



Book Review: D. A. Carson's *The Intolerance of Tolerance* By Brian Watson

We envision a congregation whose love for Jesus and one another leaves a clear and compelling witness for Christ.

The core message of Christianity—the gospel—is relatively simple. God created everything for his glory and he made us to worship him. We have all failed to do so and have rebelled against him in our sin. The Son of God became man to live the perfect life we could not live—perfectly imaging God and perfectly obeying him—and to die in the place of sinners on the cross, bearing God's holy punishment for sin. All who trust in Jesus have their sins forgiven and, though they die, will live with the Lord forever. In a sense, all of that is pretty easy to grasp. Yet the truth is that this simple gospel message has a whole host of implications for us, particularly since we live in a complex and confusing world. Peter tells us to prepare our minds for action (1 Pet. 1:13), so it is imperative that we learn to think about life in a Christian way. Therefore, we need teachers who can help us navigate this strange cultural landscape. Thankfully God has given us faithful, intelligent, insightful teachers to guide our thoughts. Don Carson is one of them.

In his recent *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Eerdmans, 2012), Carson observes the cultural shift that has taken place concerning tolerance. The very definition of tolerance seems to have changed, so Carson wisely distinguishes between the old tolerance and the new tolerance. The old tolerance is summed up nicely in a quote attributed to Voltaire: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it" (page 6). Carson says that in the old tolerance, there was a commitment to truth. We may disagree about what the truth is, sometimes rather sharply, but we agree not to force others to accept our position. Rather, we use reason and persuasion.

But the new tolerance is something else. "The *old* tolerance is the willingness to put up with, allow, or

endure people and ideas with whom we disagree; in its purest form the *new* tolerance is the social commitment to treat all ideas and people as equally right, save for those people who disagree with this view of tolerance" (98). Remember that the old tolerance upheld the existence of objective, absolute truth. "By contrast, the new tolerance argues that there is no one view that is exclusively true" (11). In other words, the new tolerance (absolutely) denies that there is absolute truth. Therefore, it is wrong for people to claim that they know the truth and that others are wrong. That kind of activity is intolerant, and, well, it won't be tolerated. As Carson writes, "The supreme sin is *intolerance*. . . . It has become the supreme vice" (12).

This change in our understanding of tolerance creates many significant problems. One is moral confusion. "The new tolerance tends to avoid serious engagement over difficult moral issues" (15). People still make moral claims. Whenever you hear, "It's the right thing to do," or, "She shouldn't do that!" you've heard a moral claim. But without objective truth, it is difficult to justify those claims. There's simply no basis for them. In the new tolerance, there is no objective, fixed standard, such as the Bible, to determine what is right and wrong, true and false. Instead, the ever-changing public opinion determines what will and will not be tolerated. As we've seen, public opinion is fickle, and it can change quickly.

A second problem is the increasing pressure to "squeeze religion away from the public sectors of politics, the media, and the academic world, into

the purely private sectors" (71). The new tolerance doesn't mind if you hold religious beliefs, as long as you keep those to yourself. Of course, Christianity (and other religions) cannot be exercised freely only in private (how does one make disciples only in private?). The new tolerance, with its intolerance of religion in the public square, leads to a decrease in religious freedom. Instead of religious truths, or any other objective truth, the basis for many arguments is pragmatism: whatever "works." "Pragmatism now commonly eclipses both nature and religion as cultural authority" (74).

A third problem is hypocrisy. The new tolerance is hypocritical. It doesn't tolerate what it defines as intolerance. I suppose intolerance of any kind is an inescapable truth—there are always things that are beyond the pale, things that cannot be tolerated. We must decide what that is, but in a society that rejects absolute truth, it is difficult to determine what should be tolerated and what shouldn't be.

A fourth problem is that the new tolerance claims to tolerate all ideas, yet it smuggles in its own agenda. The new tolerance, or what we may call secular society, claims to have no ties to any religious system and it attempts to portray itself as unbiased, scientific, and neutral. Yet this new tolerance is "smuggling into the culture massive structures of thought and imposing them on others who disagree, while insisting that the *others* are the intolerant people" (81). Secular society now holds many unbiblical views on sexuality, to name the hot issue, and it assumes that these views are reasonable and neutral. Anyone who disagrees with these views

Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 1:13

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is regarded as an intolerant bigot who has extreme, ignorant, and outdated views.

