which, if they were to prevail, must call into question the primacy of our beloved Lord. There is, to paraphrase Bonhoeffer, cheap tolerance and costly tolerance.²⁸

Pluralism's emphasis on relativism conflicts with Christianity's exclusive claim of salvation through Christ alone (Acts 4:12). "Christianity is a religion that combines the claim to being universal in scope with the demand for being exclusive in belief."²⁹ As a result, there are increasing attacks on Christian exclusivism as "naive, intolerant, and the product of an immoral religious imperialism."³⁰ In addition to Christian beliefs, Christian standards of morality have been judged as intolerant. Yet, shouldn't Christian views be just as welcome as any other in a pluralistic society?

One would think that with the view of pluralism prevailing, Christian faith would be equally welcomed along with other religions. However we are being subjected to a constant barrage by those who believe we not only have nothing to contribute to the debate, be it on abortion or pornography, but assume that because it is "Christian" is is therefore invalid.³¹

²⁶Peter Donovan, "The Intolerance of Religious Pluralism," *Religious Studies*. Vol. 29 (Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 217-218.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 219.

²⁸Ronald Goetz, "Exclusivistic Universality," *Christian Century* (April 21, 1993), p. 425.

²⁹Donald G. Dawe, *Christian Faith in a Religiously Plural World* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1980), p. 14. Though this is a true statement, I don't agree with some of Dawe's approach to handling this issue in light of our pluralistic society. I am uncomfortable with the implications of translation theology.

³⁰Harold Netland, "Exclusivism, Tolerance, and Truth," p. 78.

³¹Stiller, *Sundial*, p. 1.

That Christian views are considered invalid by much of today's society shows the mutual intolerance of relativism and exclusivism. Truth cannot be relative and exclusive at the same time, in the same place, and used in the same way. Furthermore, *personal* truth cannot be separated from *propositional* truth, for personal truth is based on a believed proposition. As seen previously, opposing propositional truth claims cannot both be true.³²

Before continuing our discussion on exclusivism and tolerance, it is important that we define Christian exclusivism. *The Lausanne Covenant*, written by Christian representatives from over 150 nations, clearly describes a Biblical position on Christianity's relationship to other religions and ideologies.

We affirm that there is only one Saviour and only one gospel, although there is wide diversity in evangelistic approaches. We recognize that all men have some knowledge of God through His general revelation in nature. But we deny that this can save, for men suppress the truth by their unrighteousness. We also regard as derogatory to Christ and the Gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and ideologies. Jesus Christ, being himself the only God-man, who gave himself as the only ransom for sinners, is the only mediator between God and man. There is no other name by which we must be saved.³³

Using *The Lausanne Covenant* as a foundation, Netland defines a Christian exclusivist as follows.

Christian exclusivists, then, are those who maintain the uniqueness and normativity of the person and work of Jesus Christ, the truth and authority of the Bible as God's definitive self-revelation, and who assert that where the claims of Scripture are incompatible with those of other faiths, the latter are not to be accepted as truth.³⁴

Christianity is not the only religion or ideology that is exclusive. Most religions and ideologies have exclusive truth claims. Even pluralism's claim that truth is relative excludes the view that truth is not relative. The dominant religion of secular humanism gives no room for the claims of Christianity to be equal to its own. A pluralism or tolerance that claims all views are equal is in reality a misnomer. "It is also, of course, a shrewd tactical move for

³²For a thorough and logical treatment of the "truth" issue in religious pluralism see, Netland, "Exclusivism, Tolerance, and Truth," *Missiology: An International Review*, pp. 82-91.

³³*Lausanne Covenant* Article 3. (Lausanne, Switzerland: International Congress on World Evangelization, July 1974)

³⁴Harold Netland, "Exclusivism, Tolerance, and Truth," p. 78. Netland is careful to note that "the use of the term 'exclusivism' is unfortunate in some respects, since it has, at least for some people, some undesirable connotations, such as narrow-mindedness, arrogance, insensitivity, self-righteousness, and so forth. The term is adopted here because of its wide use in the literature to refer to the position represented by the Lausanne Covenant. . . . properly defined exclusivism need not have these undesirable associations. Further, as defined here Christian exclusivism does not entail that all of the claims of non-Christian religions must be false or that other religious traditions are without any inherent value" (endnote, p. 93).

confessional Christian theologians to complain that pluralism puts the distinctives of other faiths equally at risk.”³⁵

