

Pluralism & Tolerance

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Introduction

During an interview with evangelical pastor Rick Warren that was broadcast on Christmas Eve, Piers Morgan, the controversial journalist and CNN television host, once again stroked the flames of controversy, asserting that both the Bible and the U.S. Constitution are “inherently flawed” and need new “amendments.”

Morgan declared, “Both the Bible and the Constitution were well intentioned but they are basically, inherently flawed. Hence, the need to amend it. My point of view about gay-rights, for example, [is that] it’s time for an amendment to the Bible. You should compile a new Bible.”

Warren responded, “Uh, no. Not a chance! What I believe is flawed is human opinion, because it constantly changes. In fact, we do it ever eight years in America. We have a change in opinion. What was hot is now not. I willingly admit that I base my world-view on the Bible, which I believe is true. My definition of truth is: if it’s new, it’s not true. If it was true a thousand years ago, it will be true a thousand years from today. Opinion changes, but truth doesn’t.”

Morgan replied, “We are going to agree to disagree on that.” [<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2253902/Now-Piers-Morgan-says-Bible-flawed.html>]

While Mr. Morgan’s comments are extreme and inflammatory, they are by no means unusual. Many accept his underlying premise. Political progressives view the Constitution as a living document, subject to the shibboleths of each successive generation. Religious liberals view Sacred Scripture in a similar light.

In one sense, Piers Morgan’s statement is more honest than some of his compatriots. He acknowledges that the Bible, as written and received, does not endorse gay marriage. Similarly, his comments about the Constitution acknowledge that current efforts to deny law-abiding citizens the right to bear arms is a violation of the Second Amendment. Thus, Mr. Morgan believes that both the Bible and the Constitution need to be amended, so that they will conform to the contemporary mindset.

This incident provides a useful occasion to examine the concepts of pluralism and tolerance. Is it true, as many assert, that all beliefs are equally valid, and that we should manifest a tolerance for all beliefs? Is truth defined by each individual? Does it make any difference what we believe and practice?

What is meant by pluralism? While the word can have a variety of meanings, in this discussion, it refers to the philosophical “theory that there are more than one or more than two kinds of ultimate reality” (Webster) or “a theory or system that recognizes more than one ultimate principle” (Oxford). Citizens of the United States have long been blessed to live in a nation where diverse ethnic, racial, religious and social groups can peacefully coexist. While we enjoy freedom of religious thought and expression, this does not mean that all are equally valid, at least in the eyes of God, and according to the standard of divine revelation.

What is meant by tolerance? Again, the word has several meanings, but here it refers to “sympathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from or conflicting with one’s own” (Webster) or “the ability, willingness, or capacity to tolerate something” (Oxford). Again, we are blessed with various freedoms (i.e., assembly, speech and religion). However, this does not mean that truth is relative or self-defined.

Modern Tolerance

The modern concept of tolerance is incompatible with the teaching of Jehovah God, who declared “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exod. 20:3-6; Deut. 6:13-15; Isa. 44:6-8). It is incompatible with the teaching of the Old Testament prophets, who called upon ancient Israel to choose between the Lord and false

idols (Josh. 24:14-28; 1 Kings 18:20-40; Jer. 2:9-13). It is incompatible with the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ, who condemned unscriptural innovations, and affirmed, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (Matt. 7:21-23; 15:1-14; John 14:6). It is incompatible with the teaching of the New Testament apostles and prophets, who denounced all who preach a different gospel, and exhorted Christians to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints” (Gal. 1:6-9; 1 Tim. 1:3-7; Jude 3-4).

Biblical Tolerance

The Greek word **anēchō**, which is translated “show tolerance” or “tolerate” in the NASB, means either “to regard someone or something with tolerance,” i.e., *bear with, put up with, tolerate*, or “to undergo something onerous or troublesome without giving in, i.e., *endure*.” This word occurs 15 times in the New Testament, and may be grouped in the following categories.

Some things are tolerated because they fall within the purview of duty. Regarding the complaint made by the Jews against Paul, Gallio the proconsul of Achaia said, “If it were a matter of wrong or of vicious crime, O Jews, it would be reasonable for me to ***put up** with you; but if there are questions about words and names and your own law, look after it yourselves; I am unwilling to be a judge of these matters” (Acts 18:12-17, esp. vs. 14-15). It was Gallio’s duty to judge criminal wrongdoing; however, religious disputes fell outside his civil jurisdiction (Rom. 13:1-7). Additionally, faithful disciples willingly ***endure** persecutions and afflictions (1 Cor. 4:11-13, esp. vs. 12; 2 Thess. 1:3-5, esp. vs. 4). Facing such trials is part and parcel of Christian service (John 15:18-25).

Some things are tolerated because they fall within the purview of love. Regarding the faithless generation to which He ministered, Jesus said, “How long shall I be with you? How long shall I ***put up** with you?” (Matt. 17:14-18, esp. vs. 17; Mark 9:14-29, esp. vs. 19; Luke 9:37-45, esp. vs. 41). Recognizing our common frailty, we should be thankful that the Lord bears with our weakness; yet, let us also recognize the limits of divine patience (2 Pet. 3:8-13).

Christians must also show ***tolerance** toward one another in love (Eph. 4:1-3, esp. vs. 2), ***bearing** with one another, and forgiving each other, if a brother has a complaint against another (Col. 3:12-14, esp. vs. 13). This “new commandment” was enjoined by Christ Himself: We should love one another, as we collectively strive to walk according to His commandments (John 13:34-35; 2 John 4-6).

Some things must not be tolerated because they fall outside the purview of truth. Paul used the Greek term for tolerance to jokingly describe the Corinthians attitude toward himself: “I wish that you would ***bear** with me in a little foolishness; but indeed you are ***bearing** with me” (2 Cor. 11:1-3, esp. vs. 1). More seriously, Paul used this term in describing the Corinthian church’s unfortunate toleration of false teachers and their damnable doctrines (2 Cor. 11:4, 16-21, esp. vs. 19-20; cf. also 2 Pet. 2:1-3).

In like-manner, the resurrected Christ criticized the church in Thyatira for tolerating evil within their midst: “But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols” (Rev. 2:18-25, esp. vs. 20).

Conclusion

Disciples should be tolerant of one another, as we struggle with weakness, but strive to live faithfully to the Lord. Nevertheless, we must not tolerate sinful behavior or false doctrine, in the sense that we accept and endorse the same. It all connects with our attitude toward the truth. While human opinions are in a state of constant flux, divine truth never changes (Psa. 119:89, 160; Isa. 40:6-8; 1 Pet. 1:22-25). Apostates will not endure sound doctrine (2 Tim. 4:1-5, esp. vs. 3), but believers bear with the inspired message of exhortation (Heb. 13:22). While disciples are obligated to show tolerance for one another in love, we must respect the doctrinal distinctives of the Gospel (Eph. 4:1-16).