Carson briefly traces the history of tolerance and provides many examples of the intolerance of the new tolerance. Some examples involve Christianity, while others do not. Some are shocking, and some are silly. In 2005, A bank in Manchester England asked a Christian organization, Christian Voice, to close its accounts. According to this bank's public release, "It has come to the bank's attention that Christian Voice is engaged in discriminatory pronouncements based on the grounds of sexual orientation." The bank claimed this stance was incompatible with the bank's commitment to diversity. Carson writes, "Thus in the name of supporting diversity, the Bank eliminates one of its diverse customers!" (22).

In another example of intolerance, this time involving my alma mater, Brandeis University, a professor was admonished for telling his students the historical fact that Mexican immigrants to the U.S. were once called "wetbacks," the use of which he was not condoning. Because two students complained, the University found that this professor was guilty of "ethnic harassment" and subsequently assigned a classroom monitor to attend his lectures, to make sure that the professor never spoke in such a way again. So much for academic freedom and truth-telling. Many other examples abound. They are often depressing and infuriating to read.

The new intolerance is antithetical to Christianity, as Carson ably demonstrates. Though people claim today that Jesus is "infinitely tolerant," this is a distortion of truth. God is indeed merciful, gracious, and slow to anger (Exod. 34:6). Yet God will also pour out his wrath on those who are not united to Christ by faith (2 Thess. 1:5-12, among many texts), and Jesus does not present himself as any less judgmental (Matt. 7:21-23; 25:31-46). Instead of mere tolerance, God gives us something better: love and justice. "His love is better than tolerance; his wrath guarantees justice that mere tolerance can never imagine" (103). Christianity,

unlike the new tolerance, is committed to truth claims. It commends the old tolerance, but not the new. This makes Christianity different from Islam, which is also committed to truth claims but is happy to reject all forms of tolerance. In fact, Christianity's stance on both truth and love makes it quite unique.

Carson warns that the new tolerance will lead to some dark places. The new tolerance takes a stance toward morality called relativism. "Relativism is the view that no one standard of true and false, right and wrong, good and bad, beautiful and ugly exists that is valid for everyone" (132). This moral relativism is incapable of addressing evil and immorality in meaningful ways. If you can't say, "This is absolutely right," and, "This is absolutely wrong," a lot of immorality can be tolerated.

If the new tolerance is permitted to continue, things in our country will grow worse, not only morally, but also politically. The new tolerance will push people of faith out of the public square, taking away their civil liberties. "If Christians and other religious citizens cannot participate freely in public discourse, bringing to bear on every discussion whatever insight or wisdom they hold to dearly, they are being relegated to second-class citizenship" (149). And only people who have such faith have the resources to criticize a government when it becomes oppressive. "Only those whose vision of human rights is grounded in something other and greater than governmental decrees can ever have adequate ground for criticizing government when government becomes repressive" (149).

Democracy itself cannot safeguard against such repression, for democracy depends upon the morality and wisdom of citizens. If the majority of Americans deny absolute truth and subscribe to the new tolerance, the result will be the oppression of people of religious convictions. Another author calls this "democratic tyranny." And tyranny is not satisfied by consuming only one form of freedom. "A long heritage of

reflection argues that if freedom of religion is progressively trimmed, it is only a matter of time before freedom, more comprehensively envisaged, is also progressively trimmed" (150-51). A commitment to truth, morality, public debate, and reasoning without coercion is a restraining voice against tyranny of the state.

Carson ends the book with ten directives, some of which are clearly Christian. His advice includes exposing the new tolerance's lack of moral grounding, as well as its hypocrisy and inconsistency; preserving truth; declaring that the new tolerance is not progress; challenging the idea that secularism is neutral; and committing to civility. But he doesn't end there. He calls for Christians to share the gospel. "If men and women are genuinely converted . . . they will become salt in a decaying world, light in a dark world—and their influence in turn, in God's mercy, may turn the tide of public perception. . . . [W]hen the gospel truly does take hold in any culture, changes in that culture are inevitable" (174). Carson tells Christians to be prepared to suffer, for Christian suffering is likely and, moreover, it is the norm. Finally, he tells Christians to delight in and trust in God:

Our ultimate confidence is not in any government or party, still less in our ability to mold the culture in which we live. God may bring about changes that reflect the more robust understanding of tolerance better known in earlier times, and that would be very helpful; alternatively, he may send 'a powerful delusion so that [people] will believe the lie (2 Thessalonians 2:11), and in consequence we may enter into more suffering for Jesus than the West has known for some time. That would have the effect of aligning us with brothers and sisters in Christ in other parts of the world, and enable us to share something of the apostles' joy (Acts 5:41). (176).