It is important to recognize that Christian exclusivism is a species of more general exclusivist position regarding the relation among religions. In this general sense, exclusivism can be defined as the position which holds that the central claims of one's own religious tradition are true, and that where beliefs of other traditions appear to be incompatible with those of one's own tradition, the former are to be rejected as false. What is often overlooked is that most religious traditions (with the possible exception of certain forms of Hinduism) are exclusivist in this sense.³⁶

The question arises, is exclusivism necessarily intolerant? The answer to this is determined by the definition of tolerance. If tolerance is to acknowledge that all views have equal credibility, then exclusivism would be considered intolerant. However, we have seen that this definition of tolerance is inconsistent with the nature of truth. If tolerance, however, is forbearance with another who holds views and practices with which one disagrees or disapproves, then exclusivism is *not* intolerant.

In tolerating a belief, one is not adopting a special attitude toward the content of the belief (one might still regard it as false); rather, one is adopting a certain acceptance of someone's believing in that belief. It is not intolerant to consider beliefs incompatible to your own as false.³⁷

It is not the exclusivism of one's views that mark a man as intolerant. “Rather, it is the highly insensitive and repugnant manner in which he expresses his views and seeks to persuade that compels us to call him intolerant.”³⁸

It would seem, then, that there is nothing necessarily intolerant in maintaining that religious beliefs which are incompatible with central Christian beliefs are false. This is not to deny that someone holding this position might act in a highly intolerant manner toward those of other faiths. The point here is simply that such intolerance is not demanded by exclusivism. There is no necessary connection between holding the beliefs of a particular group to be false and the radical mistreatment of members of that group (Griffiths and Lewis 1983:77f.). Certainly one can consider the beliefs of another to be false and yet treat that person with dignity and respect. To deny this is to suggest that we can only respect and treat properly those with whom we happen to agree. But surely this is nonsense. Is it not a mark of maturity to be able to live peaceably with, and act properly toward, those with whom we might profoundly disagree?³⁹

Not only can those who hold an exclusivist view be tolerant of others, their tolerance is more admirable because they are forbearing with others with whom they cannot agree. In

³⁵Donovan, “The Intolerance of Religious Pluralism,” p. 219.

³⁶ibid., p. 78.

³⁷Harold Netland, “Exclusivism, Tolerance, and Truth,” p. 81.

³⁸ibid., p. 81.

³⁹ibid., p. 81.

fact, by acknowledging the distinctives and possible conflicts of a belief system's truth claims, opposing exclusivists actually share a common concern to not compromise their convictions. This may even give the exclusivist an advantage over a relativist in an open pluralistic society.

On religious questions, unshakeable conservatives may well be far better placed than fallibilist liberals to engage effectively in practical co-operation with those holding different beliefs. Mutual concerns can be dealt with more congenially when there is no question of the parties involved being expected to reconsider their deepest traditional convictions or commitments. As conservative folk-wisdom has always said, 'strong fences make good neighbours'.⁴⁰

Finally, it is only in acknowledging the concept of propositional truth—which by its very nature excludes the validity of equal but contradictory truth claims—that meaningful discussion and dialogue can take place. If all truth is relative, then what solid basis is there for meaningful discussion, evaluation, and decision? With these concepts in mind, let us now turn our discussion to how Christians are to live and evangelize in the pluralistic atmosphere of Canadian society.

The Challenge: Christians Engaging Pluralism

Though excessive pluralism has its problems and inconsistencies, pluralism isn't all bad. Its basic premises foster an open atmosphere that makes acceptance and dialogue over diversity possible. "By its very nature, a pluralistic society is open to new influences."⁴¹ As Christians, we need to learn to use pluralism to our advantage by appealing to some of its claims — though not always its realities. In principle, Christians have just as much right to live their lives according to their beliefs, just as much right to be free from discrimination, and just as much right to influence in a pluralistic society, as do other religions or ideologies.

Regardless of our rights as Christians, how we approach the Canadian context of pluralism, relativism, and secularism will determine the effectiveness of our Christian influence. What is needed is a lifestyle strategy for influencing Canadian society. I propose a three-fold strategy: 1) Demonstrating God's Love, 2) Exemplifying God's Life, and 3) Speaking God's Truth.

⁴⁰Donovan, "The Intolerance of Religious Pluralism," p. 225.

⁴¹Posterski, *Reinventing Evangelism*, p. 77.

Demonstrating God's Love

Though Christian claims may be considered exclusive to other truth claims, when they are presented with demonstrations and evidences of the unconditional love of Jesus Christ, others will not only be tolerant of Christianity, but many will open their hearts to its claims. As we have previously noted, Christians aren't intolerant because of their exclusive truth claims, but some have been considered intolerant because of the arrogant, "highly insensitive and repugnant manner" in which they have expressed their views or have sought to persuade others. Many times the resistance to Christianity hasn't been its claims, but rather the inconsistent lifestyle and attitudes of its adherents.

When the cosmos finds its consummation it will be Jesus Christ the Palestinian Jew who proves to be at the heart of it all. The trick is to confess this reality in such a way that its formulation does not appear lovelessly arrogant that its very articulation seems to give it the lie. Perhaps the problem isn't one of correct formulations at all. If our lives were a truer reflection of our faith, the idea that Christians are arrogant exclusivists would scarcely occur to anyone. ⁴²

God calls His followers to go beyond tolerance. Merely acknowledging the right of others to hold differing views, while we maintain our views is not enough. To use Jesus phraseology, "Do not even the [non-Christians] do the same?" (Matt. 5:46-47; Luke 6:32). As Christians we need to go beyond tolerance to love. Douglas Hall has insightfully stated that Jesus did not say "Tolerate your neighbor," but "Love your neighbor."⁴³

Though we may not approve of the truth claims or lifestyle of other individuals or groups, we need to actively demonstrate God's love to all people regardless of their religious, moral, or cultural background. We can do this without compromising the exclusivistic message of salvation through Christ alone. In fact, not demonstrating Christ's love to those with whom we disagree, actually compromises the message of the Gospel. God did not approve of the world when He demonstrated His love for it in sending Christ. Quite the contrary, "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). The good news is that "God so loved the world" (John 3:16). How will people understand God's unconditional love and provision in Christ, if they can not see His love demonstrated through those claiming to be His followers?

Christians should not compromise their moral stands on issues like homosexuality and abortion. On the other hand, Christians should not just stand on the sidelines and curse

⁴²Goetz, "Exclusivistic Universality," p. 425.

⁴³As quoted by Bibby in *Mosaic Madness*, p. 195.

the darkness. They should shine their lights by actively serving those who are suffering the consequences of their own sin. Christians need to demonstrate practical applications of God's love by getting involved in the needs of society. Of all people, Christians should be among the first to nurse and care for those infected with aids, not ostracize them. "And have mercy on some, who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh" (Jude 1:22-23).

The church should be ministering to victims of crime; and designing strategies to bring healing to children from broken homes. More than any other institution, the church should be involved in feeding the poor (of Canada, not just other countries), working with the homeless, caring for the widows, setting free those held captive by addictions, bringing holistic healing to the ill and wounded in heart, and not least of all reaching the outcasts of society with a message of God's love. These living demonstrations of love will build bridges with our society and open their hearts to hear the GOOD NEWS of the Gospel. Jesus said it this way, "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Good works done through sincere love will open the hearts of others to acknowledge God.

Effective influence doesn't come through coercion. One can only influence when those receiving the influence have given him the authority to do so.⁴⁴ As Christians, we know this to be true. We give others unspoken authority to minister to us when we trust their character and integrity. In like manner, we influence others when they trust us and consequently open their hearts to our influence. In that sense they give us unspoken authority to influence them. Attitudes that are judgmental, critical, condemning, or even indifferent do not build trust in the hearts of people. Jesus said, "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through Him" (John 3:17; 12:47).

The ability to influence others comes when we have earned their trust by gaining credibility. We do not gain credibility in another's eyes unless we give of ourselves to another's need. Jesus won our trust by demonstrating unconditional love in dying for us on the cross. He took upon Himself our sins and the punishment that we deserved. His acts of

⁴⁴These thoughts on gaining the trust of others in order to influence them are based on comments by Brian Stiller at a Missionsfest in Calgary a number of years ago. I have developed them from the notes I took at that conference.

indescribable love, when made real by the Holy Spirit, opened our hearts to receive Him. In like manner, when we give our lives to others through genuine demonstrations of God's love, not only will we win the right to be heard, but the Holy Spirit can use that small act of love — small in comparison to Christ's love for us — to impress upon them the unfathomable love of God in Christ Jesus.

Love builds bridges. One expression of love will be acceptance. Jerry Cook, the author of *Love, Acceptance, and Forgiveness*, defines acceptance as "love in action." He writes, "Love means accepting people the way they are for Jesus sake."⁴⁵ "Unreserved acceptance of people should be a habit with us. There's no other way to get close enough to people to help them at the level of their deepest needs. When we cultivate the habit of accepting people, they open up to us, they like us, they trust us instinctively."⁴⁶

Don Posterski, in his book *Reinventing Evangelism*, also places an emphasis on acceptance in his strategy for engaging pluralism. He recommends that Christians build relational bridges by extending *acceptance* to all others — not necessarily approval — and by communicating *appreciation*. Through these means, the Christian is then able to influence Canadian society with the gospel of Christ. "Acceptance fosters acceptance, and both parties in the relationship are freed to be who they are without being threatened by each other."⁴⁷ To not demonstrate acceptance is a barrier to the gospel.

The lack of acceptance by Christians of those who are not yet followers of Jesus is one of the major obstacles to fruitful witnessing. Failure on the part of Christians to extend acceptance to nonbelievers shuts down relationships before they have an opportunity to develop. The wrong signal is sent and the door is shut.⁴⁸

We need to keep in mind that tolerance requires acceptance, but neither tolerance nor acceptance require approval.

When a non-Christian receives full and unqualified acceptance from a Christian, it is not the same as approving everything about that person. Just as God loves the sinner but detests the sin, so the Christian is called to accept the unbeliever without confusing the person with what a person does.⁴⁹

⁴⁵Jerry Cook, *Love, Acceptance, and Forgiveness* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1981), p. 15.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁷Posterski, *Reinventing Evangelism*, p. 72.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 71.

Posterski recommends that we not only show unqualified acceptance but that we also need to appreciate and validate the truth and goodness that is proclaimed and practiced by those who do not overtly acknowledge God. "The teachings of the world are not all wrong. They convey part of what God has decreed and established to be right and true."⁵⁰ Paul demonstrates appreciation to the Athenians by acknowledging their altar to the unknown God and by quoting from their philosophers: "For in him we live and move and have our being," - Epidenides; "We are his offspring," - Aratus (Acts 17:22-23, 28).⁵¹

Posterski concludes, "When *acceptance* is the attitude and when *appreciation* for what is good in people is expressed, followers of Jesus are in a position to *influence* those who have not yet accepted Christ and His teachings."⁵²

Demonstrations of unconditional love are essential to removing barriers and building bridges for the gospel of Jesus Christ. However, in addition to demonstrating God's love, they must also live a godly life.

Exemplifying God's Life

The lack of acceptance by Christians toward non-Christians has been augmented by the church's tolerance of sin in its own ranks. The moral failure and extravagance of some of Christendom's public leaders, who strongly and actively decried the evils of the world, have done as much or more to undermine the trust of non-Christians than perhaps the arrogant separatist attitudes of some Christians. Credibility is not only gained through demonstrations of love, but also through consistency of life. Like David, when Christians fail morally, they give occasion for "the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme" (2 Sam. 12:14).

Righteous living and the modeling of godly values amidst this crooked and perverse generation are essential to our Christian witness (Phil. 2:14-15; Titus 2:12). In addition, how the church handles moral failure is as important to Christian witness as is godly living. The eyes of the world are on the church. We are living epistles, known and read of all men (2 Cor. 3:2-3). Perhaps the slander and rivalry of other Christians in reaction to the failure of Bakker, Swaggart, and others was just as much a scandal as the personal failures of these

⁵⁰ibid., p. 75.

⁵¹ibid., p. 73.

⁵²ibid., p. 77.

men. The church needs to be characterized by repentance, humility, forgiveness, and restoration.

When rates of divorce and premarital sexual experimentation are as high among Christians as non-Christians, what message of light and hope does that bring? Statistically, there appears to be little difference between the church and the world. Has the salt lost its savor? The church is not only being tossed about by the world's values, but also by many winds of doctrine. There is as great a need for solid Biblical and theological teaching as there is for a revival of holiness. If the church is going to have an impact on our nation, it needs to regain credibility and trust through a consistent demonstration of Christ-like living. The world will not listen to what we say, if what we say is contradicted by the way we live.

Speaking God's Truth

Once the church has built bridges of credibility and trust through sincere demonstrations of love and consistent Christian living, it then will have earned the right to speak authoritatively to the people and issues of Canadian society. The church, more than any institution, should be authoritatively addressing the issues of life's purpose, moral ethics, and truth. Bibby writes, "Religion has provided a frame of reference for interpreting life — our ultimate origins and purpose — and death."⁵³ "Few, if any, institutions are in a better position than religion to speak to matters of ethics and truth."⁵⁴ Bibby acknowledges that the church is a key player in our Canadian society.

Religion, in unabridged form, has much to bring to our times. It addresses, the fundamental questions of existence — why we are here, where we can find our worth, how we are to relate to others, where we are going. Accordingly, religion is capable of speaking with authority to at least three themes that social scientists and futurists agree remain pervasive — the quest for meaning, for self-affirmation, for community.⁵⁵

Why has the church ceased to be a prophetic voice in society? In addition to losing society's trust through lack of genuine love and scandal, the church has succumbed to the excesses of Canadian pluralism. "Sadly, religion, rather than decrying the excesses of individualism and relativism, has tended to embrace them. It thereby has lost both its

⁵³Bibby, *Mosaic Madness*, p. 194.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 146.

message and its vocal chords.”⁵⁶ This has left the church weak and impaired in bringing its authoritative message to Canadian society. “Delimited by individualism and demoted by relativism, religion in Canada has ceased to be authoritative. Canadians who continue to ask questions, seek hope, and pursue community find religion to be offering only piecemeal, fragmented responses.”⁵⁷

The church needs to once again address societal ills with a Biblically prophetic voice. “‘The principal moral benefit of religion is that it permits a confrontation with the age in which one lives in a perspective that transcends the age and thus puts it in proportion.’ If religion still has anything to say, ‘the time is at hand.’”⁵⁸ The church needs to broadcast its message, not only to members on Sunday morning, but also through popular media: magazines, newspapers, radio, and television.

Little wonder religious leaders are shy of the media. However, unless religious groups can make their voices heard through the media, notably television, they will have a limited place in the mind-making and social-shaping that the media are carrying out. . . those who value faith [need] to come up with problem-solving strategies that will enable them to use television more effectively to converse with Canadians.⁵⁹

“Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved. How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?” (Rom 10:13-14). The church must take each opportunity to be faithful in fulfilling its commission to preach the life-transforming gospel of Jesus Christ. Apart from the Good News of Christ, there is no eternal hope for the world.

When the principles of pluralism are embodied in attitude and action, a wholesome environment is created for presenting the gospel. The results are then in God’s hands. Our confidence rests in the power of God’s truth and the activity of the Holy Spirit. Our role is to engage people in thoughtful and sometimes disruptive discussions. We are also to present the content of the gospel creatively.⁶⁰

As has always happened throughout history, not all will welcome God’s message. Some will receive, some will reject, and some will vehemently oppose. We need to realize that regardless of pluralism’s emphasis on tolerance, “the darkness hates the light because

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 147.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 146.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 199. Here Bibby quotes Peter Berger.

⁵⁹Ibid., pp. 197-198.

⁶⁰Posterski, *Reinventing Evangelism*, p. 169.

its deeds are evil" (John 3:19). If the world hated Jesus, it will also hate us because we are not of the world (John 15:18-21). "All who live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). We need to boldly proclaim the Word of God, but we also need to be sure that if we are persecuted it is for righteousness sake, not because of our arrogant intolerance or hypocritical lifestyles.

Conclusion

If the church is going to impact Canadian society with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, it must understand the pluralistic and relativistic climate of modern Canada. Based upon this understanding, the church must then formulate an uncompromising, yet effective strategy for reaching Canada with the message of the gospel. This strategy is only possible as Christians can Scripturally embody some of the principles of pluralism.

Tolerance is necessary to the harmonious coexistence of differing cultures, beliefs, and morals. Tolerance, however, does not mean approval of the ungodly lifestyles or opposing views of others. Christians must reject the notion that all truth is relative and therefore equally valid. Though Christian exclusivism does not acknowledge equal validity to all truth claims, Christians are to go beyond tolerance and demonstrate unconditional Christian love to all. By building bridges of trust and credibility through sincere demonstrations of love and consistent Christ-like living, Christians will earn the right to be heard. The church should not shrink back, but in boldness and in love, authoritatively and creatively speak the truth of God to the lost in Canadian society.

By wisely applying these principles, the church can demonstrate a balance of genuine love and authoritative truth as it proclaims a universal yet exclusive message of salvation to a pluralistic and relativistic society. May God honor His Word, and may many in Canada come to know the transforming power of His life and love resulting in renewal and godly change for all of Canada. May it be!

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